The Last Laugh

by orphan_account

Summary

Ever since I can remember, I’ve worn a mask. A clown mask, to be more precise. And all of my life has been a carefully planned path: born from the best of the best genes, with a ghoul mother and Kanou for a father. I am an experiment that the clowns more or less adopted and raised: Father had no use for me until I was self-sufficient.

Everything changed, of course, when I met Kaneki Ken. He was my best friend, my only real friend. And then he became Sasaki Haise, and forgot me.

He's worn this little facade so well, he's forgotten all about Kaneki Ken. But I will make him remember, no matter the cost.

After all, I always get the last laugh.
Hey guys! So, I kind of like the idea and theory of a half-ghoul! Hide, and also clown! Hide, and I was scrolling through those tags on Tumblr when- well, this idea was formed. Hide is going to be more or less the same ball of sunshine on the outside, but on the inside... yeah, not so much. He's more like Kanou is; able to put on a very warm smile while probably plotting his next experiment. I admit, this will not be a completely happy story. Actually, I really don't have much more than a vague idea on where I want this to go. It may have a happy ending... or it may not.

Comments, and especially corrections (I really can't spell to save my life) are appreciated! If I mess my facts up, please feel free to call me out on it- although please be polite when you do- so I can correct it!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 1

My first memory is that of laying on my back in my bassinet, staring upwards at a small mobile. It was of a group of multicolored rubber balls-- juggling balls-- spinning around in a circle slowly, while a tune played, softly. It was a sad, melancholic song, and that haunts me more than anything else. It sounded like a song one would play at a funeral.

Nextly I remember seeing my own reflection. I was young, still, but old enough to stumble around on my own two feet. I was at Uta's HySy studio, I know now, and I encountered a mirror.

My face was the picture of childhood innocence. Round with baby fat and framed by locks of bright orange hair that was dark-- almost black-brown-- around the roots. My eyes were as brown as the chocolate humans loved. My reflection was quite confusing to me. I seemed to look too fragile, too tiny, compared to everyone else. Uta, who was barely more than a teenager at the time I was born, but was at the time of this memory twenty-three and just beginning HySy, was present in the reflection of the floor-length mirror in which I gazed. My two-year-old eyes widened as I pressed my chubby palms onto the cold glass.

Itori was behind me, suddenly, her hands on my small shoulders.

"Never seen your reflection before, kiddo?"

"Nu-uh, I-tan."

"Well then, remember this, okay? That person in the mirror is you. You are Hideyoshi. And first and foremost, you are a clown. You're like me and Uta. I don't care if your dad says otherwise-- you smile and nod and agree, but remember that we are the clowns, and we always get the last laugh."

Uta chuckled, and came closer to Itori and I. He tossed me a paper-covered mask, which I barely managed to catch and eagerly tore into, revealing a jumble of bright colors.

A clown mask, with a bright green face and a crimson nose. An orange circle covered the right eye, where there was a large circle opening. The left eye was merely a slit, allowing the wearer to see out of but none to see in.

Uta flashed a crooked smile, his dyed eyes gleaming.

"If you're going to be a clown, you'll need a mask."

"Pierrot. Focus on the current predicament, please."

Reality was cruel in calling me back from my reminiscing, but I suppose it couldn't be helped.

"But you're more than capable than of dealing with them by yourself, No-Face." I complain, sighing.

"What happened to respect for your elders?" Uta scoffed, putting his tattooed hands on his hips. "Are you too chicken to deal with them on your own, Pierrot? Or are you too much of a ba-by?"
"You're not that much older than I am, No-Face." I muttered. "I personally couldn't care who dealt with them-- whoa there, getting a little feisty, aren't you?"

"Don't talk about us like we ain't here!" The orange-haired investigator demanded, retracting his sword-like quinque from the ground near my feet. It had missed my foot by inches. "Tch. Damn ghouls."

His purple-haired companion rolled his eyes, but remained silent. His pose was much more confident and his stance much more controlled and ready than his lax orange-haired partner, and I pegged him to be the most dangerous of the two.

Uta sighed dramatically, shrugging. "Oh well, suppose it can't be helped. I am a bit hungry, so maybe this is a good encounter."

"I'd hope you were hungry. That's the entire reason we came out hunting."

"I probably could have waited, but I was bored." Uta admitted.

"Why'd you drag me along with you if you were just bored?" I queried, a bit irritably. "Father had a new experiment he requested my assistance on and I put him off so that we could go hunting tonight."

A sudden ripping sound tore through the dank alley, drawing my and Uta's attention back to the two investigators, just as a sharp projectile shot towards me. I danced out of the path of the projectile easily, almost with an otherworldly ease.

It was from the orange-haired investigator. Unbelievably, a kagune had emerged from his back. An ukaku, colored as brightly as his hair. And as for the sharp projectile buried in the dark walls of the building behind me, well, it didn't actually appear that dangerous, on a closer inspection.

_He's weak._

"Ooh, investigators with a kagune. That's new." Uta remarked, his eyes widening with excitement. "I'm officially not bored anymore."

"Oi! I _told_ ya, you stupid ghouls, quit talkin'!"

"Actually, you said, 'Don't talk about us like we ain't here!' immediately followed by 'Tch. Damn ghouls.' You said nothing about talking in general." I retorted calmly. "No-Face, I do hope that you'll help me with this. I'm not going to kill your food for you."

"Oh, I wouldn't ask you to. Fine, Fine, let's see..." Uta seemed to disappear for a moment, reappearing behind them. He didn't actually disappear, and my eyes followed his movements with little difficulty, but to a human it would appear that he vanished and materialized.

Uta sniffed the orange haired investigator deeply, his nose almost touching the investigator's neck. Said investigator yelped in a not-so-manly way and swung his quinque at Uta instinctively, but Uta was already back beside me, chuckling.

"I like this one. He smells interesting. I'll take him, you take the purple haired one?"

"Why not? But let's make it quick, No-Face? Father wasn't too pleased with my leaving to hunt, and I wish to get back soon."

"It won't take long to wrap these two up," Uta agreed.
And no more words were needed. Off like a shot, I charged the purple haired investigator. His shirt tore as a kagune shot out of his shoulder and engulfed his arm, and the koukaku was swung up a split second before my hand would have snapped the investigator's arm at the elbow. The orange-haired investigator that Uta attacked, it seemed, was slower than his companion, because his pain-filled scream echoed through the alleyway. Distantly I heard footsteps— a companion perhaps? Oh well. They were miles away, and another Dove was nothing to fret about.

The orange haired investigator panted, but stood his ground with gleaming eyes and one arm hanging limply at a crooked angle.

"Set your arm back, Shirazu, you idiot. If it starts healing, then you're screwed and they'll have to re-break it." The purple haired investigator commented irritably. I was fascinated by his lack of concern for his partner. I thought doves were supposed to care about one another?

_I mused, maybe some humans aren't so bad._

"Thanks, Urie!" The orange-haired investigator whom I presumed to be Shirazu exclaimed, apparently in the dark to the fact that his companion's advice, however correct it may be, was said merely out of spite.

I wasted no time in bringing my knee up as hard as I possibly could, nailing the purple haired investigator in the chest. He stumbled back, one hand clutching his chest— it appeared that I had broken ribs, but I wasn't sure— while blood leaked out of the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a lot, but I was surely disappointed.

"Humans... are so fragile," I murmured.

"Going soft on me, Pierrot?" Uta questioned, wheeling his body in an abrupt twist to kick the orange investigator in the side. Said investigator slammed into the alleyway wall hard enough for the glass to shatter in the window above the impact zone.

"No. Just disappointed, I suppose."

"You're quite right, though it appears that these investigators have an upgraded durability," Uta said delightedly, and I had a feeling he was smiling under his mask. "Really, at this point the CCG is no better than Aogiri."

I examined the purple haired investigator I was engaged in conflict with, and noted that only one of his eyes had a kakugan. The sclera was grey, however, not black, and I sneered.

"At least Father and Aogiri can make _real_ half-ghouls. Look at these failures. Nothing but cheap knockoffs. Fakes."

The koukaku was swung at me, and I danced out of the way, ducking as the investigator changed the momentum of his body and arm faster than I had imagined he was capable of, and it nicked my leg. I made an admittedly shocked noise, but the pain didn't even register. The edge of the koukaku felt almost blunt, weak, like a cheap kitchen knife. It barely cut me at all. It _did_ tear my clothes, and that was enough to spark my anger.

"You tore my pants—," I managed to say through gritted teeth.

"Look at all the fucks I give—," The investigator retorted with cold eyes, and I almost respected him for keeping his cold composure even though I was about to brutally slaughter him.
Almost.

The koukaku was swung at me again. I caught it, and my eyes blazed behind my mask.

"You tore my pants."

I held the bladed koukaku and the arm it was connected to firmly in my hand, before kneeling it with all of my might. A loud cracking noise resounded through the alley, and the purple haired investigator finally let out a scream as he collapsed to the ground. His breathing was ragged, and his kakugan started dissolving. A punctured lung, probably. He was down for the count, and I was starting to get hungry. I wasn't much for cannibalism, but food was food, and I could always hunt again later.

Besides, it wasn't really cannibalism if it was just a poorly made imitation. And I suppose the smell of the purple haired investigator wasn't completely unappealing...

My thoughts were cut off as two figures came into view at the opening of the alleyway. One of them was a lean male, shorter than average but not by much. He had unusually forest green hair, and an eye-patch. I felt a pang of nostalgia, remembering my old friend, but dismissed it. His companion, however, froze me in my tracks.

He was my height, perhaps a half inch shorter. His hair was two-toned, more white than black, and his eyes were the pale grey of steel and storm clouds.

"Sassan!" The orange haired investigator managed to cough. "Tooru! You made it!"

"Shirazu-kun! Urie-kun!" The green-haired investigator gasped, horrified at the bloody scene.

"This just got a lot more interesting," Uta said gleefully. "This is the most fun I've had in ages."

I wasn't listening. It was so clearly him. It was there, in his eyes, in his stance, in the way he stood and the way his hair fell.

I stepped over the mostly unconscious body of the still-alive purple haired investigator (perhaps he was more durable than I had thought) and walked towards him, my eyes the size of dinner plates behind my mask.

He gripped his briefcase, and a click was audible before the case pulse and morphed into a quinque with a long, tapered end. Previously a koukaku, I guessed, though the thought was distant in my fogged mind.

"Stay back, Mutsuki-kun. When you see your chance, get Shirazu-kun and Urie-kun out of here and run." He announced grimly, putting a hand out to stop his green haired subordinate, who had begun to step forward to stand beside his superior, two knives drawn.

"But Sasaski-san--"

"This is an order from your superior. Do you understand, Mutsuki-kun?" His voice was firm and hard, and I understood the meaning perfectly. He was conveying, without directly saying it, knew that he and his subordinates were majorly outclassed and overpowered by Uta and I, and he would hold us off for as long as he could in order to enable his subordinates escape, quite possibly at the cost of his own life.

The green haired man swallowed, his single visible eye darting from his superior to Uta and I.
"I-I understand, Sasaki-san. I'll call for back-up as soon as I can. Please, be careful."

"Don't worry about me, Mutsuki-kun. I'll be okay." His voice was thick with the lie, and I couldn't comprehend why he didn't recognize me. Sure, I wore a mask that concealed my face, but should he recognize me? I wasn't that different. I was a little taller, and I had aged a few years, but so had he. He would recognize my voice. He had to. You don't just forget someone who was this important to you.

So my footsteps were sound and sure when I approached him, and my hand sure as it came slowly to my mask, ready to reveal my face the moment he recognized me. Would he gasp and splutter, I wondered? Would he laugh, and greet me with something absurdly mundane, like 'It's been awhile,'?

I took a deep breath to steady my erratic heartbeat, and as I breathed out I said his name.

"Kaneki."
"Kaneki."

The minute the name left my lips, he went rigid. His eyes dilated, and it seemed as though his world had just shattered. His lips moved, but no words came out, like his brain short circuited and he was unable to put the mass of jumbled thoughts into words. The mumbling began, and the quinque fell out of his hands, clattering to the ground ungracefully.

"I-- who is that-- why does that name sound so familiar-- is that-- who are you--"

"Sasaki-san!" The green haired subordinate cried, dropping his knives in favor of gripping Kaneki's shoulders, shaking him violently. "Sasaki-san, snap out of it! Remember who you are!"

"I am... I am Sasaki Haise, a Rank 1 Investigator under First Class Mado Akira? Yes, that's right. I-I don't know what had taken a hold of me, Mutsuki-kun, I'm sorry," Kaneki whispered. "I'm sorry for being such a terrible superior. But I am in control now, I promise. I will hold back the ghouls while you retreat."

"Sasaki-san, I..." The green haired investigator seemed conflicted, but reluctantly dropped his hands from Kaneki's shoulders, stepping back and retrieving his knives. "Never mind. Just remember to be careful, please."

"I will, Mutsuki. Thank you." Kaneki said quietly, before gripping his newly-regained quinque and advancing towards me. He eyed me warily, and seemed more on edge than ever. I was thoroughly confused. Not only did he seemingly not recognize me, but he also apparently had the beginnings of a minor nervous breakdown. Also, he reacted to his name, but yet answered to Sasaki.

Was it, perhaps, that he didn't even know who I was? Did he... not know himself?

My mind reeled like a rubber band that had been stretched to the limit and abruptly released.

Uta was beside me, suddenly, and I realized my hand was still gripping the edge of my mask. I dropped my hand, and from behind his mask, I saw Uta's eyes searching mine for any signs of emotion. If he found any, he did not question it.

"We can hunt later, Pierrot. Let's go for now."
I only nodded, too consumed in my thoughts to care much. I did return to reality, however, and Uta and I darted away. I leapt up with an inhuman speed and strength, grasping onto the window ledge on the fourth story and using that to boost myself upward another two floors. Uta made it to the roof a split second before I did, and a knife buried itself in the roof below us.

"The cheeky little subordinate threw a knife at us. Perhaps he isn't so weak after all." Uta observed, a hand coming up to remove his mask. He shook his head, and moonlight caught on his lip piercings as he smiled. "This has been a most interesting night indeed."

"It's him, Uta." I said firmly, glancing down from the roof of the building. Kaneki and his green haired subordinate had rushed to the side of their wounded companions, and I sighed. "But he didn't remember me."

"Oh, we can do some research later. I'm sure your father will be able to uncover a thing or two about him, with all of those connections of his. But we did lose our dinner." Uta sighed.

"We can hunt tomorrow. But the ward will be swamped with Doves tonight, so it's best we head back," I felt a pang of hunger-- and not the kind that could be sated and curbed with human foods-- spark within me, and was severely disappointed at the lost meal. Tomorrow I would eat my fill, I resolved, of the fattest human I could find.

"Do you want to stop by Helter Skelter before you go?" Uta asked, tilting his head to the side. "I'm headed there to grab a drink before I head to HySy."

"I have time, I guess. It's been awhile since I've seen Itori." I shoved my hands into my pockets as I speak, making a displeased face as I observed the tear in my pants.

"She might be able to sew that up for you," Uta gestured to the tear, "but I could probably do better work of it."

"You're right. If I leave this," I waved a hand at the clothes I wore, my trademark 'clown' getup: neon green pants and a matching button-up jacket, a white undershirt, and a bright green tie loose around my neck; everything was rimmed in sky-blue ribbon, and the buttons were pearly white; my boots were a similar green, only adorned with bright orange stripes. "Will you patch it up?"

I was the Pierrot, the icon of The Clowns. More of a mascot or a poster boy, really.

Uta was, admittedly, more famous. As No-Face, he was perhaps one of the most famous ghouls of today's century.

Uta waved a hand dismissively. "I'll see what I can do. But for now, let's go. I'm starving."

Sasaki Haise gripped the hand of his unconscious subordinate tightly. Shirazu was in worse shape than Urie-- who had fought his way back to consciousness and was propped up next to Mutsuki, who was calling for an ambulance and back-up-- with an unhealing broken arm and severe internal injuries, as far as Sasaki could tell. His body was battered from being hurtled into a building, and his
quinque was snapped in half. Sasaki grimaced, nudging the broken weapon away as he gently propped Shirazu up in an attempt to ease his ragged breathing. Blood soaked into his white coat, and had he been human he would have cut himself on debris as he took his subordinates place on the shard-littered ground, easing Shirazu off the broken glass and brick fragments. Sasaki took the moment of utter helplessness as he waited for the ambulance to arrive to think for a moment.

Kaneki? The name sent shivers down his spine, made the faceless monster inside him rear it's head excitedly. Why did the monster react so strongly to that name? Was it someone he knew, in the past? Was that... his former name?

Who was the strange ghoul in the garish neon getup and the clown mask? No-Face was a powerful ghoul, everyone in the CCG knew that. The Clowns were best avoided, period. Nobody wanted to encounter the clowns, not even the higher-ups, and it was just his unfortunate subordinates luck to be forced to fight such vicious ghouls.

But that ghoul... was different. There was something in the bright orange hair that framed the mask, something about the way he carefree way he stood, that was somehow familiar. His memory (or rather, his lack thereof) was leaving much to be desired at the moment. It was frustrating, because he could feel it. It was as if he was on one side of a one-way window; something-- something was watching him, mocking him, while he only came up short with every question. The truth, his memory, was tantalizingly close, just on the other side of the thin sheet of glass. He wanted to shatter that glass, wanted to find the answers he sought, but he was too afraid.

Sasaki had a gut feeling that should be break the glass, there was no going back. His life with the Q's and Akira and Arima would disappear, and he would become the monster he so feared, the one that lurked in the deepest part of his mind, a taunt and insult and jeer always ready to be whispered.

The wailing of a siren brought him back, away from the icy cold sheet of black one-way glass, but as Sasaki waved frantically to bring the paramedics to the spot he where he held Shirazu, he heard a laugh eerily like his own, but devoid of humor and as dry as fallen leaves. The rattling of iron chains accompanied it, and he felt something like a cold puff of breath against the back of his neck and ear.

"You're weak, Haise."

Sasaki turned his head around, eyes wide and terrified, but there was no-one there.

I smiled warmly when the door to Helter Skelter was opened, and the noisiness of the bar crashed over me. The crowds parted way for us easily, and I removed my mask, twirling it around my finger, making my beaming smile clear.

Itori didn't take long to spot us as we sat down at the bar. She grinned like a maniac, which I suppose she was, and flung her arms wide, almost knocking over a pair of wine-glasses.

"Hide! Oh, it's been forever since I saw you, kiddo!" Ignoring the bar between us, she grabbed me in a bone-crushing hug. If I were human, I would have genuinely been concerned for my health. I
wasn't, so I returned her hug with just as much force.

"I-chan! I've missed you, too!" I laugh as she releases me, brushing a long lock of pinkish hair behind her ear.

"So, what brings you both here so late?" She questions, already pouring three glasses. She never takes her eyes off us while she pours the crimson liquid, and she never spills a drop.

I take the glass she offers me, and Uta holds his glass out with a playful smile. Itori and I join in with his cheerful "Kampai!" before taking long drinks. My glass is empty within the first few long sips, and I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand before I answer.

"We were out hunting," I offer as an explanation in short. I wasn't much for explanations when my mind was eager to be elsewhere; Uta could do that. I had too much to think about, and Uta was the one who wanted to hunt tonight in the first place. He could do the explaining.

Uta seemed to understand my train of thought well enough; without a glance towards me, he launched into a well-detailed, elaborately woven story that was completely factual. I wondered briefly how he managed to do that, weave a story like that to tell the tale in just the short amount of time it took us to reach Helter Skelter. Impressive, really.

Then I chose to focus on other things. More specifically, someone else.

Grey eyes and black hair flashed behind closed eyelids. The smell of musty books, the sweetly enticing scent of flesh and blood, the play-pretend feeling of acting normal. Of acting human.

I miss those times of acting human, I think. I miss him.

I trace a line around my wineglass with my finger, a devilish smile coming to light on my face. A plan is forming in my mind, and I like it greatly. I think Father will like it too. It is dangerous, it is risky, it is exciting and fun.

I will protect him. I will no longer be an observer. I will play this game of facades and lies and masks again, and I will be just as good as before. I will worm my way into this Sasaki's life... and then I will tear off his mask and make him remember.

At any cost.

Itori notes my fiendishly pleased smirk, and she raises an eyebrow. Uta takes notice, too.

"What's got you so happy, kiddo? I thought that you'd be disappointing, after losing a meal and being forgotten by him."

I shake my head, and I laugh.

"On the contrary, I-chan. I think I've just found a new game to play... or rather, to resume."

Uta smiles mischievously, and I know he's hooked already. "Mind filling us in, hmm?"

"Sure. But before I do, who was it that made my fake records when I was young? I believe I am in need of their services again."
"Sasaki. Remember, it's an honor to be chosen to be a teacher at the Academy, even temporarily. Teach them well, and set a good impression." Akira instructed. "Have some confidence in yourself."

"I know, Akira-san." Haise sighed. "I just wish that the opportunity to take the teaching position hadn't come right now, what with Shirazu-kun and Urie-kun still recovering."

"Sasaki, those subordinates of yours are stronger than you give them credit for," Akira reprimands, though her tone of voice is gentler than Haise expected. "Don't worry about them. Urie and Shirazu are still recovering, yes, but they're already back to patrolling the First Ward by their own consent. They're Quinx, Sasaki-- they may not heal as fast as you do, but they heal much, much faster than humans do."

Haise smiles weakly. "I know, Akira-san. I'll do my best to stop worrying. I promise."

"You'd better. I'll hold you to that, Sasaki. Now get out of the car and go teach those recruits. And remember your other task too!"

Haise takes a deep breath, and his smile becomes more real, more confident.

"I will, Akira-san!"

The car door is shut and Akira drives away, back into the steady stream of Tokyo traffic. Despite her assurances and his own promise, Haise's hands tremble with nervousness, and he tries-- and fails-- to push it away as he plasters a painfully large smile on his face and strides toward the door. His briefcase is in hand, and it clinks against his leg with each step.

My other task, huh...

He was tasked with scouting potential Quinx members, in terms of physical strength and mental health. Watch the students, his superiors told him, find the ones that have the aptitude.

Haise was met at the door by the a young man with shockingly bright orange hair and a good-natured smile.

"Hello there! You're Rank 1 Sasaki Haise, correct?"

"I am." Haise answered. The man was wearing the typical uniform of the CCG's Ghoul Investigator Training Academy, which consisted of a simple white button-up shirt that was starched to stiffness and a black tie, accompanied by a set of black slacks, but the man was... different, somehow. Maybe it was the childish was he smiled, or the oddly boyish features, or maybe the way his hair fell, messy and untamed and as bright as a traffic cone, but it made Haise strangely at ease as he gave a short but polite incline of his head in greeting.

The man beamed brightly before dipping into an identical bow, and Haise was distantly reminded of sunflowers when he caught sight of the bright orange-blonde hair turning dark around the roots.

"Great! I'm a student at the class you'll be teaching, so I volunteered to come and greet you!"
"I'm flattered," Haise admits, and his smile is a bit more genuine. He had forgotten just how nice the students at the Academy were, and how much he had loved to teach. But something was off about this young man, an odd sense of déjà vu that lurked in his mind when he saw this blonde's smile.

Shirazu, maybe? Yes, that had to be it. They had the same color hair, and the same boyish air to them.

"If you'll follow me, I'll show you to the gym where you'll be teaching today, Sasaki-san," the man offers.

"That would be great, thank you," Haise says earnestly. The breeze is beginning to pick up, and it blows the blond's hair around his head. Haise's hair blows a bit wildly, too, and he wonders if it's getting too long. Surely not; it's only to his ears.

But the breeze also blows an odd scent to him, one that almost stops him dead. It's an odd smell, one that he can't put into words, but it's tantalizingly unfamiliar, and it seemed to be coming right from this man. It was a bit different than the smell he got from every day pedestrians; it was like there was a spice had been added to this man, altering his scent ever so slightly, but it was overshadowed by an almost... metallic tang, one that made Haise shiver with dread, although he wasn't sure why.

The blonde man turned around, already holding open the door, and his head tilted a little to the side.

"Is something wrong, Sasaki-san?"

Haise shook his head, more to himself than the blonde. "No. I was just thinking I didn't know your name yet."

The blonde's eyes widened, and Haise noted they were the color of the chocolate bars Saiko loved. "Oh! How rude of me! I'm terribly sorry, Sasaki-san."

"Oh, no, please don't apologize over something as minor as that," Haise assured, "I just wanted to know your name, is all."

The man smiled a little, slowly at first but gradually turning into a beaming grin.

"Alright. I'm Nagachika Hideyoshi, but everyone calls me Hide."
Chapter 3

I'm pleased that my spot in the lines is one that is in the front. Lady Luck must be on my side, because in the four alphabetically-ordered lines, I'm the first in the third line.

Kaneki-- No, not Kaneki, I remind myself. The person with the bright smile and the two-toned hair is not Kaneki Ken; he's the mask Kaneki Ken hides behind, Sasaki Haise. He is the person I must get close to, and when I've made it well-past his defenses, I've got to rip the mask off his face and bring Kaneki Ken back to me.

But while I'm here, I'll enjoy this, the thrill of play-pretending human and the game of lies and masks. This game is my specialty, and the rush it gives roars in my ears, almost enough to rid me of the dreaded feeling of the RC suppressants. It dulls my reflexes and softens my skin to the weakness of a humans, nullifying my regenerative powers and making my kagune unable to form. Dreaded things, really, but unfortunately I'm used to it. I took them on a regular basis back then, anyways, so it isn't like this is unbearable.

At least the stupid things repress my scent as a half-ghoul. Father and I had done excellent work, but I'll have to tell him they still aren't perfected yet; Haise had obviously noticed something different about the way I smelled. Although, in the long run, this might be good. Haise is no doubt curious now, intrigued by my odd scent. And it's only until I'm chosen as a candidate for the Quinx squad, in which case the next step of my plan can be put forth into motion.

I'm genuinely smiling as Haise continues on instructing us on how to properly use a quinque, and when he is finished lecturing us on the basics and given us a tutorial on the proper way to open the briefcases, the assistant instructor comes forward, wheeling a hand cart stacked full with four silver cases.

"There are lots of different kinds of quinques that can be shaped from harvested kakuhou, such as axes, guns, shields or blades-- but only to a degree. Most still retain some characteristics of the original kagune, like ukaku-type kagune being used to make guns and the like." Haise gestured with his hands a lot when he talked, I mused. "But my point is, each of you will probably find it easier to wield a different type of quinque. So, each of the instructors have different types of quinque for you to try out, and we'll be making note of which ones you seem most fitted to use."

"I hope I get the ukaku one," the young woman behind me whispered to the man directly opposing her in the second line. They bore a striking resemblance in looks, and I wondered if they were related.

"You might not see as much action with a long-distance weapon, though," the man cautioned, and the woman shrugged.

"I'd be okay with that," she admitted, and I barely contained my sneer.

Weak.

"So hey, what's your name again?" The woman asked me suddenly, and I put on that winning smile that came so easily to me as I turned around a little to face her until our names were called to try out the quinques.

"I'm Nagachika Hideyoshi, but Hide's fine too. Whatever you prefer," I say with another, not-so-noticeably smaller smile. "Did you want to ask me something?"
"I did, actually. You came here pretty late, and I didn't think they let students enroll late," the woman asked. I believe her name-- no, I know-- was Nakahara.

My smile didn't falter, but her tone of voice irritated me. I was normally good-natured with human, but this one grated my nerves, for some reason.

"Ah, I just transferred Academies, not newly-enrolled," I explained patiently my sort-of false backstory without hesitation. "I lived in the Twentieth Ward until recently."

"The Twentieth Ward?" Her eyes are the size of saucers. "Isn't that where, y'know, the coffee shop incident from a few years ago happened? Were you there? Was it scary?"

My stomach turns with anger, and my fists curl just a little. Father's digging hadn't just turned up Sasaki Haise's real identity; it had also uncovered the date he had been 'acquired', and the fashion he had been 'acquired' in. Just the thought of the stupid, glasses wearing, white-haired man who had almost killed Kaneki made my blood boil. Arima was stronger than any of us had anticipated-- Kaneki was never supposed to end up like this. He was supposed to win and throw the CCG into chaos, while we, the Clowns, would simply look on and laugh, just like we had when we turned him into a half-ghoul and sabotaged his date with Rize.

But for one of the first times in my life, my plot... hadn't gone according to plan.

"It is where the coffee shop incident happened," I said with gritted teeth, my smile long gone. "I was there. It was terrifying."

I was there, but it wasn't terrifying. It was chaos, uncontrolled and blood-soaked. It was very entertaining, and more than a little amusing, but it took a complete turn when I thought my best friend had died.

Nakahara made a sympathetic sound that made me want to hit her.

"I'm sorry about that. I can't imagine how scary that would have been," she murmured. After a long pause, she moved on. "But on a lighter topic, what type of quinque do you think you'll be able to use?"

I grin at his praise wholeheartedly and completely unintentionally, the fact of which makes my smile grow all the wider.

With all of the others, even Uta and Itori, I can keep my actions, expressions, and emotions firmly in check. They do as I say. But it's always been like this, since we were kids. You've always held the reins on my emotions, always made me do impulsive things, Kaneki. That's one of the reasons I like you so much, you know. That's why I've got to bring the real you back.
"Well, I've read a lot about ghouls," I admit. And it's true, I have. I just don't mention the fact I read them to understand the experiments I did with Father, or the fact I studied ghoul anatomy to help better create half-breeds, or that I learned anatomy mainly by dissecting corpses or hunting my next meal.

But Haise just smiles wider and claps his hands together excitedly.

"That's great! I'm sure you'll be a great Ghoul Investigator!"

"That means a lot coming from you, Sasaki-san," I said, and he just gives me another smile before the assistant instructor calls for the next person: me.

I stride over confidently. Four briefcases are laid out in order from ukaku to bikaku, and I wait patiently until the assistant instructor-- a woman with a thin line for a mouth and long hair tied back into a tight bun-- hands me the first case.

I press the button on the handle and the silver case morphs into a long, L-shaped gun of a blueish color. It has no trigger, which baffles me for a moment, until I realize the longer, handle-end of the gun is surprisingly pliant. I point it at the target and squeeze the base, and in perfect synchrony, a crystalline shard flies out of the muzzle. It flies just off to the right of the target, and I adjust my arms, frowning a little. It doesn't have a recoil like a normal gun, but it fits awkwardly in my hands. Even so, it irks me when the next shard doesn't hit bulls-eye yet again; this time, it hits the target, but lies just to the left of the red circle of the target that resides a mere fifty feet away from me. Grinding my teeth with a deeper frown, I adjust my arms a few inches to the left, and fire another shot. This time, the shard lodges itself firmly below the target's bulls-eye.

"Well, that's some impressive shooting for someone who doesn't have any previous experience shooting guns," the assistant instructor noted, flipping through my profile. "But let's move on to the next one now. We've still got others to test, after all."

In the end, I tested best for the koukaku-types and bikaku-types, just as I had thought. After we had all been tested, it was announced that today's classes were finished and we could go home. I watched the flood of my classmates rushing out the door in twos or threes, chatting about various things. I overheard one rather large group planning to go out to celebrate an engagement, another group of three going to a gym, and a rather young male duo planning on going for a run.

I stayed behind. It wasn't against the rules to use the CCG's training grounds, but most students preferred to use other gyms, apparently. The gun quinque was still rather irritating me. I know that I am a good shot, so why is something as simple as firing a quinque accurately evading me?

I pick up the silver briefcase that contained the gun quinque, glancing around once more to insure that I was alone. It was against the rules to use a quinque without an instructor until we were assigned our own quinque, but since none of the instructors were around, well... what they didn't know wouldn't kill them.

I press the button on the handle and the quinque case gives a quiet click before shuddering and
morphing into the blue, trigger-less, L-shaped gun. I grip it tightly in my hands, and it still fits awkwardly in my hands. I ignore the uncomfortably foreign feeling of the gun and narrow my eyes. The target is a mere fifty feet away. I was able to accurately target things that far away since young childhood. This should be nothing.

I squeeze the quinque and another crystalline shard flies out, lodging itself firmly in the middle of the red section, a good distance away from the bulls-eye. I try again, but the shard goes no closer to the bulls-eye; this time it's too far up.

I make a displeased sound, and I jolt when a foot nudges my own gently, shifting my feet into a different stance.

It's Haise, with a kind smile and gentle eyes.

"You must have good eyesight, Hide-kun, almost hitting the bulls-eye every time except for that first shot during testing. But your stance isn't right," Haise stands behind me, and he reaches over my shoulders to adjust my hands a little. He claps his hands over mine where they lay on the gun and he fixes how I am grasping the quinque. Although his hands don't linger, my hands burn. "If you needed help with your stance, you should have said so. Don't jump the gun next time, 'kay?"

I stared at him incredulously for a moment, unsure of what I had just heard. But from the way his eyes are sparkling, he intended that ridiculously horrible pun. And I can't help it when laughter bubbles out of my throat, and I continue to laugh until I'm out of breath and there are tears threatening to wet my eyes.

Haise looks... surprised.

"Was that one really that good?" He asked me, once I had caught my breath.

I shook my head, smiling. "Well, don't shoot the messenger, but... No. It was pretty terrible, Sasakisan."

"Oh." Haise looks crestfallen, then blinks. "Wait a minute. Did you just...?"

"I don't think I did anything; are you sure you just aren't a little bit trigger happy to find puns where there are none?"

"You are! You're making puns!"

I smile. "I suppose I am, aren't I?"

"And you laughed at my pun! Not even the squad does that!" Haise sounded so happy it was almost astonishing.

"It was so bad I had to laugh," I admitted. A small bout of silence passes between us for a moment, and I see my opportunity. "You just mentioned a squad, right?" I wait for his nod of confirmation before I continue. "Well then, that's the famous Quinx squad, right?"

"Yeah, that's them. But I don't know about the whole 'famous' part. If anything, we're more of... infamous." Haise laughed nervously. "We don't have very many achievements, and the Quinx are more of an experimental squad-- a squad inside of a squad? I don't really know how to explain it very well... I'm in the Mado Squad, under First Class Mado Akira, and I oversee the Quinx squad, which are technically a part of the Mado Squad?"

I spare him more complicated explaining by nodding understandingly.
"I think I understand now."

"Good," Haise said, with a smile that is more than a little relieved. His phone rings suddenly, jarring our conversation to an end. He glances at me with a frown, and I wave a hand at him.

"It's alright, go ahead."

_I'm sorry_, he mouths as he hits the green button to accept the call.

"Hello? Oh, Mutsuki-kun? How was Dr. Shiba? Oh, it was anemia? Well, how's the case going?" There was a short pause in which I assumed the one called Mutsuki was filling Haise in on the desired information. "It was... a dog, not a ghoul. I see. Well, I'm actually kind of glad. I wouldn't want Urie-kun and Shirazu-kun to overexert themselves so soon after just returning to work." There was a longer pause, in which Haise's face completely drained of color. "Alright, let's get the leads from the team investigating Torso. Shimoguchi and his squad are probably still at headquarters-- I'll meet you there! Try and contact Shirazu-kun and Urie-kun while you wait, please, but I'm sure they won't answer you. I'll see you soon, Mutsuki-kun."

Haise ended the phone call, and turned back to me with an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry. That was my squad. They've managed to get themselves into trouble again, it seems. I was going to help you fix your stance a little more, but it seems I don't have the time today. Are you free tomorrow? They don't hold classes on Saturdays, right?"

_This actually works out in my favor. Another day to spend getting closer to Haise, and another day to make myself a perfect candidate for the Quinx squad._

"It's fine, Sasaki-san! You don't need to apologize over something like this," I assured him. "Tomorrow's fine. Should we meet here, around eleven, if that's fine?"

"Hmm... I've got an appointment with Dr. Shiba in the morning, and a meeting with the other squad leaders after that, which will probably run past noon..." Haise looked thoughtful. "Well, how about we meet here at one?"

"That works for me, Sasaki-san." I smile as he stands, and I walk with him out the door. We part ways there, and I stand for a moment when I am confident I am well out of sight of the building.

The wind ruffles my hair, and there's an exhilaration swelling in me that I haven't felt in a long, long time that makes me feel giddy. I draw out my cellphone, wondering who I should update first.

Itori's words, still clear despite my young age fogging some of my other memories.

_You're like me and Uta. I don't care if your dad says otherwise-- you smile and nod and agree, but remember, we are the Clowns, and we always get the last laugh._

I dial Uta's number. He picks up on the second ring, and the noise of Helter Skelter comes through the phone muffledly, and I know I've made the right choice.

_I am Pierrot, of the Clowns._
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's rather late when I make my way to the laboratory, after being thoroughly sure I wasn't followed. The sun is setting, turning the sky a bloody red behind the relatively large and modernized building located in the 19th Ward that I make my way into. The outside looks much like a house or a very small factory might, although the walls have no windows and the fence circling the property is wire. I draw an old fashioned key from my pants pocket and unlock the wire gate, closing and locking it behind me. Once I approach the building itself, the pristine steel door not making a sound as I slide it open, the security is much tighter, some of the guards with rather nasty-looking scars or, once I am deeper into the lab itself, wearing masks and cloaks that proclaim them Aoigiri Tree members.

They keep their distance from me, a choice which I give them points for. It is a wise decision, on their part.

When I reach a small room with monochrome silver lockers, I locate the second locker and enter my combination, reaching in to pull out a sterile white coat and dull grey scrubs. I change mechanically, routinely, and the feeling of the papery scrubs on my skin is almost soothing. The white lab coat is a reassuring weight, and I shove my brightly colored hair into my head-covering. As I walk out of the locker room and into the hallway, a small ghoul with a gas-mask like face covering and an ill-fitting cloak is waiting. It hands me a pair of gloves as I emerge.

"Kanou-sensei is waiting for you in Lab 4," it directs me.

"Thank you. You're dismissed," I say civilly, my expression perfectly polite. The ghoul simply gives a little nod before exiting back through the locker rooms.

I pretend I don't notice it trip multiple times on it's ill-fitting cloak. It seems young and rather new at the whole lab assistant business.

When I enter the lab itself, I find Father waiting for me, gloves on and expression faintly displeased.

"Hideyoshi. You're late."

"I do apologize, but I needed to ensure that none of my newly-acquired co-workers had followed me here," I announce. It was partially true, although I didn't mention I had stopped for coffee and a late snack, which happened to be freshly baked taiyaki from a rather nice old woman in a pleasant-smelling mom-and-pop bakery near the train station.

Yes, better to not mention that particular reason.

Father sighs, but his irritable air passes soon enough, and he gets straight down to business.

"Before we get back to monitoring the growth of the RC Cells, we should take your vitals." Father said, and there's a politely courteous smile on his face. If I didn't know better, I'd say that the smile was warm and kind, his brown eyes soft.

I did know better, however, because the smile on my face was the perfect mirror of his, and mine was also completely false.

"That sounds good. I've been admittedly a bit careless in my consumption of human foods, and I
want to make sure my RC levels haven't gone down."

"Do be more careful, Hideyoshi," Father adds, and I don't give it a response.

Instead I walk to the rows of neat filing cabinets that gleam in the corner, dustless and shining in the harshness of the industrial grade lighting. I don't have to look at the lettering guides written on stickers stuck to the front of the drawers; by now, I know which drawer contains my files by heart. I select the files labeled in bold lettering: RC Cell Progression and the other, simply called Profile.

"Have the effects of the RC Suppressants worn off yet, or should a standard needle suffice?" Father called from across the laboratory.

I pause for a moment, debating on the best way to test that theory out. In the end, I raise my hand and slash my finger on the edge of the filing cabinets. The cut is only shallow, and it heals almost immediately.

"They've worn off. Best prep a quinque needle for the most accurate results."

Father doesn't answer, but when I make my way back to the set of chairs and table, he's prepped the needle. I set the files on the table and flip the one labeled Profile open, skimming my most up-to-date RC Level and making note of the number.

I remove my lab coat and roll the sleeve of my scrubs up, and Father swabs the inside of my arm with an alcohol swab. I don't flinch when the needle pierces my arm and draws blood. When he's finished and the needle is removed, he walked towards a machine that measures RC Cells in the opposite end of the lab, and I wiped the stray blood that had trickled down my arm before the puncture had healed.

There's a loud humming coming from the machine as it measures my RC Level, but I've grown a bit bored with the subject, and I'm about to move on when Father makes a clicking noise with his tongue.

"Hideyoshi. You're levels have dropped, and by almost a full six points, as well. Hunt tonight and get them back up."

I sighed through my nose and fought to keep the pleasantly neutral expression on my face. I could hear the implied order in his words.

"I'll be more careful from now on. I'll double on my RC intake for the week, but I'd rather not resort to cannibalism. It's a very foul business, and it does have the rather nasty side effect of insanity."

Father gave me an annoyed look that said Don't you get smart with me young man.

"Hideyoshi, you know as well as I do that insanity is only a side effect when cannibalism is taken to the extreme, in unhealthy amounts. In generously sparse amounts, cannibalism is perfectly healthy. And besides, wasn't it you who came up with the thesis of insanity only taking effect when RC Levels spike at an uncontrolled and unregulated rate, causing mutation in the cells themselves?"

I didn't voice the fact that most non-ghouls-- actually, most ghouls as well-- thought that any cannibalism was unhealthy. And ghoul flesh tasted foul and rotten.

"I am, but I'd rather not test that theory on myself." I said firmly. "My RC Levels won't be effected by the suppressants, since the suppressants only restrain my RC Cells from taking effect. So, as long as I continue to eat and restrict my consumption of human foods, then my RC Levels should continue to rise at the set rate. Is that not true, Father?"
His expression was somewhat annoyed that I had apparently felt the need to state the obvious. I felt a small spark of joy at his annoyance. I may have been born from his genes, and by all rights I am his son in appearance, intelligence, and mindset, but that was where the relation ended. Father was not my owner, if my creator, and I obeyed by his rules merely out of respect for creating me and the benefits of the knowledge gleaned from his laboratories.

The Kanou name was influential in the higher-classed ghoul world as of late, as well, so that was another benefit, I suppose. His connections and information network isn't something to scoff at, I'll give Father that. And the ties to Aoigiri Tree is quite useful at times, although it did have it's downsides. Aogiri ghouls were either desperate, crazy, or rather rude and unpleasant conversationalists. Occasionally chillingly strong or-- less likely-- very smart and manipulative, in which case I found them quite pleasant.

"Hm." He gives me flat look. "Fine, then. Moving on to brighter topics, have you read the latest update on Experiment 31?"

"I haven't."

"You should have. This experiment would benefit you, especially."

I study my newly-updated profile with a disappointed look. Father hadn't lied; my RC Levels had dropped by a whole six points. Even if I wasn't as obsessed with raising my RC Cell Levels as Father, being exceptionally strong was enjoyable, and getting even fractionally weaker was unacceptable. "By benefiting me, you do mean benefiting my RC Levels, don't you?"

"It's the same thing in the end, isn't it?"

"It is."

There was a longer bit of silence as Father called to one of the lab assistants, and he requested a lab report from yesterday. The lab assistant nodded once and scurried away. She returned a moment later with the requested form, and Father gave it to me expectantly.

I skimmed through it.

"Ah. The synthetic meat is taking well to the RC Fluids, eh?"

"You shouldn't be so nonchalant about something so revolutionary, Hideyoshi. If this experiment continues to be successful, it may be possible to completely regulate your RC Cell intake."

I try to resist the urge to roll my eyes and scoff, but a small huff escapes my lips even so. Father doesn't care for simple things in the experiment like 'taste', but to a ghoul, taste is one of the biggest factors in choosing prey. And the taste of the synthetic meat is terrible, when compared to a true meal. Like tofu to a meat-lover, I suppose.

Father doesn't take notice, or if he does, he doesn't comment. I wonder if his hearing is getting bad in his aging, but I think the latter is more likely. It's almost like a mental duel between us, every time we meet; we must carefully pick and choose our battles, in order to win them all.

"Well then, just hunt tonight, I suppose." Father concludes with a disappointed air of finality. "We should move on. We must check up on Owl today, and we'll be late if we don't get a move on. He should be here any time, after all."

"Yes, Father."
I follow him dutifully, handing my updated profile to the lab assistant to be put away and glance at the clock. It's now almost six, and I want to sigh. It seems like it will be another long night.

*I hope Owl, at least, has something interesting to fill me in on. This is getting boring.*

---

Haise's mind is, unsurprisingly, elsewhere as he rolls up his sleeves and dunks his hands into the hot, soapy water. Something had been nagging at him all day long, but like answers seem to always, it lay just beyond his reach. It was on the tip of his tongue, the edge of his mind, but Haise was unable to uncover the answer itself. All it gave him was a splitting headache, adding to the exhaustion that lay heavy in his muscles and bones that never quite went away. He still needed to read the materials for tomorrow's meeting, and look over everyone's coaching plan, but Haise was tired.

And yet, instead of thinking of the upcoming meeting and the coaching plan, or the scolding he had given to his subordinates just a short while ago, or the ghoul who was probably not Torso that they had fought and captured, Haise's mind was content to drift away from the growing headache and the nagging feeling that he was missing something important to lie among happier thoughts. Foremost, the training meeting at one o'clock with Nagachika Hideyoshi, the Academy student with the extraordinary analysis skills, and the oddly enticing smell, and the amazing eyes-- eyesight, Haise corrected himself. Amazing eyesight. He must have been more tired than he thought, to make up a slip-up like that.

Underneath the pleasant thoughts of Hide-- which were indeed pleasant, and brought to mind warm sunlight, for a reason Haise couldn't fathom-- there was a strange sense of foreboding.

Still washing the dishes mechanically, Haise was jolted out of his thoughts by Mutsuki.

"Sasaki-san? Do you want me to dry the dishes while you wash them?"

Haise brushed off his own skiddish jump with a smile and laugh.

"Sure! That would be great, Mutsuki-kun."

Mutsuki looked a bit concerned, and Haise knew he hadn't gotten off without being noticed. Mutsuki stayed silent for awhile, simply drying and putting up the dishes, before he gathered up the courage to hesitantly ask the question on his mind.

"So, Sasaki-san... How was the Academy?"

Haise held in a relieved sigh. Mutsuki hadn't asked the dreaded, *'Are you okay?* question. Haise was perfectly fine, of course; well, as fine as one could be when the past twenty-some years were lost. Yet he always felt a little like he was lying when he said he was fine-- was he really fine, with the faceless monster fighting against him at his weakest seconds, when he was scared or alone? When the beast that lie dormant inside him was barely able to be kept at bay?

Of course he was, Haise reassured himself. He was just being dramatic, nothing more. Perhaps he should stop reading so many dramas.
"The Academy was great, actually! I met a student there that I think has a lot of potential!" Haise is eager to get away his own thoughts. Talking is a great way to do just that.

"Oh, really?" Mutsuki asks curiously. "What's their name?"

"His name's Nagachika Hideyoshi," Haise doesn't realize it, but his talking is becoming more animated, and Mutsuki's worry lessens slightly. Haise sees Mutsuki's shoulder's relax a little and he smiles. "Actually, I'm meeting with him tomorrow, to help him with his shooting."

Mutsuki raises an eyebrow.

"You are?"

Haise hears the incredulous note to his subordinate's voice, but he finds it hard to relate, a bit. Sure, it may seem a bit odd, to already have his eye on someone as having great potential, enough so to single him out in the crowd of students, and to already select his potential candidate for the additional Quinx member (although Mutsuki didn't know about that. In fact, none of the current Quinx had been informed of the decision to single out a new addition). But Hide stood out in a way Haise couldn't explain in words: there was something about him that drew all eyes to him, that made him be the center of attention. It was impossible to not notice Hide, and Haise's intuition was telling him that this would be the right choice.

And his intuition was never wrong... right?

Haise's heart was beating fast. Everything around him was dim and black, and he couldn't see anything, not even his own hand, which he was sure he was waving in front of his face. He was beginning to panic, and his breathing became ragged as his heartbeat soared in his ears like the crescendo of an orchestra.

And then suddenly, he wasn't alone in the dark. The shadowy dark parted and recoiled away as a sunflower bloomed at his feet, and abruptly, his fear began to vanish. The darkness peeled away completely now, revealing a scenery that was before hidden. Haise was sitting on a grassy hill, a book clutched in his hands, when a voice drifted through his dream like the wind.

"--I just moved here recently. So I still don't have any friends! So... would you be my friend?"

The spot where the voice is coming from is so blurred and distorted, Haise can't make out a person at all. But he can see orange, warm and bright, and he hears a voice that sounds far too young to be his say.

"S-Sure."

"Awesome! I'm--"

The voice is cut off abruptly as the scene fades away, into a new one. This time, Haise is standing in the middle of a scene that looks like it's from a sci-fi movie. The floor beneath his feet is a watery
blue, and it ripples like the ocean. The sky is brilliantly blue and unnaturally close and clear. It's exhilarating and calming, in an odd paradox.

But then the sunflower begins to fade, and Haise cried out as white flowers-- white roses?-- sprung up around the sunflower. Yet, the sunflower, although slightly dimmed, remained in place at his feet, giving off a warm glow like the sun. The weariness in his bones gradually melts away as the comfortingly warm wind ruffles his hair gently, almost like a caress.

And then the flowers ripple. The once-warm and pleasant wind becomes cold, and the scenery around him flickers. The sky and ocean fall away to reveal checkerboard tiles, and the flowers turn a bloody red, morphing into red spider lilies that seem to leer wickedly at him, and the sunflower seems to be giving off a darker glow that Haise hadn't noticed until now. He wants to cry, because the sunflower was the only remaining thing that gave off a somewhat warm feeling, but there was something wrong with it, something dark. But Haise remained in place next to the sunflower, still.

The wind was picking up, biting and as cold as ice. There's a metallic clicking coming from somewhere with an equally metallic smell to match that smells acridly familiar, and it sends cold shivers down his spine. Haise is terrified now, and his heart is seized with fear, because the smell triggers an instinct driven deep into him, so deep it's muscle memory. An instinct that makes his breath vanish with fear and his hands tremble. Haise's fingers and toes begin to ache, and there's an irritating feeling in his ear that turns into scratching pain that makes Haise cry out, and he wants to clap a hand over his ear to try and stop the pain, but his muscles are frozen.

The clinking sound is getting closer to him, and Haise still cannot move. He is frozen in place with fear that lashes at his wrists and ankles like chains, and the flowers at his feet gradually wilt and die, until only the sunflower is left. And then, as the clinking stops and Haise knows the monster is just behind him, because he can feel cold puffs of air like breaths on the back of his neck, a raspy voice speaks out, but for the first time, it isn't a taunt or a jeer.

"Hide," The voice says, dry as leaves and filled with a confusion and sorrow that shakes Haise to the core. "Why?"

The sunflower at Haise's feet turns black and wilts away.

Haise sits bolt upright in bed, and he's panting like he had just ran a race. His heart is thumping in his chest at a painful rate, and a sob is choked in his throat. His cheeks are wet: Haise is crying, bitter tears that sting his eyes.

He wonders what he had dreamed and tries to summon the memory to mind, but he can find nothing. The dream is long forgotten, slipping through his hands like water.
This was going to be posted on time tomorrow, but I finished it tonight, so I figured what the heck, I'm going to post it now.

Anyways, this chapter. Not as much happened as I would've liked, but the first kind-of glimpses of little shiro-Kaneki happen, and you get a little insight on how Hide's relationship with Kanou is. I hope you enjoyed, and remember to please notify me of any errors you find so they can be fixed!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*He's late,* I think with a glance at my watch. *By a whole fifteen minutes. Kaneki was almost never late.*

I give my arm a shake to push my sleeve back down, sighing. I decided to dress casually but nicely, in something fit for a weekend ron de vu with my sort-of work superior. A plain but nice set of black pants and a nice-but-not-dress-nice dark grey button up. I want to wear something brightly colored, but I fear it may be a little too informal as of yet, and it may be a little too soon since the *incident.* I don't want to jog any suspicions about me being Pierrot; that would be rather awkward to explain.

*Surprise! I'm the ghoul who tried to eat your subordinate! Tell him I said sorry, 'kay? No hard feelings, right?*

Not going to happen.

I smile at the CCG officials bustling around the office as I rock from the toes to the balls of my feet absentmindedly. The lobby of the First Ward Main Office is rather crowded, especially for a Saturday, but I suppose it is the main office for a reason. My laminated ID Card, identifying me as an Academy student, hangs from my neck on a brightly pattered, slightly kiddish lanyard. I get a few odd looks for my lanyard, but I don't particularly care. I like my lanyard, in all it's green-and-orange glory. If I can't wear bright colored clothes yet, I'll be damned if I don't express my fondness for neon colors in some form, and nobody can see my socks, so I'll display my lanyard as proudly as I want, thank you very much.

I roll my shoulders a little and tap one foot. I can't sit still, and it's been that way since infant-hood, I've been told. My hands and feet always seem to be doing something, and right now that something is tapping out a melody to some English song I'd heard over the radio the previous night. The lyrics were fuzzy and I couldn't remember them very well, but the melody was upbeat and bright, and it made a point to firmly lodge itself in my mind. I wonder what the song was called? That'll bug me later, until I figure it out.

I make a mental note to do so, and as I do, the elevator gives out a bright *ding* as it's shiny metal doors slide open and Haise, along with a female investigator that automatically makes my lip curl. Oh, don't get me wrong, it wasn't anything about her being a *woman* that made me upset; rather, it was her *skills.* The spine-user's name was well-known and rather feared in the ghoul community, and even now, when she wasn't even carrying a quinque-- that I could see, that is-- she gave off a dangerous aura that made me respect her, and that respect was the precise reason I hated her. She would be an irritating foe, and I had no doubt that I would suffer a wound or two before I slaughtered her.

"I'm sorry, Akira." Haise apologized rather miserably, lagging a step or two behind her with his eyes downcast. "You had to cover for me..."

"Sasaki," the woman said, giving him an exasperated look. Haise looked up, eyes still guilty, but they widened and his mouth flew open when the woman did the last thing I expected her to do.

She punched him in the gut, hard enough for Haise to double over in shock, a horrible gagging noise escaping him. The Spine-User made a displeased sound, sighing.
"It's not that I hate your amicable personality, but don't act so sweetly during fights. Even I was embarrassed at that statement of Clause 2 just now." Her eyes are cold, and I'm not sure what statement she's referring to nor what fight, but I have to agree with this woman. Kaneki was always too sweet, always seeking to please people, even after his time spent with Aoigiri Tree, although he was a bit more malicious and deceiving then. But although I agreed with her, the Spine-User woman punching Haise did make my blood boil a bit.

*Don't touch him. Kaneki is mine.*

"You tend to be prejudiced *more* than the Quinckes themselves. Don't defend ghouls. Unless you want to take another Mado punch, that is." There is just a little bit of humor in her voice now, I think, and my lips twitch. *Oh no,* I think, *I'm beginning to tolerate this woman.* The woman shakes her head a final time. "That kindness will be the end of you, Haise."

Haise has stopped gagging by now, and he wiped his mouth feebly, wincing and clutching a hand to his abdomen. I offer him a hand with a sympathetic smile, and with something like a smile-- or probably as much of a smile as he can muster after taking that punch-- he accepts my hand. I pull him up gingerly and hope not to make it seem too easy. Haise is quite light, for an investigator, I suppose, but even so. Carefully safeguarding my human identity is rule one, and otherworldly strength is a big no-no at the moment. The woman, apparently not having noticed me until now, turns to me with an unreadable expression and slightly narrowed eyes.

"And who might you be?"

There are no polite honorifics, no politeness at all in her speech. I am slightly appalled and slightly intrigued.

I beam, bowing politely and showing her my lanyard. "I'm an Academy student, Nagachika Hideyoshi. And you are...?" I keep my tone polite and my expression pleasant. From what I can tell, she is Haise's superior, and as such, I need to be on good terms with her. But a guard has been thrown up behind my eyes now, because I know this woman. This is Mado Akira, the woman I worked with beside Amon. I have grown taller, and my hair is a back to how it used to be, ruffled and short, like down, rather than long like it was when I worked with her, but did she recognize me?

She only gives a short nod. "First Class Mado. Mado Akira. But what is an Academy student doing loitering in the lobby of the Main Office Branch?"

No, 'nice to meet you' or anything. Geez. I *am* growing tolerant of her.

Haise saves me from answering.

"Ah, actually Akira, Hide-kun is meeting me here. I promised him we would work on his shooting some, since we were interrupted after class yesterday." He turns his gaze to me, and his look was apologetic and a little bit pleading. I don't know why; I couldn't ever be mad at something as fickle as being late to meet me. Irritated, maybe, but never angry. "Sorry I was late, Hide-kun. The meeting ran late."

"It's fine, Sasaki-san," I reassure him immediately. "I don't have any plans for today, so please, take as long as you need."

Akira gives me one last long, analyzing look. I apparently pass her scrutiny, because she simply nods again.

"It was pleasant meeting you, Nagachika," and a weight lifts from my chest. "I must be going."
Goodbye, Nagachika, Haise."

And Akira walks away without another word.

Haise sighs, and he brushes off the knees of his suit and jacket gently. I make a sympathetic face.

"That was quite a punch. Are you alright, Sasaki-san?"

"I'm fine, Hide-kun, but thank you for asking. Honestly I deserved it, more or less." Another heaving sigh. There are dark circles under his eyes like purple bruises, and a pang goes through me. I may not care much for Haise, but he is Kaneki's host-- his container, per se-- and it wouldn't do for Kaneki to return in less than optimal condition. Haise must take care so Kaneki stays well, and I decide to make that my own personal goal.

"So, I assume the meeting didn't go well? Bad day in general?"

Haise nods ruefully, and runs a hand through his dual-coloured hair.

"Yeah. The meeting went quite terribly, actually, and I'll have to agree on that last statement as well."

This is my perfect opportunity. Training and showing off my physical aptitude can be done at any point in time, but how often does a chance like this arrive?

I beam, and it's so genuine I can almost feel the warmth radiating from it.

"Well then, how about I make your day a little better? We can put training off for a few days or whatever, but what's say we go get coffee? Talking makes everything better, y'know," I add.

Haise looks torn.

"But I promised I'd help you with your shooting today, Hide-kun! It wouldn't be fair to skip out on your training just because my day isn't going well!"

I shake my finger at him, which was probably quite disrespectful to do to a superior, but I didn't care.

"No arguing, Sasaki-san. It's official; we're going on a coffee date and you're going to tell me about all of your troubles!" I declare, probably overstepping my bounds, but deciding to take the risk. Life was no fun without it's fair share of risks, after all. "I've always been told I'm a very good listener, so it's time to put that skill to good use!"

"Hide-kun-!" Haise begins, but his protests are cut short when I seize his arm and drag him behind me as I march towards the exit. We pass an investigator wearing a black suit with a neat crop of pale blonde hair and closed eyes, and Haise shoots a pleading look towards him, but the investigator shrugs and gives me a smile. Triumphantely ignoring Haise's "Hide-kun!" I lead him out of the building.

When we've made it a few streets from the building, I release his arm. Haise stumbles for a moment, unsteady, before he regains his balance and brings his wrist close to his body as if he's afraid I would try and grab his wrist again. And although I'm regretful to let go of his hand, I wouldn't grab it again.

"Hide-kun..." Haise seems at a loss at what to say. Finally, he looks around us, almost worriedly. "Do you know how odd it probably looks, a grown man being dragged around Chiyoda? We probably look like a couple of maniacs, you know."

I'm dead silent for a long moment as I process this bit of information.
"...That is what you're worried about?"

Haise nods, like he doesn't see why I'm so incredulous.

"Sasaki-san, Chiyoda has doubtless seen stranger things than me dragging you a few streets," I say, but that's all I manage before I start laughing. And I can't seem to stop, but that's alright, because like honest laughter tends to be, it's infectious. Haise joins in with my laughter until we're both out of breath and wheezing, and when we stop, Haise smiles at me.

It made my heart stutter, because in the warm sunlight's illumination, he looks exactly the same. His face was the same, pale-skinned and delicate boned. His hair was two-toned, but it had the same feathery ends and framed his face messily. His eyes, though, caught me off guard.

When we were children, the grey of his eyes always seemed like the grey of misty rain, ever-shifting and never quite the same, sometimes guarded and sometimes open. When he was human and his mother was dead, his eyes were the color of grey skies, somehow darker and always a bit far away. When he was a just-turned ghoul, his hair still black, his eyes were like the colour of grey pearls, always a bit glassy, but still gleaming and bright. After his time with Aogiri Tree, they always seemed comparable to steely chrome or stone, cold and slightly apathetic, emotions always held at arm's length away from them.

But now they seemed ironically like the colour of a dove's feathers, free and open, proudly displaying emotion like I'd never seen in them before.

"Well then, Hide-kun, how about we go get that coffee now?"

We end up settling for a smaller coffee shop, nestled near the train station and in between a book store and a shoe shop. It's not exactly empty, but it's quiet enough, and pleasant smelling, like-- unsurprisingly-- coffee beans. There's a low chatter that acts like a soft white noise in the background as we're seated and a young waitress with long hair tied back in a braid comes to give us menus.

"I'll be back to take your order in a little bit," she says cheerily, walking away and back to another table, where a group of high-school aged girls are seated and chatting over foamy coffees that look like they're mostly whipped cream.

Haise doesn't pick up his menu to browse, but I don't say anything. I pick mine up more for show than anything, glancing through it with feigned interest. I already know what I'll order; very rarely do I order any time of coffee that isn't simply black, and I'm not about to change my ways now.

After an adequate amount of deliberation time, I fold my menu and set it down before lacing my fingers and propping my head on them, tilting my head a little.

"So Sasaki-san, what's was wrong last night? Your squad was in trouble, weren't they? Are they okay now?"

Haise gave a rather long exhale, exasperated.
"Oh, that. Yes, they're fine. Shirazu and Urie just seem to be trouble magnets as of late-- ah, they're some of my squad members. Urie's the squad leader for the Quinx, but he's more of a... I think a good term would be, 'not a team player'. And Shirazu, well, he's a good kid, but he tends to act first and think later, and he follows Urie's lead most of the time. And then there's Mutsuki, and he's such a good kid, but he can't seem to manifest his kagune as of yet, and he's anemic, and he's so nervous and skiddish. And then there's Saiko, who's so sweet, but she doesn't ever want to go on investigations and I can't ever wake her up in the mornings--"

"Are we ready to order?" The waitress interrupted, beaming.

Haise blinked, snapping his mouth closed before opening it again. Saving him from further confusion, I smile warmly and pass the waitress out menus.

"Sure! I think we're ready to order. I'll take a medium coffee, just plain-- black, that is. No milk or sugar, please."

"I'll have the same thing he's having," Haise adds. The waitress nods and scribbles our orders down on a small notebook before walking away again, calling something out to someone unseen.

"So, Sasaki-san, I'm not sure that I heard you quite right. Did you say-- I believe his name was Mutsuki-kun?-- couldn't manifest a kagune?"

Haise looked a little surprised.

"I did. Ah, let me explain a little. The squad that I'm mentoring, the Quinx Squad, is a group of Academy students that have passed the aptitude test and undergone a surgery to implant a ghoul's kakuhou inside them. It doesn't turn them into ghouls, though," Haise was quick to assure. "It's coated in a thick layer of quinque steel, so it's just like having a quinque inside your body."

I let a surprised look pass over my face, one of shock and a hint of amazement.

"Oh wow. That's... that's... I don't really know what to say. Is the surgery... safe?" I've allowed my voice to drop down to a whisper now.

Haise nods firmly. "Oh yes, the surgery is definitely safe. It has a four out of four success rate. There's a frame system, see, that let's the kakuhou adjust to the hosts body."

"Do these... Quinx... have to eat bodies?"

Haise shakes his head, and his smile is a little muted when he thanks the waitress as she brings our coffees. There's a short moment when he merely stares into the dark liquid, and even when he looks up at me, his smile is sad and his eyes are dulled.

"No. The Quinx are still human. Only ghouls must eat flesh to sustain."

That looks more like the Kaneki I know, doesn't it?

I study his face intently, and it's not just for show. I genuinely do want to observe his reactions.

"Are you alright, Sasaki-san? You look upset. Did I say something wrong?"

Haise simply gives another shake of his head, taking a long drink from his still-scalding coffee before answering me.

"No. No, you didn't do anything wrong, Hide-kun. I'm not upset at all, certainly not with you," He
assures me, and his smile is barely there. "I'm just a bit absentminded today, I suppose," he adds, and I take a drink from my own cup, ignoring the liquid that scalds my tongue when I do. I can't have Haise seeing me smile when he touches his chin at the last line.

My Kaneki might just be closer to the surface than I thought.

Chapter End Notes

I don't really have much to say about this chapter, I guess? It's actually pretty light-hearted, I think, and you get a little bit more insight to Haise’s mindset and thought process... and yeah, it's twisted as hell but I hope you guys don't perceive Hide as being all bad. He might be the antagonist to Haise, but Hide isn't exactly completely evil...

I think?

The Hero, that is, "often simply an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, who, despite the odds being stacked against him or her, typically prevails in the end. In some movies (especially action movies), an hero may exhibit characteristics such as superhuman strength and endurance that sometimes makes him nearly invincible.

There’s also The Anti-Hero that being "a protagonist who is lacking the traditional heroic attributes and qualities, and instead possesses character traits that are antithetical to heroism."

Of course, there’s The Villain defined as simply "a cruelly malicious person who is involved in or devoted to wickedness or crime; scoundrel; or a character in a play, novel, or the like, who constitutes an important evil agency in the plot."

And then there’s the lesser-known Anti-Villain defined as "An anti-villain is a character in a film, drama or literary work who pursues undeniably villainous ends, but employs methods that are arguably noble in order to advance his interests. Thus, the anti-villain is the converse of the anti-hero, who frequently resorts to immoral means in pursuit of an admirable goal. An anti-villain may commit serious crimes, such as murder; alternatively, his actions may only be considered "villainous" because they come in direct conflict with the story's protagonist."

Personally, I think that Hide is a strange mix of Anti-Hero and Villain, or maybe even a little bit of Anti-Villain. I'll save my reasoning for another time, but tell me what you think Hide is in the comments!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Well... actually, this chapter is kind of the calm before the storm. See the end notes after the chapter for more on that "storm".

And I want to mention Dave_in_Nightvale, for accurately predicting Akira's actions. I want to mention Young Kyle and Mr for guessing the direction this story's probably heading in.

Enjoy this mostly-filler-but-necessary-chapter, posted a day early! (Wow, look at me, actually making it before Friday)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Nagachika, huh?_

Akira strummed her fingers thoughtfully on her keyboard. Her intuition was telling her there was something off about this Nagachika Hideyoshi, and the name itself set off alarm bells. It brought memories of a bright, orange-haired boy with a habit of playing detective and an uncanny ability of putting two and two together before she had even come to that conclusion.

The boy whose life had been tragically cut short, as he went missing in action during the Anteiku Raid two years prior. At least, that was what had been recorded on document, and what Akira had believed. After all, it wasn't like Nagachika was a very popular surname, and for it to be paired with the first name Hideyoshi, and belonging to a man with uncanny resemblance to her old subordinate? It simply wasn't plausible.

She clicked through the CCG's database, looking for the particular file she wanted. But there was no file, no record of anyone named Nagachika Hideyoshi anywhere from two years prior. Letting out an irritated noise, Akira went to pull up the missing in action database instead, and searched _Nagachika_.

One hit. Akira selected it, tapping her fingers impatiently as the file loaded.

Nagachika Chikara, age eighteen. The picture showed a beaming young man with a mop of unruly brown hair and eyes. Missing In Action during the Anteiku Raid, most likely deceased. Formerly a part-timer, at the time of assumed death was a subordinate to Amon Koutarou and Mado Akira.

Her fingers stilled.

This boy surely wasn't her subordinate. She was sure her subordinate was orange-haired, and called Nagachika Hideyoshi. But the only other people she could ask were Takizawa and Amon-- both whom were also MIA.

But Akira wasn't one to give up. She'd be keeping a close eye on Nagachika, she vowed. Her intuition told her something wasn't right.

And her intuition was always right.
"I'm back!" Haise called, pocketing his house key and stepping into the entryway to remove his shoes.

Mutsuki looked up from where he was sitting at the western-style dining room table with a smile. "Welcome home, Sasaki-san."

"Huh? You're alone?" Haise asked, although the bright smile remained on his face. "What about Urie and the others?"

Mutsuki sat his cellphone down with a rueful smile. "They haven't come back. You were right about the ghoul from yesterday: he isn't Torso. So they flipped and stormed off."

Haise just sighed, pulling off his white trench coat and hanging it up neatly. Even though their quinques are in for repairs... Are they planning on using their kagune again?

"What about Saiko?"

Mutsuki glanced in the direction of the stairs briefly. "Well, she was using some app until now... Umm... "A Game To Grow A Lion Dance", is what it's called?"

Haise gave a small smile, one that was maybe just a little less bright than before and a little more exasperated. "Is that even fun? Well, never mind that. Mutsuki, did you eat yet? Need me to whip something up?"

"But aren't you tired, after just finishing work?"

"I didn't work all day today. I just visited Doctor Shiba and then went to the meeting, which ran longer than I expected, but that let out around one. I was with Hide-kun for the rest of the day."

Haise gave his subordinate another smile. "Besides, I want to make something."

"Ah..." Mutsuki would never quite understand it, but Haise did enjoy cooking. So he slid off the stool he was perched on, bare feet making a sound against the wood floor, "Then, let me help!"

Haise didn't say anything in response, turning on the water to wash his hands. "You need to bulk up, Mutsuki. So it'll be meat."

"Ah!" Mutsuki protested. "But I don't like meat with blood dripping from it..."

"Don't complain to your superior," Haise said, trying to suppress a smile. It didn't work.

They cooked in relative silence, although it was a comfortable silence, by no means awkward. Until Mutsuki suddenly made a noise of surprise, causing Haise to look over in concern.
"Is something wrong, Mutsuki?"

"Oh, no, nothing's wrong," Mutsuki guaranteed. "I just remembered that I wanted to ask how the training with Hide-san went."

"Oh. That." Mutsuki frowned a little at Haise's response. "Um. We didn't actually get around to training."

"If you don't mind me asking, what did you do, then?"

"Went out for coffee."

"All afternoon?" Mutsuki genuinely hoped he wasn't being too nosy. Poking into a superiors personal life probably wasn't a good thing to do, but Haise was never a normal superior. Work superiors didn't normally cook meals for his underlings, nor did they normally live in a house with said underlings. Normal work superiors certainly didn't allow one of his underlings to call him the French word for Mama.

"Well, we looked at some books, too," Haise said, almost defensively. "But... yeah. All afternoon."

"Did you have fun, Sasaki-san?"

"I had a lot of fun, actually. Thanks for asking, Mutsuki," Haise said, and his smile was bright and genuine.

Mutsuki smiled as well.

"Nice of you to drop in so often, Hide," Uta said flatly, releasing his pencil as I opened the door to the flat above HySy.

"And the award for Deadpan Snarker goes to... you! Who would've guessed," I exclaim, pocketing my key and removing my shoes. Uta is seated at his desk, his sketchpad opened in front of him, "I'll have you know that I have a four hour train ride every time I visit."

"Yes, yes, you're such a wanted person," Uta waves a hand dismissively. "Since you were apparently so busy that you couldn't even give me another phone call, I've got a lot of catching up to do. Make yourself useful and make some coffee. I think I've got some leftovers in the fridge, too, so heat those up."

"What am I, your slave?" I say indignantly, folding my arms.

Uta gives me a perfectly well-mannered smile, but his eyes are sly.

"Why, of course. Why else would I keep you around?"

"Mean!" I declare, sticking out my tongue. I still move to prepare the instant coffee, and once that was done I open the fridge. Like most ghouls, Uta's fridge is completely barren, besides for a few Tupperware containers that are neatly labeled and a few cans of my favorite soda. There are two,
with the same date haphazardly slapped onto them in the form of pale stickers with sharpie neatly printed on it. I remove the top of one, poke at the contents with a fork to stir it, and pop it into the microwave. Uta is at least neat in his packaging, and the containers are easy to heat up.

It takes awhile, but eventually both of the containers are heated up and the coffee is done. Balancing the four dishes takes effort, but I manage, much to Uta's amusement.

"You should be a waiter," he comments. "With that balance and reflexes of yours, and that charm, you'd be set."

"I'm busy enough without another job, as you've already pointed out." I note sourly.

Uta beams. "Ah yes, that. So now, how is my precious customer doing?"

"Well, Sasaki Haise seems to be doing quite well, although he's got the Spine-User, Mado Akira, as his superior." I scoff. "That's fate just laughing at me. What kind of luck is that, Haise's superior being my old superior?"

Uta raised an eyebrow as he takes a sip of his coffee, the glass teacup making a clinking sound against his lip piercing. "Mado Akira, you say? Did she recognize you?"

"No. And even if she did, which would be an inconvenience, she wouldn't be so bold as to outright confront me. She'd surely check the database for my records as confirmation first, which have conveniently been wiped from the system. The only Nagachika Hideyoshi that ever served the CCG is me, as a currently enrolled Academy student."

"Don't you think that her suspicions will only increase if the records of her subordinate suddenly disappeared?" Uta asked, and he sounded genuinely concerned.

"Of course. I've countered for that, too. There are now records of a Nagachika Chikara that served her, before going MIA during the Anteiku raid. Not only that, but the picture has been changed, too. No worries there."

"Chikara, huh?" Uta smirked. "It looks like your sense of humor is the same as ever. 'Empty, vacant, void'."

"Well, I had to have the last laugh, after all," I smile. "I wouldn't be a Clown if I didn't."

After a rather disastrous talk with Shirazu and Urie that put a damper on the happy night, Haise found himself inside the great mass of Quinque steel-coated walls called Cochlea, Mutsuki at his side. The prison director apparently had no qualms about them visiting so late.

"Rank 1 Sasaki." The prison head, Shinme Haiseki, greeted them with an expression that gave away no emotion. "I've been in contact with First-Class Mado."

Haise offered a polite smile in response, well aware of Mutsuki fidgeting nervously behind him. Haise could almost read his subordinates thoughts on his face.
The prison head is scary.

"The previous prison head, Misaka, lost her life by Aogiri Tree," Shinme informed them as he lead them down the winding stairs to the SS Rank floor. Haise had to keep himself from looking up or down: the view of Cochlea's many floors and stairs, winding around and around in a seemingly endless cycle, was dizzying. "Cochlea was dealt a huge blow during the Aogiri raid. I'm expecting great things from the Qs Squad."

"Thank you for your confidence, Shinme-san," Haise said, genuinely pleased. Most of the CCG's staff tended to think that the Quinx Squad wouldn't amount to much, and it was increasingly rare to find a someone with a positive outlook on the Quinx's future.

"But you know, a human with a built-in quinque..." Shinme smiled, although it was an unnerving smile in a way Haise didn't think he could describe. "The Bureau Director sure has some bold ideas. I like it."

Mutsuki's eyes drifted from the prison head to the cell walls, like he couldn't decide which was more concerning. Haise glanced at him once, but kept walking behind the prison head.

"It's fine, Mucchan."

Mutsuki blinked, not sure if he'd heard quite right. Mucchan? That's what Saiko-chan calls me, but when did Sasaki-san start?

"These walls are coated with qoinque steel," Haise went on, "The ghouls held here are also weakened by an RC depressant."

"Ye-Yes, Sasaki-san," Mutsuki said, with a little bit of an exasperated smile. Qoinque? Depressants, not suppressants? He's sleepy... What happened to the Sasarious who was ready to pull an all-nighter?

The group of three stopped in front of a cell just like any of the others, but Mutsuki shivered in anticipation as the warden unlocked the cell. It was divided by some clear material that somehow was ghoul-resistant, but Mutsuki didn't want to know how, really. A tall, thin ghoul with white hair and a neatly shaven beard was waiting for them, looking completely at ease in his prison scrubs.

Mutsuki had done his homework on the way here. Unfortunately, that made him more anxious, not relaxed.

SS Rated ghoul Donato Porpora. A Russian ghoul, he's a dangerous ghoul who killed investigators and caused many incidents. In Japan he was running a Catholic orphanage, and he preyed upon the children he was looking after. Alias: Priest.

"Oh? I was wondering who it was... It's you, Haise." Mutsuki tried to keep the question out of his eyes as his superior gave a tired smile at the ghoul as he continued. Haise? No honorifics? "Nice timing, by the way. I was just getting bored." The ghoul stretched, eyeing the rooms new occupants. "Where's your superior, Mado Akira?"

"Oh, she's on a different case," Haise explained.

"How is it to be under a woman's thumb?"

Haise gave the ghoul a thumbs-up gesture, smiling weakly. "It's pleasant as long as it's an excellent thumb. How have you been, Porpora?"
The ghoul gave a friendly chuckle. "Loose-lipped like always. Oh... There's a new one with you today. Little young too."

Mutsuki was frozen as the ghoul leaned close to the glass-like divider, making his heart race. He gripped the hem of his short white coat fearfully, visible eye flown wide as Donato's face twisted from the friendly, pleasant expression he'd worn while talking to Haise to a vicious, predatory smile.

"Looks really tasty! I want to selfishly rip apart that belly and stuff my mouth full of those soft organs."

Mutsuki went white as a sheet, certain that his heart was going to give out and that would be the end of his life when an arm descended, laying across his shoulders comfortingly. It was Haise, who gave Donato an exasperated smile.

"Please don't tease him too much."

"Tease? Mutsuki wondered dismally. That was... teasing?"

"Sit down, Mucchan," Haise ordered gently.

Mutsuki complied with a faint apology, gaze still frozen on Donato, who looked rather smug.

"Excuse me," Was the only semblance to an apology Donato offered. "All right... What kind of investigation is this?"

Haise sat down across from the ghoul, opening a laptop that was already running and typing a few short keystrokes into it. "It's about the ghoul Torso," Haise clarified. "I'm bringing up the data." A glowing map, flagged with red check-marks, a chart, and a document of other information appeared on the glass-like divide.

"His hunting areas are pretty spread apart." Haise said with a gesture to the map. "We think he's using a vehicle as a means of transportation. All of his victims are women, and... all of them only have their torso taken away."

Donato nodded. "I see... so he's a torso-mania. For ghouls, the head is an extremely important part. By completely understanding what he's eating, it amplifies the excitement of the meal. He satisfies himself while looking at the face... Well, I suppose everyone has their own taste of having fun."

Mutsuki felt even sicker, really. *Fun?* Even among ghouls, Donato seemed to be... especially twisted.

"The head is no doubt the face of the meal," Donato looked rather amused with himself. "To humans, ghoul meals can be boring because they're garnished by just a single 'flower'. Not showing any interest in that 'flower' and just leaving it be... He's quite choosy with his food. A picky eater, if you would."

Haise's expression looked far away and rather sad.

"Isn't it because he's afraid? The eye shows emotion, the mouth spits out words. The face contains a massive amount of information. He's doing this in order to block that information. What if we assume that?" Haise drummed his fingers. "A ghoul that's aware of his own power... yet is still afraid of humans. The reason for that must be..." Haise's eyes lit up. "Oh. I see."

Donato had picked up Haise's trail of thought without difficulty. "He's either a ghoul that's blended into human society, or he's a ghoul who's hiding his identity and most likely has a normal job. While
being oppressed by his boss and clients, he's skillfully deceiving his surroundings. A job that includes knowledge of the streets. Say, for instance... A taxi driver."

It clicked in Haise's mind like a spark.

_Urie's been giving me so many taxi receipts... It must be because he's already narrowed it down. He's a sharp one. That excellence right now is only a nuisance._

"Thank you for your insights, Porpora."

Donato didn't say anything at first as the information disappeared and Haise stood to make his leave, Mutsuki ready and eager to leave beside him. Finally, Donato said, "Haise. After you've solved this case, I want to tell you about a different case. Come alone next time."

Haise nodded, and no farewells were said. As Haise lead the way up the stairwells of Cochlea, Mutsuki spoke for the first time in what felt like ages.

"Sasaki-san... Why does the CCG let someone like that live? When I look into that ghoul's eyes... It sends shivers down my spine.

Haise's face was carefully expressionless.

"Porpora is a very beneficial information provider for the CCG. That's why the authorities are using him. I don't like the idea of it, but... someday..." Haise swallowed, and his lips were painfully dry. "Someday he'll be disposed of. But until that day comes... That's right. "Donato has to keep proving himself. He wants to prove just how valuable he is."

Mutsuki thought he heard something in his superior's voice then, something like a heavy acceptance. He didn't say anything about it.

---

_It was the voice again, that dry, listless voice so eerily like his own that it sent chills down Haise's spine._

"Isn't that the case with you as well, Haise?"

_Somehow, Haise didn't need to ask what the monster was referring to._

"Because you... are the same as Donato."

"Huh...?" Haise queried. A set of hands crept around his neck and sat chillingly around his throat. The hands seemed somehow wrong, the nails a dark black, the skin unbearably cold. The hands did not squeeze his neck: they did not need to. The faint pressure of the hands simply resting against his throat was enough to choke him.

"All you're doing is indulging in this twisted self-value that you have of yourself. And if you don't,
you won't last. Eventually... you will break or become useless. Once that happens, you'll be discarded."

The voice of the monster was beautifully terrible, exposing Haise's darkest fears like it was nothing, in that voice so like his own. It was almost like Haise was saying them himself.

"Isn't that right? Haise."

Haise sat up groggily on the sofa of the Chateau, rubbing his eyes blearily. One hand fumbled for his glasses, the other attempting to smooth the terrible bedhead he was undoubtedly experiencing. Placing his glasses on his face, Haise stared at the files he had fallen asleep studying.

*I just don't get it. Why is he so obsessed with the torso...?*

Chapter End Notes

Okay! Next chapter: More Hide/Haise interaction, and the Serpent fight... with a change. The next chapter will be the real diverging point for the story from the manga, so what do you think the change will be?

(Haha, look at my attempt at suspense. I'm pretty sure you all know what the change in the Serpent fight is.)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

So... since the previous chapter was fairly filler-ish, and I've written up to chapter nine, I figured, why not? Posting another chapter surely can't hurt. Enjoy the first part of the Serpent fight!

It's almost to the end of Haise's deadline to identify Torso's face. I know this, because I've been helping him during what was supposed to be training sessions, but instead have turned into Saturday coffee dates. My help is anything but subtle: our second meeting, the day after Haise's Cochlea visit-- which I was also informed of, because apparently his subordinate almost had a heart attack due to Donato Porpora's teasing-- we met in the lobby of the main office by chance, and I bought him coffee from the vending machines because he looked half-dead. While I did, I helped him to establish why Torso was so obsessed with the torso's of his victims. Really, all of the information was in front of him, and he probably would have established that connection himself if it hadn't been for the fact he had apparently gotten no sleep besides an accidental nap. I didn't pry about that accidental nap, because Haise had made a face of terror at the thought. It was probably a nightmare.

I was perfectly fine with helping the investigation from behind the scenes with Haise during our Saturday coffee dates. It was entertaining, like another real-life game of detective, my long time hobby. I was perfectly fine with the investigation-- that is, until Haise grew so panicked about his approaching deadline (which was only five days away) that he had to break off our coffee date today. It was understandable, logically. And I was a very logical person, but that didn't mean that I wasn't a little irked and disappointed.

I huffed in displeasure, but pushed it away and drew out my wallet when it was my turn in line to pay. The convenience store, which was close to the apartment I was renting, was convenient for coffee runs at times like this, when it had slipped my mind to by another can of instant coffee. I was also picking up a few human trivialities, like a few cans of soda and a few packs of instant noodles. Maybe I was still a college kid at heart.

I payed the requested amount, and left with my plastic bag in hand. As I emerged into the cooling late afternoon air, I sighed. I had been doing a whole lot of nothing today, besides checking a few experiments and getting a phone call from a rather drunk Itori, who was adamant on coming and seeing me, because it had been too long since I'd visited her, and more along those lines. The situation was defused by Uta, thankfully, but I was itching to do something. Lab work was dull, convenience store runs were boring--

"Hide-kun? Is that you?"

I turned around to find Haise, standing at the opposite side of the street, near a bench on the grounds of the hospital. He was smiling and waving at me, and I smiled back at him, crossing the street to meet him.

"Sasaki-san? What're you doing at the hospital so late? Did something happen to one of your subordinates again?" It wasn't an unreasonable assumption, considering his subordinates were a troublesome bunch in that trouble didn't have to come looking for them; they stumbled right into trouble. That is, in Haise's own words.
Haise shook his head. "No, not this time. I'm on a stakeout for the Torso case again tonight."

"Again?" I question. I lean forward, balancing on my toes until my face is only a short distance from his own, and I study his face intently. Haise looks tired-- but then, when does he not? "The circles under your eyes have gotten wider," I accuse. "You haven't been sleeping again, have you?"

Haise laughed nervously. "Why did I think I'd escape your scrutiny? You notice everything." He sighed. "No, I haven't. There's only five more days left until the deadline Akira-san agreed on. We've got to find Torso before then, but time's just ticking away, and there's just no progress."

Haise looked... defeated. It wasn't a good look on him. It never had been, and it wasn't now. I put my hands on my hips disappointingly. "Sasaki-san! Don't tell me you're giving up!"

"What?" Haise looked confused. "Well, I'm not giving up, no. It's just a bit discouraging that--"

I cut him off, trying my best to imitate Father's disappointed parent look. I have a feeling I did a rather good job, because Haise looked guilty.

"No, no, no. Don't start thinking like that. If you start thinking like that, you'll already have lost. You cheer up and chin up right now," I order, poking him in the side. Haise flinches, but doesn't lean away. In fact, he smiles, a bit more genuinely.

"Thanks, Hide-kun. I think I needed that."

I smile triumphantly. "Of course you did. That's why fate brought me here at this exact moment, you know. To give you a pep talk."

"Well, you give great pep talks. Thanks again, Hide-kun." Haise smiles at me again, and gestures to the bench. We sit down together and I set my bag between our feet. "Sorry again for breaking off our coffee date today. I really am on a stakeout."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. There's always next Saturday, and the one after that, and the one after that... well, my point is that there's an infinite amount of Saturdays that we can go have coffee. There's only five more days to catch Torso. The case takes priority, I understand."

Haise sighed. "The woes of being a Ghoul Investigator, huh?"

"Trainee for me, but yeah," I agree. "And you're also the father of four problem children, don't forget."

"What do you mean, Hide-kun?" Haise looked puzzled, then understanding dawned in his eyes. "Do you mean the Quinx? They aren't problem children-- well, not really, anyways."

"But you didn't deny that you're like their father," I sung gleefully. "No denying it now, Sasaki-san!"

Haise gave me an exasperated look. "I just want to be able to coddle them as much as I can. I may be their superior, and sure, they're Ghoul Investigators, but they're also just kids."

I was cut off by the ringing of a cell phone, and both Haise and I freeze. It was a text message alert, it appears, because after the shrill single ring no other noise was heard. Haise blinked, then rummaged through his pocket and pulled out his phone. He looked at the alert and chuckled.
"It's one of those responsible young adults. But I wonder what Mucchan needs...?" Haise read the message, and his face paled considerably. He stands shakily, looking like someone just punched him in the gut.

"Sasaki-san? What did the message say?"

Haise's hands were shaking, and he looked terrified. "It's Mutsuki. He-- oh god, he's in trouble, Hide-kun, he found Torso and he's alone."

I blinked, not sure if I heard that right. Mutsuki was the meek one that couldn't summon his kagune. "Did you just say he confronted Torso alone?"

"I did, but that's all the message says-- he's in Torso's cab right now, Hide-kun--!" Haise was really freaking out, and honestly, I didn't blame him. From what Haise had told me, unless he or reinforcements got there soon, this Mutsuki was as good as dead.

I stand abruptly, gripping Haise's hands-- which not only were shaking, but very cold-- and cut his frantic talking off. "Alright, Sasaki-san, calm down. If you want to help him, first off, we need to figure out where he was. What was his location when he got into the cab?"

"He was at the plastic surgery hospital, a few miles away from here, but--"

I let go of one of his hands and smile strainedly. The RC Suppressants I had taken are gradually wearing off, but it'll be a good few hours yet until I'm back to full strength, and I'm still feeling their effects. That's good, though; I can't move as fast. Faster than normal humans, yes, but no faster than what is considered good for ghoul investigators.

"So then, Mister Ghoul Investigator, how fast can you run? More importantly, can you run and make a call for backup at the same time?"

As it turns out, Haise can indeed multitask, and as we dart through the streets of the First Ward, dodging pedestrians and cars alike, I've taken to carrying Haise's quinque case while he made the distress call for back-up. And the CCG certainly lives up to expectation: sirens go off within the next three minutes or so, sirens go off, pointing us in the correct direction. Neither Haise nor myself is breathing hard yet, but we've got another mile and a half to go, and with every minute that ticks away, the risk of Haise's subordinate being dead-- something that would devastate him, and something I am determined to avoid-- is increasing. With my calculations (and running calculation in your head while dead sprinting is not easy, especially when doing it all based on estimations) we were running an average of four minutes every mile: that would be approximately six more minutes until we reached the taxi if it was motionless. Which, it probably wasn't.

_Faster, faster. We've got to run faster, damn it._

Five more minutes. Haise's subordinate had a quinque, right? In close quarters, Mutsuki should be able to hold his own-- or at least, not die-- for a little bit... surely?

I'm starting to breathe a little heavier, but we've started running at a constant rate of two and a quarter minutes for every mile. We had less than two minutes-- no, less than a minute now-- until we reached his subordinate. I can see the yellow taxi now, with the number twenty three emblazoned in black on the sides. The taxi is crashed in the middle of the road, and there are police cars surrounding it. It
appears that the tires are blown out, and as we get a little closer, I hear more scuffling, but I stop dead in my tracks, still almost a half-mile from the blockade of police cars. The ghoul standing in the midst of burning police cars, as if he doesn't have a care in the world, if definitely not Torso. This is a ghoul I am well acquainted with; at least, a ghoul Nagachika Hideyoshi, the human former college student, is.

This is Serpent, my former senpai, Nishio Nishiki.

"That isn't Torso," Haise whispered, eyes wide. "That's... Serpent!"

"And none of the CCG reinforcements are here yet," I curse. "Those are all just normal cops."

Haise's gaze is drawn to a spot near the crashed taxi as we draw closer, and I follow his gaze to find a group of three teenagers, looking haggard and beaten, next to it. I recognize them from the night that seems so long ago when I hunted with Uta, although now I can put names to them, thanks to Haise. There's the one I tried to eat, with the purple hair and eyes, his kagune dissipating to nothingness and his shirt bloodstained and torn. There's Shirazu, in his black jumpsuit, orange hair messy and longer than an investigators should be, falling down the back of his neck to touch his shoulders in slightly bloodied clumps. And the one who looks the worst is Mutsuki, his white coat long soiled by crimson splatters of blood and tears caused undoubtedly by getting thrown around by a ghoul. His face is bruising already, and a trail of blood leads from his mouth. There's a nasty-looking wound near his visible eye, too, looking like it was caused by a punch. He's a resilient one, I'll give him that.

Serpent cackled, and he leaned a land back to scratch the back of his head in an absurdly mundane gesture.

"For real... okay, let's end this." Serpent hissed, and the long, reptilian bikaku shoots towards the group of Haise's young subordinates. And we're close, so close, but for a moment I'm unsure if we'll make it--

And then we slide to a stop in front of the group, Haise activating his quinque just in time. He thrust it into the ground, and as the kagune collided with it, the bikaku split in half. Haise had just saved not only me, but his subordinates too, by diverting Serpent's kagune around us.

There was no time to think, however. While Haise was fighting, I had elected myself caregiver. Haise might fight harder when something-- namely, the lives of the people he cared deeply about--were at stake, but he wouldn't be able to focus one hundred percent of his attention of the fight if he was still worried about his subordinates. It would be better to get them far away from the action, or to act as guardian if Serpent tried to attack any of the kids.

And damn you Haise, for getting that terminology stuck in my head. I won't be able to look at any of his subordinates the same way any more.

I put on my most charming and reassuring smile, standing between them and where Haise and Serpent were furiously battling it out.

"Alright, kiddos! I'm going to assume Saiko-chan wasn't with you guys today, right? So, we're all accounted for? Mutsuki-kun? Urie-kun? Shirazu-kun?"

Mutsuki wiped blood from under his eyes, and it smeared like bloody tears. He stated at me like I had just fallen from the sky.

"Um, who are you?"
"Yeah!" Shirazu interrupted. "How d'ya know our names?"

"I'm Nagachika Hideyoshi, the Academy student who's been stealing your mentor away for coffee every Saturday." I explained, wondering how much Haise had told them. "You can call me Hide, though. Almost everybody does. And I know your names because Sasaki-san sure likes to talk about you-- he's like a proud parent, but don't tell him I told you so." I held a finger to my lips as I spoke, winking.

Mutsuki let out a short, breathless laugh. Shirazu looked relaxed, his face relieved, and Urie was the only one who looked a little incredulous or suspicious. I'd give him time to warm up to me, though. I would be suspicious too, if someone I didn't know suddenly appeared out of nowhere with his superior on a battlefield and knew my name.

"S-So your Hide-san," Mutsuki managed, attempting to catch his breath in-between winces. "Sasaki-san has told me about you. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I grinned, a toothy smile, and held out my hand to lift Mutsuki up."C'mon, you guys. Get behind the police blockade. Not that the police would do much good, against a ghoul like Serpent, but reinforcements should be here soon. We called them in on the way, so you can get your wounds treated soon. Until then, behind a ton of cars is safer than here, right?"

Shirazu nodded reluctantly, and Mutsuki looked ready to sway on his feet. Urie, however, snarled at me, almost like a feral cat.

"Like hell I'm going to let Rank 1 Sasaki take all the credit!" He hissed. "I'm still able to fight! If my extermination skills are deemed in proportion with an S-ranked ghoul, my chances of getting the White Wing will go up exponentially!"

I smiled, but now it was cold.

"First of all, Sasaki-san would never take the credit for someone else's achievement. And, as far as I could see, he is the one risking his life to save ours. Not you." I wasn't even sure why I was defending Haise. He wasn't Kaneki; he was the thing hiding Kaneki, the facade that Kaneki wore. Perhaps it was because Haise was Kaneki's container, or because he was so much like my best friend that it was instinct to defend him. Yes, that was it: Haise was like the child version of Kaneki. I must protect him, care for him, love him and nurture him to ensure Kaneki's safe return to me.

"Secondly," I continue, and my smile is so cold and menacing it shouldn't even be called a smile anymore. "You shouldn't think your able to take on an S-Ranked ghoul when right now you couldn't take on me."

Ha. More like the other way around. Urie didn't need to know that, though.

He scowled at me, but he backed down. I don't now whether or not it was pack instincts or something like that, but there was a hatred in his eyes like fire. My smile melted back into a sunny one like had never been cold, and I helped Shirazu and Mutsuki stand, although they more or less helped each other. Urie smacked my hand away when I offered it to him, storming far ahead of us and disappearing behind the blockade before Shirazu and Mutsuki were even steady on their feet.

Suddenly Haise was sent flying, skidding to a stop on his feet but doubled over, a spray of blood flying from his mouth, crimson and smelling intoxicatingly sweet. He wasn't very far from us at all, and I took a step forward, but Haise free himself upward and wiped the blood from his mouth, his eyes closed and hand held out in a gesture for me to stop.
"Hide-kun. Contact Akira. Mutsuki should know her number." He seemed to sway on his feet a moment, but he steadied himself, and his voice was strained when he managed a final line. "And... Thank you, for getting the kids away."

"Anytime, Sasaki-san." I say, a little taken aback.

But Haise didn't seem like he could hear me. He cracked his fingers, and my eyes widened. There was a fine red mist— *kagune secretion*, my mind supplied— seeping from under Haise's torn dress shirt. And then it happened, the kagune sprouting from his lower back with a tearing sound as his shirt ripped further, four shining red tentacles. The look in his eyes made my heart soar--

This wasn't *Haise*, at least, not completely. *This was Kaneki, my Kaneki.*
Chapter 8

Woo-hoo, part 2 of the Serpent fight! Stuff goes down, and... yeah. You'll find out.

I've written up to chapter 12 at this point. But I'm posting this in celebration of 102 Kudos and 1207 Hits milestone!

Shirazu and Mutsuki's eyes were blown wide.

"So the rumors were true..." Mutsuki whispered.

"Sassan is a ghoul," Shirazu echoed.

I smiled, watching the Haise leap into the air to begin his real counterattack. Then I turned around and made a shooing motion at the two remaining Quinx.

"C'mon now, Sasaki-san asked me to get you all out of here safely. If I don't, he'll never go on another coffee date with me again, you know. And I like my Saturdays the way they are: booked." Putting a hand on either of their shoulders, steering them towards the police blockade. They stumbled a few times, but we made it to the other side of the blockade with little difficulty. Shirazu I wasn't as concerned about, but Mutsuki's bleeding was still oozing slowly, and he was a little dazed. With a fight going on a few yards away, though, I really don't blame him.

"Sit, both of you. Shirazu-kun, Mutsuki-kun, Urie-kun-- oh, quit giving me those looks," I scolded Urie, who was shooting daggers at me with his eyes. "Looks don't really kill, so quit trying. Ghouls, however, do kill, and Torso's still around here somewhere. I want all of you to be on guard. I don't think Torso's stupid enough to try anything, but be careful, just in case. And Urie-kun, if you're so confident you can fight, then you can guard your squad-mates with little trouble," I declared.

Shirazu and Mutsuki were still frozen, watching the fight with the a mix of awe and terror through the glass of the police car's windows. I planted hands on their shoulders and sat them down like children.

"Alright, Mutsuki-kun? Sasaki-san said you would know Akira's phone number?"

Mutsuki's eyes were still wide, and I feared that his dilated pupils were the early signs of shock. But he rummaged in his coat pocket, drawing out the busted remains of a cellphone. "Ah... I don't have it. I'm sorry, Hide-san."

I ruffled his hair, ignoring the blood that smeared my hand when I did so. "Don't worry, Mutsuki-kun. I can reach her through the CCG's main office line. You guys, just rest for now."

I dialed up the CCG's number on my cell phone, the automated line leading me through an irritatingly long series of questions to get to a real representative. Finally, a woman's voice, pleasant and light, came through the speaker.

"Hello, you've reached the emergency line for the First Ward. My name is Nao, how may I help you?"
"This is Academy student Nagachika Hideyoshi, from the First Ward Academy. I'm currently at the scene of a ghoul attack by S-Ranked Serpent. A-Ranked ghoul Torso is also on-scene, but his exact whereabouts are unknown. The Quinx Squad is on scene, but injured and unable to engage the Serpent. Rank 1 Sasaki Haise, from the Mado Squad, is currently engaged in a battle with S-Ranked Serpent alone. I need you to send back-up immediately, and put this line through to First Class Mado Akira."

There is the sound of rapid typing from the other line, and the woman is remarkably calm for being told there was a high-ranked ghoul on a rampage. I commend her for that.

"Alright, Nagachika-san. Back-up is headed your way as we speak, and I'm putting you through to First Class Mado Akira. Thank you for your cooperation." The line momentarily goes dead, static filling the speaker, but then it rings again and a woman who's voice I recognize picks up.

"First Class Mado speaking."

"Mado-san? This is Nagachika Hideyoshi. I'm on the scene of a battle with S-Rated Serpent. The Quinx Squad is injured and unable to engage. Sasaki-san is battling Serpent alone. Back-up is on the way, but Sasaki-san told me to contact you. Our exact location should be in the dispatch report for back-up; I'm unsure of where we are, exactly, myself. My phone should have been traced via GPS."

There are no pointless questions, and I respect this woman, just a little. "I understand. I'll be there soon, Nagachika." And then the line dies for good this time, and I pass my phone to Shirazu. He gives me a questioning look, but I smile.

"It's for safekeeping," I explain. "Also, what quinque do you all have on hand?"

"Um, I've got two Rinkaku daggers, Iraft and Abksol," Mutsuki said after a confused moment of silence.

"I've got a Bikaku one, Tsunagi," Shirazu says, nudging the silver case that had never even been opened. "It's a sword, but, 's got no guard. Urie's got the same one, but his got roughed up durin' the fight, I think. Why d'ya ask, Hide-san?"

"I think I'll need to borrow your quinque for a bit. I promise, I'll return it," I assure. "Sasaki-san can't hold out until back-up gets here-- at least, I don't think. I'm going to go help subdue Serpent."

"That's ridiculous," Urie sneered. "An Academy student, trying to take on an S-Ranked ghoul? You'll only get in the way and end up getting yourself killed. You'll probably get Sasaki killed as well."

The comment makes me burn with rage, but I just smile, hitting the button on Shirazu's quinque case so that it transforms into a long, thinner sword without a guard. It's balanced well, being a mass-produced quinque, and it fits comfortably in my hand. I smile at Urie, a large beaming grin that almost hurts it's so wide.

"Just watch me, 'kay?"

"Be careful, Hide-san!" Mutsuki croaked. His voice is growing horse, just like Shirazu's and Urie's, and probably Haise's. Coughing up blood tended to make your throat sore, unfortunately spoken from personal experience.

"I will be. You all, too. Rest up, but watch your backs," I warn again. "And do not come and try and help. You all just stay safe."
"We will. Don't worry about us!" Shirazu assures, and his orange hair is rust-coloured with blood.

I don't say goodbye, and neither do they. Goodbye seemed too ominous.

My stride is confident as I make my was back to Haise. Just as I do, I see him, his quinque and kagune working in a perfect tandem, get thrown high into the air, Serpent's kagune punching a hole through his abdomen. His head flies back, eyes wide, and he coughs more blood as Serpent chucks him across the ground. Haise rolls, spinning, until his momentum gives way and he collapses on the ground. He's panting and bloody, his eyes hazy-- I can see that, even from yards away. My heart seizes, my steps faltering.

*His regeneration... will it happen in time?*

"Come on! Stand up!" I shout, so loudly that it burns my throat. "You can still fight!"

Serpent gives me an annoyed look, and I dash forward, quinque in hand. His kagune, of course, meets me before I can reach anywhere near him.

"You..." Serpent mutters. "First the King of Fakes, and now you?"

"Long time no see," I agree quietly, so quiet that it won't be overheard by the clashing of our weapons, kagune and quinque. "Nishio-senpai."

I am very conscious of the events going on behind me. I am dearly hoping that Haise is actually moving, and that is not just my imagination.

"Sasaki-san!" Mutsuki cries, dashing forward despite my explicit orders not to. Shirazu looks panicked, for his severely wounded superior and his foolishly good-hearted friend, and he reaches out a hand to grab Mutsuki with an anxious cry of, "Tooru!"

Haise stands up, throwing a hand out firmly, his head down. His voice seems colder when he speaks, and it sends shivers down my spine, because it's happening again. I catch another glimpse of Kaneki, my Kaneki, as Haise orders to his subordinates, "Stand back."

Mutsuki is frozen now, his voice cracking a little. "We... We can still fight! We can't just stand here and watch--!"

Haise finally raises his head, and his grey eyes are no longer like doves feathers. They are cool grey steel. "Rank 3 Mutsuki. *This is an order from your superior.*"

Shirazu yanks Mutsuki back gently. "Tooru! Don't get in the way! Remember what Hide-san said, and listen to Sassan's orders! Trust them!"

Mutsuki backs down, and allows himself to be lead behind the blockade. I focus my attention back on Haise, who has stretched and healed. He cracks his fingers, grinning. "All right," He says, more to himself than anyone else.

Serpent's kagune clashes into my borrowed quinque, and I grit my teeth. I'm more sluggish than normal, thanks to the suppressants, and my body's durability is downgraded. My bones creak in protest when I stand my ground firmly, a fire blazing behind my eyes.

Clash, clash, clash. I deflect every strike save one, which scrapes into my ankle painfully, probably scraping bone. In an act of rebuttal, I cut off one of his kagune-limbs. This quinque is much duller than a kagune, I note irritably. It takes much more force to pack a good punch.
Haise strides towards where Serpent and I are in a deadlock, my quinque driven through his kagune, locking him in place, but in return I am unable to move. If I were to ease the pressure, even a little, he would break free. But as I twisted the quinque harshly, Serpent gave a cry of pain and his kagune dissipated into mist.

"You won't get past here, Serpent," Haise declares.

"Yeah," Serpent agrees. "Compared to those brats, I'm much more interested in you."

Haise laughs darkly. "I wonder if I should be happy about that. But I think it's better if you don't know about me... Right?!" The kakugan in his eye is activated, his sclera midnight black and his iris blood red. His expression as he cracked his fingers was almost deranged: wild, full of fiery anger and a determination to cause pain.

It was wonderful.

I could see the horrified shock on his subordinates faces-- only Urie's expression remained unchanged.

Haise's new fighting style didn't leave much room for Serpent to get a hit in. His downfall was almost smooth as Haise's bluff worked exceptionally well, the unseen kagune ripping through Serpent's abdomen. And then came the second and the third and the fourth and the fifth, tearing a large hole in Serpent's body.

Haise cackled. "That's payback, Serpent!" He howled as Serpent was sent flying, skidding across the concrete until the friction overtook his momentum, leaving him lying in a pool of blood, gasping in pain as his mask slid off. Nishio's hair was stained with blood, his own and the blood of Haise and myself and the kids. (Damn you, Haise.)

I strode up to Serpent, bloodstained quinque in hand, Haise in stride beside me. Nishio groaned in pain, clutching his abdomen. He gave a bitter laugh.

"I'll die, I'll die,'... was it? For real..." Nishio was looking between myself and Haise, lips wet with blood. "You... No matter where you go, you're helpless... Kaneki."

"Nishio-senpai?" Haise whispered, but it was like the name was forced from him against his will. I could see the panic in his eyes, and I took a step closer to him as his kakugan vanished. Haise clutched at his head in pain, now, his screams completely incoherent and his hands clawing at his hair. Two long, thin Rinkaku have appeared from his lower back, thrashing around and lashing out at random.

There are footsteps that makes my head whip around. The backup has arrived-- thanks for your help, guys-- in white coats with briefcases. The Quinx look at a loss amid them as the leader holds up a hand, face emotionless.

"Pursuing Serpent is on hold. Kuramoto, Takeomi, deal with C5~C9. The rest are backup. Our first priority is to deal with SS-Rated ghoul, Sasaki Haise."

A click, somewhere far off in the distance. My eyes shoot to the rooftop of the building next to us, where I see Akira, damn that woman, holding a poised sniper rifle. The possibilities run through my
head inhumanly fast as I process the new information. Haise is the CCG’s trump card, a notch below the Reaper. After going through such trouble to obtain him, surely they wouldn't kill him. So those aren't Q-bullets, but RC suppressants...? That means the 'backup' will have to weaken him first.

My eyes widen, and I decide to do something very foolish and very risky. I rush forward to Haise, where he's on his knees, still screaming his head off incoherently, blocking Akira's shot with my body. I kneel next to him, ignoring the lashing Rinkaku tendrils, and I wrap my arms around an SS-Rated ghoul on a rampage.

I may have a death wish, at this point.

I draw Haise into my lap like one would a child, making soothing noises and running my hands through his hair gently. There is blood everywhere, enveloping us in the thick smell, and it's impossible to tell who's blood is what at this stage. His screams have stiffled into something like mumbled sobs, and I feel like we must look ridiculous, two grown men sitting in a pool of blood, decently battered and bruised, one sobbing like an infant.

And I can't bring myself to care.

I whisper soft reassurances and hold him close, his arms wrapped around my neck limply and his tears soaking my soiled shirt. I curl around him as the investigators draw near slowly, like they can't believe what they had just seen. They probably can't. Akira is likely fuming, but she can't say it was deliberate to block her line of fire: no human could clearly see that distance and accurately predict the bullet's trajectory. My attention is still focused solely on Haise, however, when his mumbles form faint words, choked by tears.

"I am... I am..." Haise whispers. His eyes are faintly open, and glassy. "Who... Who am I?"

My mind spins, but I cannot tell him he is Kaneki here. No, it's far too soon to tell Haise now. So I continue to run my hands through his dual-colored hair gently and I tell him firmly, "You are Sasaki Haise. A Ghoul Investigator under the Mado Squad."

Haise nods slowly.

"I am... Sasaki Haise. You are... Nagachika Hideyoshi. Hide." His hand grips my tattered shirtsleeve, and I smile. This is the Haise I know, the stubborn fighter. Even when he's weeping, he is strong. He is eerily like Kaneki, in that way.

The click of heels against the pavement draw my attention upwards to stare at the slightly sorrowful but very pissed face of Mado Akira.

"That's right, Haise." I say back. Haise looks on the verge of unconsciousness, but he is still fighting against it, his hazy eyes peering at Akira uncertainly, like he can't quite see her straight.

"It's okay, Haise. Nobody died. Don't overdo it so much. It's an order." Akira knelt down next to me, where Haise can see her from where he still remains limp in my lap. "It's okay," She repeats, and I don't explicitly like her, but she may have earned just a little of my affections. "Rest awhile, Haise."

Haise makes a noise of confirmation, and his eyes slipped closed. I can see the Quinx, standing further off, staring at us with such a mix of emotions it's unreadable. Akira is staring at me, and for a long time, she is silent. Finally, she says, "Well done, Nagachika. Stay with him until the ambulance arrives, and then come and see me. I need to have a talk with you and the Quinx."

Then she walks away, and I hold Haise just a little bit closer.
I help the paramedics load Haise from his current position— which is, by the way, completely unconscious and as limp as a rag-doll in my lap— to the stretcher, and I watch as they load him into the ambulance and drive away with the lights flashing.

Then I stretch my aching muscles and walk to where the Quinx are waiting. They seem to have recovered from their attack enough to stand firmly and unshakably next to Akira, but Mutsuki and Shirazu look rather unnerved and a little sick, whereas Urie looks like he couldn't care less.

Akira's face is emotionless and cool as I walk towards the dead-silent group, and she stands just a little bit straighter before she begins.

"Rank 1 Ghoul Investigator Sasaki Haise... is a half-ghoul." She lets this sink in a moment before she continues. "He is a victim of Kanou, the crazy scientist of Aoigiri Tree, who transplanted the kakuhou of a ghoul into him and turned him into a half-ghoul. There are several rules regarding his treatment." Akira has paused again, and her eyes look a little darker than before. "One of those rules is to treat Sasaki Haise as a human. Another is... In the unavoidable situation of his kagune running wild, he will be treated as a ghoul and exterminated."

Akira is silent for such a long time, I think that she is done talking. But she resumes her speech, after carefully inspecting each of our reactions. I kept my emotions schooled into an expression of slight awe, but no more or less than that. Akira's gaze lingers on me the longest. "We will do our utmost to call him by injuring him and shooting him down with RC Suppressants, but if anything happens, we have to exterminate him. Even though Haise understands these risks, he went all-out trying to save you guys."

I can read the expressions on the Quinx face, now, as if it had been engraved into their very hearts. Urie's, especially, is very clear. His is envy, as green as Mutsuki's hair, plastered all over his dark purple eyes. Shirazu's, by contrast, is evident in his solemn eyes and muted expression. His was best described as reverence. Finally, Mutsuki's, who was the easiest to read. His was fear. Fear of what, I wasn't so sure. Not of Haise, not entirely, I didn't think.

"But you, Nagachika," Akira announced, turning her full attention on me. "How did you calm him, without suppressants? What was an Academy student like you thinking, going up against an S-Rated ghoul? Moreover, how did you hold your own against an S-Rated ghoul?"
I hold my hands up as if in defense, bearing a small smile. "Whoa, okay. So, as for the first question, um. I just, y'know, hugged him. It's like with little kids when they throw temper tantrums. He was just really upset."

"That doesn't make any sense, and if I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't believe it," Akira shook her head. "But that act in itself was foolish. I don't think I've ever met someone who is stupid enough to embrace a rampaging ghoul."

I beamed. "It's a pleasure to be the first, then."

Akira didn't find my antics amusing. "Answer my other questions."

"Alright, alright. Geez," I mutter. "Anyways, second question. Well, I was thinking that I had to buy H-- Sasaki-san some time so his regeneration could kick in. He had the kakugan, after all," I tap my eye, "So that means that he should have had the ability to heal himself too, right? That was pretty much my thoughts."

Akira looked like she had a massive headache coming on. "Let me get this straight. You ran into battle to buy Haise time, when you have zero battle experience, because you came to the conclusion that Haise was a ghoul and needed time to regenerate?"

"Yeah." I honestly didn't see what was so hard to understand. I was speaking quite clearly, and I hadn't changed my story at all from the first telling. "And the third, though, that one I'm not so sure about myself."

Akira looked at me for a long moment, and I knew why. She was searching for signs of deceit. And I was sure that she found none. She grit her teeth in frustration, and I decided it was a good time to stumble a little, wincing and holding my ankle up a little higher than it's unwounded counterpart.

"You're hurt!" Shirazu gave a sort of gasping noise, looking at the bloody mess that was my ankle. Really, it looked a lot worse than it did, even if it ached irritatingly. Especially since my regeneration couldn't activate, and wouldn't be able to for another good few hours.

"Ah, it'll be fine. It didn't even break," I assured them, but it was successful in drawing Akira's attention away from my answers, at least, momentarily. And by showing pain and wounds, I was surely showing her evidence I was only 'human'. It was a win-win.
"Mutsuki, you look like you're in the best shape. Help Nagachika to the paramedics, and the rest of you, go get checked out as well." Akira looked at me for another long minute, before she added as she passed me, quiet enough that only I heard, something that made my eyes a little wide.

"Thank you, Nagachika."

Haise is awake, but slightly drowsy-looking, with bedhead and his glasses crooked, when I sweep into the hospital room, bouquet in hand. He looks up from the book he had been reading in surprise, glancing at the clock at his bedside with an incredulous blink. It's bright and early, visiting hours--literally--just having begun.

"Hide-kun?"

"Hi, Sasaki-san!" I beam, showing him the ribbon-bound bouquet. "Hospital rooms are dull, so I brought flowers!"

Haise smiles, but he still looks concerned. "Hide-kun, don't you have classes right now at the Academy?"

I laugh, stepping closer and placing the bouquet in his lap before leaning against the bland-looking hospital wall and slipping my shoe off to show him my bandage-wrapped, braced ankle. "Nope! I've been excused from classes for a whole seven days when I get my stitches removed! Look at this, if I didn't want a crutch, they made me wear an ankle brace!" I let my displeasure show in my voice. "For a little thing like this!"

"Hide-kun, are you sure you shouldn't have taken the crutch?" Haise looks genuinely concerned, but I wave him off.

"Yep! One hundred percent sure! Crutches are a nuisance, and my ankle isn't as bad as it looked when they stitched me up. It doesn't even hurt anymore, really."
Haise tucks the corner of his page down, setting the book aside on his bedside table. "Well... that's good, then," He said, but he sounded troubled, and I almost groaned. He was approaching that subject, then, of what happened yesterday. Well, Haise didn't waste any time, did he?

"Hey, serious topics can wait until you're discharged," I scolded. "That's why I came here, you know. I'm here to be your escort!"

"My... escort?"

"Yep! Your escort home," I say with another grin. "Akira-san told me that they let you off work today too, so I volunteered to be the one to come and get you. And, guess what?"

Haise still looked slightly glum, and I knew my efforts in distracting him from that topic hadn't gone as well as I hoped. But still, he questioned, "What?"

"It's not Saturday, but I brought coffee anyways!" I glanced behind me, ensuring that none of the hospital personnel were anywhere near, drawing the coffee cup out from where it was hidden behind my back. "Don't tell the nurses, though. I don't think patients are supposed to have caffeine, but. I made an exception for you."

Haise finally laughed, a sound like bells pealing. I passed him the coffee cup and he took it gratefully, inhaling the smell of the hot beverage with a happy sigh. I sit in the chair by his bedside as he takes the first sip eagerly, ignoring the fact that the liquid no doubt scalded his tongue.

"Thank you, Hide-kun. For the flowers and the coffee." And as he spoke, Haise sat the coffee down next to his book and inspected the flowers. The bouquet was bound with a bright yellow ribbon and consisted entirely of red de-thorned roses, save for the middle flower, which was a daffodil as yellow and bright as the ribbon. "They're beautiful."

I was debating on whether or not to say some corny line like they reminded me of you or not when I remembered what else I had brought. I place a plastic sack, it's handles tied shut, on his blanket-covered legs with another grin.

"I can't take all the credit for this next one, though. Your subordinates told me to send their regards--and your clothes."
Haise looked confused until he opened the sack, setting the flowers next to him gingerly. It contained a neatly folded set of clothes, undergarments, socks, tie and all. He beamed, and I laughed.

"Well, we figured you couldn't exactly go home in yesterday's clothes, not without looking like a maniac. So Shirazu-kun met me at the train station this morning before I came here and gave me your clothes."

Haise smiled, eyes looking just a little shiny. "The Quinx are... they're good kids."

"They are." I agree, and I mean it. I clap him on the back gently, standing up and putting my hands on my hips. "Alright then! Are you ready to go? You can be discharged whenever, now. I checked with Akira-san, and she said it was fine."

"I'll be happy to leave," Haise agreed. "I don't know why, I just don't like hospitals very much."

It's probably lingering feelings of discontent from the operation that turned him into a ghoul, I reasoned, and with that thought I left to get one of the nurses and the papers. By the time I returned, Haise was dressed, in all his suit-and-tie glory, although his white coat is notably absent. I wonder if he has a spare somewhere, or if that was his only white coat. The discharge process actually goes smoothly, but that's CCG hospitals for you, I suppose.

Haise pauses as we finally exit the hospital and takes a deep breath, and I try to suppress my smile a little, for his sake. It doesn't work.

"Finally free of the antiseptic-smelling air, huh?"

Haise looked so startled it was unbelievably funny. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

I think, Because I know you. I don't say that.

"I can see it in your expression. You don't have a very good poker face, y'know." The train station is almost a fifteen minute walk away, at our leisurely pace, but neither of us seem to mind. "You wear your heart on your sleeve."
"I suppose I do." Haise glances at me as we walk, and the air is growing chilled. He's almost as tall as I am, now, I note with dismay. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"Not at all," I assure him. "It's a good thing."

And our walk turns silent. We reach the train station and find that we have missed the train, so we hail a cab and ride in silence. I try to find of a way to break it, before it turns too heavy to bear, but for as brilliant as I am, I can't seem to think of the right words to say. It's not until we reach the address that Haise had requested of the driver that he speaks, the car idling.

"Hide-kun... about yesterday..."

And I jump at the opportunity, speaking before he can. "That's right! I never thanked you!"

"Thanked me?" Haise looks thoroughly confused, and there's something dark in his eyes that makes me angry for a reason I can't quite explain. I'm not angry at Haise, no, nor myself: I'm angry at whatever caused the darkness in his eyes. Tragedy's are wonderful, sadness is entertaining, pain is fun— that is what I've always believed. What I still believe, in fact. But it's only fun to observe them, to orchestrate them; it's no longer just a game anymore when it comes to Kaneki-- and now, by extension, Haise. "What would you thank me for, Hide-kun?"

"For saving my ass yesterday, what else?" I retort, a little shortly. "Sasaki-san, you went all out, even knowing what would happen to you if you lost control! You did it to protect the Quinx and me! I literally owe you my life-- what wouldn't I thank you for?"

Haise won't look at me anymore, and I can't see his reflection in the taxi's window.

"Hide-kun, I could have killed you, yesterday!" Haise's voice is bitter with something eerily akin to self-loathing at the moment, and it's almost enough to make me recoil. "I could have killed you!"

"But you didn't," I reassure. "Look at me. I'm perfectly fine. And that's because of you, Sasaki-san."

"But Hide-kun--!"
"Sasaki-san." I interrupt. "I don't think you understand. It was my choice to calm you down-- and I've already been lectured by Akira-san for my choice, by the way-- and it worked. I did it because I didn't want you to get hurt, and I fully accepted my choice and the consequences it may have had. So quit blaming yourself, Haise!"

I don't process what I've said until after I've already said it, and I slap a hand to my mouth, eyes wide. That was crossing a line, even for me, calling Haise by his given name. And what's worse, I did it without the use of honorifics. I wasn't sure what the hell had come over me, but I was sure that my whole plan had probably just been chucked out the metaphorical window and things were likely about to go to hell in a hand-basket.

Haise simply stared at me for a long time, his eyes wide. I wondered if, after I'd screwed up this badly, ever be able to see Haise's eyes like that again, openly shocked and almost vulnerable. Then he looked away, and he opened the door and got out of the taxi. I felt a little bad for the driver; the fee had long since been paid, yet we remained having an argument in his back seat. Haise paused after he had gotten out of the taxi, still refusing to look at me, and I winced when I noticed red staining his cheeks. I really had screwed up big-time if he was that mad.

And then Haise shattered my expectations by a long shot.

"Do you want to come in and properly meet the Quinx? You can stay for lunch, if you want, Hide."

I released a breath I didn't know I was holding and reached for the handle to open the door. My hands were trembling.

"I'd love to, Haise."

Chapter End Notes

Little sidenote: red roses symbolize love, and daffodils mean rebirth. Hide was getting his own little laugh from the flowers he chose.

This chapter may seem fairly unimportant compared to the others, but there is indeed some subtle character development. Even the chapters that seem to be just filled or fluff--- they all do serve a purpose. Just a very... well, subtle one.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

3638 words and a fight of undeadly proportion. Now this story will begin to clearly divulge from the manga, and I'm ninety percent things will start to get hectic very soon. But for a few more chapters... well, enjoy the fluffy peace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's Monday of the next week, and my stitches have been removed, allowing me to resume my training at the Academy. I am extremely happy about this fact; I had needed to be extra careful about my RC Suppressants to ensure that the wound hadn't closed in the time-span my stitches were in. In the week that I have been 'incapacitated', surprisingly little has happened. I've seen Haise and the Quinx twice in the week, despite my being on leave, once to have lunch at the Chateau again and once to have coffee with the entire group-- minus Urie and Saiko.

I stretch, as we're about to begin our respective sparring matches. We're still unable to train with real quinque-- something about health risks-- so they have us training with 'the next best thing': kendo swords and martial arts. It's basically a free for all in the sense that there are really no rules applied; the only goal is to beat your opponent, and to do that you can apply any and all martial arts or sword-fighting knowledge you have. I look forward to these matches, because it's almost, almost, sort of similar to real combat.

Of course, my peaceful stretching time does not last long. It's to be expected, really; the incident with Haise was closed off to those who weren't on-scene, but the Serpent fight, not so much. My training partner broke the peaceful quiet, his oddly green eyes striking considering that he seemed to be completely Japanese besides that little oddity.

"So, Nagachika-kun, is it true you fought an S-Rated ghoul?"

He doesn't waste time, at least.

"Ah... I wouldn't necessarily say that--" I was cut off midway through my sentence by the door sliding open, and none other than Haise walking in. He glances around the room, which has fallen silent for a moment, and our instructor approaches him.

"Good afternoon, Rank 1 Sasaski," Our instructor, Takahashi, greets. "What brings you to the Academy today?"

"Actually, I'm here for him." Haise points to me, and I raise an eyebrow. "Hide and myself have been summoned to the main office by Special Class Arima, I'm afraid, so I stopped by to pick him up."

A ripple goes through the classroom-slash-dojo, and I commend Haise for managing to remain looking unbothered by the whispers. The rumor mill will be quite happy with this, no doubt. It'll be all over the workplace by tonight, and sometimes I swear, my colleagues are worse than teenage girls.

Takahashi nods. "Well then, you've been excused, Nagachika-kun."
As soon as the dismissal is said I stand and put away my equipment, a little disappointed that I was unable to spar today. But my curiosity has been piqued, and I have to wonder why someone like the Reaper would summon me. Haise doesn't look particularly nervous or worried, so it can't be anything bad... right?

I bow and say my farewells to the instructor, and I follow Haise out of the Academy. We don't even make it all the way out of the doors before I snicker.

"Great job feeding the rumor mills, Haise."

"It's not like I did it on purpose," Haise muttered.

"I know. That's what makes it even funnier," I can't help but snicker again. Haise gives me a flat look. I compose myself with a little bit of difficulty, sighing. "Anyways, what's a high-ranking guy like Special Class Arima doing, requesting my presence. I mean, you, I understand. Me, an Academy student? Not so much."

Haise does look a little concerned, on closer inspection. "I think I have a sort of idea. He asked about you when I visited him last Wednesday, remember? After he had been filled in about the Serpent fight?" I nodded, as prompts for him to go on as we start walking in the direction of the main office. It's less than a mile away, so it seems Haise had elected to walk rather than call a cab. I have no objections. "Well, he mentioned wanting to meet you then, but I didn't assume he'd go as far as calling you out of your classes..."

"Ah, it's not like they were important, anyways," I wave my hand dismissively. "Really, we aren't learning anything new. It's all physical training, now, and I can make that up in my own time."

"I still wish I could've given you a little more of a heads-up about this, though," Haise sighed. "But I only just found out myself, right before I was sent to pick you up."

"Nah, it's fine. I'm at least wearing a suit, right? Even if it isn't the nicest, it could be worse."

Haise looks at me for a long time, his gaze lingering on my face rather than my clothes. Finally, he says, "You'd look fine in anything."

The tips of my ears are burning, and I feel like this is karma coming back to bite me for unintentionally making Haise blush like crazy when I started calling him by his first name. Karma tends to be cruel that way. Of course this happens as we're approaching the CCG's Main Office building, and I'm grateful that my hair is just ruffled enough to hide the tips of my ears.

We ride in the elevator in a comfortable, if slightly nervous, silence. Nobody else boards the elevator in our ride to one of the higher floors, and I swallow. I am not nervous to meet the Reaper, not in the way one would typically be. I am anxious to meet him, to assess him in person, get a read on him. But I am not fearful. I am confident in my own skills. In this game of deceit and lies, I am the top player, and I know it. I'll probably be the only ghoul to ever be summoned by the CCG's Reaper and live, and there's a gratifying feeling there.

Then the elevator dings, and we step into a hallway full of doors that lead to conference rooms. Haise gestures towards one of them, and his hand brushes mine lightly.

"Arima-san is actually a very kind person," Haise said quietly. "So don't be nervous, okay?"

I nod in return, giving Haise a small smile, and we enter the conference room. And there, sitting on the other side of a long conference table, is the infamous Arima Kishou, the CCG's esteemed Reaper. He is calm-looking, white hair neat and suit impeccable, rectangle-framed glasses perched perfectly.
on the bridge of his nose. He doesn't rise as we enter, instead gesturing towards the other seats.

"Haise. It's nice to see you again, as always. Thank you for letting me borrow more of your books, I'll be sure to return those soon."

Haise beams. "No, take your time. And it's nice to see you too, Arima-san."

Arima turns his gaze to me, and I'm chilled to realize that I cannot read him at all. He is as apathetic as a corpse, and I momentarily freeze. But then his lips twist upwards just a little at the corners, barely a twitch, and I relax. He is still human. There is no need to be afraid, merely a little wary.

"And you must be Nagachika Hideyoshi. I've heard a lot about you recently."

I offer my best winning smile, blindingly bright. "All good things, I hope. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Arima-san."

Arima doesn't say anything for a short span of time. Finally he nods, slowly. "All good things. It's nice to meet you as well." Arima straightens, and he observes me coolly. "Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, down to business. Nagachika, what do you know about the Quinx?"

This certainly wasn't what I was expecting, but I can work with this. It just means that my plans are moving a little faster than expected.

"Biologically speaking? The Quinx are humans with the abilities of ghouls, like regeneration and such, by the use of a quinque implanted inside their bodies... correct?"

"That is correct. This is due to a frame system that is designed in order to keep the Quinx human, and to help the kakuhou adjust to the host's body. Now, Nagachika, allow me to be blunt." Arima leaned forward. "You have passed the physical guidelines by a long-shot, and from your entrance exams to the Academy, you certainly aren't lacking in intelligence. However, as an Academy student who hasn't yet passed his final exam, you don't qualify for the Quinx Surgery. If you can pass your final exam test-- and the sooner, the better-- we would like you to undergo the surgery and become the next Quinx."

I don't look to Haise. No, it must seem like I made this decision on my own.

"Are you saying the CCG wants me to take my exam right now, and if I pass, then to undergo a surgery to change me into a Quinx?" I let my voice be incredulous and a little higher than normal. Haise looks concerned.

"I am."

"Why me?" I say, and my voice hasn't dropped back an octave yet. It's working better than I expected.

"Because you're physically and mentally suited to the job. Your RC Cell count is within the designated 'green zone', if you will, a perfect median amount in a human. It means that your aptitude for being a Quinx is extraordinarily high." Arima rattles off the sentences like they're practiced. Maybe they have been.

"Aren't there already four Quinx?" I ask, letting my eyes dart from side to side panickedly. "Why... why would I need to become a Quinx?"

Arima laces his fingers together, expression still unchanged. My inability to read him is frustrating and unnerving. "Two of the current Quinx, although they ranked highly on the paper aptitude test,
are more or less unsuited to combat at the moment. They cannot utilize the full abilities of ghouls, like the other two. Which is why we've taken a slightly different approach this time, selecting you. Your physical abilities are currently on par enough to hold your own against an S- Ranked Ghoul, a commendable feat. But, moreover, you are very mentally capable and very adaptable, from what has been observed."

*Flattery gets you everywhere, Reaper. Nicely done.*

I swallow visibly, letting my nervousness begin to drop away. "I... I think I understand, now. But I will be able to remain human, if I were to undertake this surgery, won't I?"

"You would." Arima confirms. "The surgery has a four out of four success rate. It's done by our own certified doctors. There is still a risk, as with any surgery, but it's very small chance. And of course, there is a large monetary bonus."

I allow myself to seem to mull this over, and eventually, I ask, "...Can I have some time to think this over?"

Arima nodded. "Of course you can. We don't request your answer until next Monday, but prefer and answer as soon as possible. Is that an adequate amount of time?"

"It is." I survey Haise's expression briefly: he appears very concerned. I try to keep my own expression muted somewhere in between brooding and astonished. "Thank you for your offer, Arima-san."

Arima just nods. "My apologizes for pulling you out of your classes, Nagachika. But since you are here, may I make another request?"

There's a gleam in his apathetic eyes now, I think, or is it just the sunlight reflecting off his glasses? I can't tell, and it makes my blood run cold. I've never been unable to read a person. The CCG's Reaper is... an intriguing foe. A dangerous foe, at that.

"Of course, Arima-san."

"May I fight you?" He says it so bluntly that I am taken aback.

"I'm sorry?"

Haise is gaping. "Arima-san...!"

"It's just a friendly little match, of course. Nothing serious. I fight Haise often, when I see him. And it's not like I we would aim to injure the other: the first one to be knocked off the table loses, simple as that." Arima explained, and I cannot help it if my blood sings at his offer. I'm not stupid. I can't beat the CCG's Reaper in a real match when I'm drugged up on RC Suppressants. But I can show him just how much of an asset I'd be, as a Quinx. I can try and knock him off the desk, at least-- who knows? Maybe I'll even win. "It's not that I don't trust the reports. I just want to evaluate you myself."

I rise from where I'm sitting, pulling myself onto the large, rectangular table, with it's middle hollow. "That sounds great, actually. I never imagined I'd be able to fight with someone as skilled as you, Arima-san."

Arima stands and pulls himself onto the table too, a genuinely interested look gleaming in his otherwise cold eyes that makes me want to change my smile from warm to feral. "Afterwards I'll give some constructive criticism as thanks."
"I appreciate that."

While we exchange pleasant words, Haise has regained his senses from the shock, it seems, and he grabs my arm nervously. "Hide! Surely you aren't serious-- you just had your stitches removed! You'll hurt yourself!"

I laugh, pulling his hand from my wrist and holding it in my opposite one. "I'll be fine, Haise! C'mon, don't you have faith in me?"

Haise is holding my hand so tightly my knuckles are white. It's sweet, his concern. "Of course I have faith in you, but you really will reopen your wound if you try to spar with someone!"

I pat his head. "It's fine. I've been cleared by the doctor to come back to work, with no restrictions of movement at all! I'm very hard to break, so don't worry. I'll be fine, I promise."

Haise releases my hand reluctantly, and I give him another smile. Arima is waiting patiently for me, looking like he could wait forever and still be unruffled.

"So, the goal is to knock you off before you can knock me off, right?" I ask for clarification. "Any restrictions, or does anything go?"

"Anything goes," Arima pushes his glasses up a little. "And that's correct, yes. you simply have to knock me off to win-- or be knocked off, to lose. Are we ready to start, then?"

I beam at him, giving the Reaper a thumbs-up. "Ready when you are, Arima-san!"

"Haise? Won't you give us a countdown, then? To insure fairness."

Haise swallows, but gives Arima a nod. He takes a deep breath, like he's the one about to fight. "Three. Two. One-- begin!"

Speed will be my greatest asset, now that my strength has been taken down a few notches by the RC Suppressants. As soon as Haise gives the word, I dart forward, my shoes flying over the polished dark wood of the tabletop. The traction is terrible, with my dress shoes and the lacquer of the table, but I try to ignore the feeling and focus my mind entirely on the effort of speeding up, building momentum in the short distance between the Reaper and I. I push harder than the Serpent fight, moving so fast my body burns-- but it's worth it. I land the first blow, a roundhouse kick that I throw all of my build-up speed and momentum into. It would have connected with Arima's torso, but he brings up his forearms to take the kick. Even so, he slides back a few inches, now dangerously close to the edge of the table. Arima looks pleasantly surprised, and I hear Haise emit a gasp. But I don't stop-- no, I can't stop. If I were to stop and regain my bearings, the Reaper would land a blow and it would all be over.

So I leap upwards when he kicks out at my ankles, landing in time to sweep my own foot outward and just miss his own. I grit my teeth, dancing under a blow that would have hit my head, tricky bastard, only to be hit by a fist I can't completely avoid, taking a grazing blow to the ribs. I dart under his arm before he can stand upright again and kick out at the backs of his knees, but I only manage to land a single blow, and it isn't strong enough to do any more than make his left knee buckle. He counters immediately, swinging around on his opposite leg and landing a hard blow to my stomach with the leg I had made buckle.

I resist the nausea the wells up, grinding my teeth together as I skid to a stop, one heel hanging over the edge. I push forward again, throwing a punch at his head. Arima dodges it, but he ducks right into a kick of my own that connects just under his shoulder, sending him spinning a short gap so now
we stand on opposing edges, both of our feet against the edge. Arima looks surprised I managed to kick that high, and I use the opportunity to throw my body forward to hit him shoulder-first, and immediately following I shove a hand to his ribs. One of his fists meets my side painfully, and I skid again, teetering on the edge of the table. Arima moves faster, this time, and I can't dodge the kick that sends me flying. As one last triumph, I throw a hand up and catch the most of the blow on my forearm, and as I begin to fly backwards I shove my arm out, knocking him off balance. I close my eyes as I connect with the wall loudly, hissing out a mutter of pain.

"Hide! Arima-san!" Haise looked torn, but after a split moment of deliberation, he came to where I was slumped against the wall in a Hide-shaped ball. Understandable, since while Arima had indeed toppled off of the table and into the empty space in the middle of it because I had accomplished knocking him off balance, I was the one who had just gotten flung across the room and into a wall. I hoped there wasn't a dent-- in the wall and in my head.

Damn you, repressed healing.

Haise reached me in what seemed like an instant: one second he was across the room, frozen in place, the next he was at my side and drawing me gently into his lap, waving a hand in front of my face so quickly I couldn't follow it. Everything seemed sort of fuzzy and out-of-focus, spinning slowly, but that was probably just me. "Hide! Can you hear me? Hide!"

"I'm fine, Haise," I said, but it only made Haise seem more concerned.

"Hide, you're slurring your words--"

"His pupils aren't dilated, but I think he has a concussion, Haise. Take him down to Doctor Shiba and have him take a look, but Nagachika should be fine." Arima observed, looking rather indifferent considering he was the one who kicked me into a wall. He kind of looked a little regretful, but that might have been the concussion.

"I will," Haise promised.

"And, Nagachika?" Arima added. "I apologize if I overdid it."

I attempt my best at a smile, but my face doesn't want to respond and it takes several attempts. "It's fine, Arima-san. Thanks for the fight."

Haise leaves it at that, saying his farewells to Arima before lifting me up gingerly, slinging one of my arms around his neck and putting a hand underneath my other arm. I winced; my limbs felt lead-like, slow to respond, and I was suddenly weighed down by fatigue as we emerged into the hallway. My feet were dragging on the floor and I kept tripping. Internally, I cursed. It wasn't that I detested physical contact with Haise, or anything: I strove for it. But I was certainly not a helpless damsel in distress, and ordinarily, when I wasn't weighed down by these stupid RC Suppressants and my frailer-than-normal body, I could walk off a little hit like that. Why did humans have to be so fragile, damn it?

When I had tripped so many times I had lost count before we had even reached the elevator, Haise stopped and sighed.

"This isn't working."

"It is," I protested, unnerved by the spinning room and the new-found nausea now that I was still.

"I'm going to carry you," Haise announced. It took my foggy mind too long to process what he had said, and my eyes widened as I was swept up onto his back, piggy-back style. Haise didn't wait for a
response from me before hooking my legs with his arms and starting forward, much faster and easier without my dragging and stumbling. We made it into the elevator with much more ease, and with a sigh, I gave up, dropping my head to rest in his multi-coloured hair. Haise smelled pleasantly like vanilla and cinnamon, like he'd been cooking before he came to work, but I could also smell laundry detergent and something like lavender shampoo. It was a nice smell, and I didn't have to be at one hundred percent to identify them all. Plus it took my mind off the pounding in my head, which hadn't settled with my nausea and the spinning of the elevator.

"Y'know, we probably look like a couple crazies," I muttered, even though a large portion of Ghoul Investigators were a bit... eccentric. "But I don't really care."

"I don't care, either." Haise agreed. I couldn't see his face, but I thought he might be smiling. "Besides, CCG has doubtless seen stranger things than me carrying you a few floors."

I grin, remembering my own words and pleased that he recalled them so well.

"Sasaki-san, Chiyoda has doubtless seen stranger things than me dragging you a few streets."

Chapter End Notes

Well, dear readers, did you enjoy it? And more importantly, did some of you begin to question how strong Hide truly is? And not how strong he thinks he is; I mean how strong he really is. I haven't mentioned Pierrot's CCG-given ranking is yet, but I have dropped a few indicators. He didn't use his kagune when he fought the investigators in the first chapter, did he? Nope. His RC Cell Levels-- which Kanou is rather meticulous about rising at a steady pace, mind you-- are always closely monitored, down to the slightest change, which I feel should say volumes. He knocked Arima off balance, when Haise has never been able to in their matches-- Haise, who is an SS-rated ghoul...

Now, that isn't to say Hide would able to surpass Arima. But he is indeed quite powerful, as all of the (Eto) naturally born half-ghouls are. So now my ending question for you readers is this:

What do you think Hide will use his power for?

No guarantee I can answer this in your comments, of course, since it's a major spoiler for later. But it is a good question to keep in mind.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Haha, this was painful to write. Not as painful as chapters thirteen and fourteen-- man, those hurt to write-- but still pretty painful. Enjoy the suffering, dear readers.

(Bonus: I'm posting another chapter with this one, but it's not chapter 12. It's more like chapter 11.5)

Not only did Doctor Shiba announce that I did indeed have a concussion, but he also decreed that I couldn't stay by myself-- despite my arguing that I was a perfectly competent adult, thank you very much. Since I lived alone in the apartment I rented, and I certainly wasn't going to call Uta or Itori and most definitely not Father, considering they were all on the CCG’s wanted list, Haise offered to bring me home and stay with me to watch over me. Not to my apartment, much to my amusement, but to the Chateau.

That was how I found myself, pulled out of a light doze when Haise pulled open the door of the taxi and offered me a hand. I took it with a stifled yawn, and he helped pull me out of the taxi. In all honesty, I was feeling much better, and the only lingering effects were perhaps the aching in my head and the slight lag in my movements and thoughts that was gradually clearing up.

I followed him up the steps to the porch of the Chateau, Haise keeping a hand on my sleeve to ensure I didn't suddenly fall over. His doting was sweet, and my misgivings about it had passed. It made me smile, if a little tiredly, as Haise unlocked the door and swung it open. His subordinates were already home, it seemed, from the shouting between two voices, and what seemed like a quieter voice trying to soothe the other two. With an exasperated smile already on his face, Haise called out, "I'm home!"

As we removed our shoes in the entryway, Mutsuki appears at the end of the entryway. "Welcome home, Sasaki-san. And you too, Hide-san. It's nice to see you."

I grin cheerfully, and wave at him. The wave throws me off-balance a little, and perhaps I jinxed myself by thinking my dizziness had already passed. Haise steadies me, grabbing my arm until I straighten myself. At Mutsuki's confused look, I elaborate with a small laugh.

"I was foolish enough to fight Arima-san and got flung into a wall headfirst! I got beat pretty bad, actually!"

Haise propelled me forward with a gentle nudge, and we emerge into the living area of the Chateau. Saiko and Shirazu are playing what appears to be a racing game in front of the couch. As we pass Mutsuki, Haise adds, "Don't listen to him. He may have lost, but he managed to knock Arima-san off too. Hide has a concussion, by the way."

Mutsuki, who was familiar with Arima's odd game of sparring that often occurred, raised an eyebrow as Haise gave me a little push-- not near enough to off-balance me-- towards the couch. "Go on, go sit. I've got to start dinner: we're having hamburger steak tonight."

I obey him, and I find that Urie, looking rather irritated-- or is that how he always looked?-- was
sitting on the largest couch and reading what appears to be a case report, while Mutsuki was watching Saiko and Shirazu play video games with a novel in his hand, opened but neglected in favor of observing the two Quinx sitting on the floor, chuckling as they making very loud commenation on how their game was going. I sat on the loveseat alone, head propped in my hand as I too began to observe them. Haise was humming while he cooked in the kitchen, and soon enough the smell of hamburger steak sizzling in the pan drifted into the living room. And as I fell into the easy atmosphere of the house, I realized I couldn't tell if I was faking my smiles.

I didn't think I was.

I was genuinely smiling and laughing at the antics of these four young adults, something I had only ever done with Kaneki and Uta or Itori. The realization was enough to send me reeling, the sick feeling coming back as I put a hand to my mouth and staggered towards the restroom, Mutsuki giving me an alarmed look. I waved him off and shut the door, stumbling to the sink to grip it tightly in my hands as my vision went slightly out-of-focus. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, under the cruel LED lighting. In my reflection, I did not see Kanou's son, the Clown's poster-boy: I saw Nagachika Hideyoshi, and I looked very small and afraid in my suit, like a child who had put on an act that was far too great for him to keep up. I looked like someone who was in over his head, and the jarring awareness made everything go dark for a moment. I sunk to the floor, my head clutched in my hands as salty tears forced their way out of my eyes and a choked cry wrenched from my throat. For a single, terrifying moment, I was Nagachika Hideyoshi, and the pain that shook me was almost unbearable. There was a hollow feeling residing inside my chest, like something vital was missing, and my hand fisted in my shirt above where my heart was. Images flashed across my mind aimlessly, in a photo-like reel: two-toned hair, a bright smile, a laugh like the pealing of bells, eyes the colour of dove feathers. And all of them had a single thing in common: they all centered around Kaneki. No, not Kaneki, I realized. Haise.

There was a knock at the door that brought me out of my stupor.

"Hide? Are you okay? Dinner is ready."

I am not Nagachika Hideyoshi. Nagachika Hideyoshi was a pitiful boy, a human mask, that I wore to conceal my identity. He was the foolish human that had a habit of playing detective and thought with his heart rather than his mind, that would risk everything for the sake of his childhood friend and love.

I am not Nagachika Hideyoshi. I am a Kanou and a Clown, and as I stood, my reflection in the mirror seemed to distort and change. I wasn't wearing a suit: I was wearing a neon-coloured get-up, in bright greens and blues, and there was a clown mask on my face.

"I'm fine, Haise. I'm coming now."

I splashed water on my face to hide the remaining redness in my eyes and took a steadying breath before I walked out of the bathroom with a smile that was a little bit harder to keep. I didn't understand why, but I let it fade back into an easier smile as I sat down with Haise and the Quinx to eat. It was the concussion making me act this way, throwing my off and mixing up my emotions.

Wasn't it?
The next morning I made the bed in the spare bedroom I had slept in, put my borrowed pajamas into the hamper, and dressed in a borrowed suit that fit surprisingly well considering Haise was a little bit shorter than myself. I carpooled with Haise and the Quinx bright and early, and I didn't go to the Academy. I went with them to the First Ward Main Office of the CCG, and I parted ways with the group as they went off to a meeting. I rode the elevator alone to one of the topmost floors and I strode in to the room where Arima awaited.

"I didn't expect you to make your choice this fast," Arima admitted.

I smiled. "I tend to do things that surprise people."

There's a paper test in front of him, and he slides it forward, a sharpened No. 2 pencil with it. I sit down in the deadly quiet room, and pick up the pencil. The test seems absurdly simple, having covered everything learned in the Academy necessary to be a Ghoul Investigator. My pencil almost seems to fly, and if this were a cartoon, smoke would fly from where my pencil touched the paper. I finish the test in what seems like no time at all, and I rise and hand it to Arima confidently. He raises an eyebrow and I glance at the clock-- it shows that only an hour and a half has passed. Normally, that would be only a third of the allotted time to finish the test.

I smile again, and I wait while he grades my paper with a fat red pen. It doesn't take him long, and when he hands me the graded test, there is only a single mark on the paper: my grade at the top, showing a perfect one hundred.

"You've technically graduated from the Academy, so you no longer need to go to the classes," Arima announced. We leave the room at the same time, and enter the elevator. "Your surgery will happen soon-- sometime within the next week. The arrangements have already been made with Doctor Shiba, so he'll check your vitals and make sure there aren't any risks today. Your appointment is scheduled for this afternoon at three, but until then, you're dismissed and free to leave." The elevator dings open, and Arima actually claps my shoulder as he exits, two floors above me.

"Congratulations, Nagachika."

I exit on the first floor and hurry out of the building. Three is still a few hours away, but the meeting-place Father and I have agreed on is an hour and a half away.

I ride the train, focusing on nothing in particular and finding it rather difficult to focus on anything, and meet with Father in a small, quaint-looking bathroom of a pharmacy.

"Hideyoshi," He greets me as I lock the bathroom door behind me. "I take it you passed your exam."

"Of course, Father," I answer, wondering why I am disappointed by his greeting. It had been this way since I was young: why did I expect something different now? "I wouldn't be here otherwise. I scored perfectly."

"I would expect nothing less." He has a briefcase full of medical supplies, and I roll up my sleeves. Father doesn't say anything else as he swabs my arms with foul-smelling alcohol and draws out a scalpel made of quinque steel. I close my eyes briefly as he slices open my forearm and inserts a tube full of blood in the place where my main vein lies. It burns, and I grit my teeth as the first wound stitches itself closed. It's invisible to the naked eye, this tube, but it is invaluable in pretending to be human. "The blood's RC count is just in the range of four hundred and twenty two, so it's perfectly in tune with your 'records' on file." Father informs as he applies the same treatment to my other forearm. I conceal a hiss of pain as the new tube is inserted, and I exhale slowly as the cut stitches closed. It's impossible to tell that there are thin tubes lying in front of my veins.
"Are the preparations for the surgery in place?" I question, wiping the blood off my arms and accepting the syringe from Father. It's full of a cloudy but mostly clear liquid, and it smells horribly metallic to my nose, but I don't flinch as I inject myself with it, careful to avoid puncturing the tubes. The puncture heals, but I feel a bit dizzy as the day's RC suppressants take place.

"They are. Our doctor is ready and in position. The surgery will go exactly as planned-- the new kakuhou will be inserted, but the frame system will be damaged, so it's easier for your RC Cells to break down and attack the foreign kakuhou. It will take almost an hour, on estimation, to have the kakuhou broken down into base RC Cells and absorbed into the body. As for the Quinque Steel frames-- those'll take an average of three hours to break down into RC Cells to absorb, but it definitely won't be a pleasant process." Father informed me without looking concerned. I wasn't concerned either: the facts he informed me of had been taken from almost two months of careful study and experimentation, a process I helped oversee. "You'll cough up unsightly amounts of blood, experience extreme pain, and feel like death warmed over. You won't actually die, though, since we won't inject you with suppressants that day and your regeneration will heal any damage done."

"And the scalpels?" I question as the dizziness began to clear as I adjusted to the familiar feeling of the suppressants.

"They'll be replaced the day of the surgery by the doctor."

I sigh, flexing my arms gingerly. It felt odd, having the tubes pressed against my veins, but it's not unbearable. "Thank you."

Father's brown eyes, so much like my own, are bright as he packs up his equipment and does a last check for blood spilled.

"It's not like this doesn't have benefits for myself too. It's only a means to the end goal of reviving my ultimate artificial creation. Perhaps this time he'll even join us," Father beams, that friendly old man smile that I know is false.

I smile too. "Perhaps he will."

*Over my dead body, Father. Haise is not yours; he is mine and mine alone.*

---

It's Saturday, now, and the surgery has been scheduled for Tuesday. I chew on the end of a black pen while I read over the legal documents I'm supposed to sign and return on the day of the surgery. It's a load of legal mumbo-jumbo, and the only noteworthy thing in the entire seven-paged packet of small-printed words is the line about the CCG providing semi-permanent support, even if I were to leave the CCG. It's not like I need it, but it's surprising that the CCG would include such a clause. Then again, I suspect that it's to keep a view on their experiments, which is the same reason that all of the Quinx live under the same roof. The CCG can't allow a partial ghoul to run amok society unmonitored, now can they?

I snort, and Haise chuckles as he sits back down, two cups of coffee in hand. He's wearing his glasses today, and he glances at the papers I'm reading.

"Sometimes I think they try and make their legal documents as confusing as possible. Are you
understanding it okay?"

I sigh. "I can understand it fine-- I just can't understand their reasoning for using a font this small."

"So you just give up and sign the papers anyways?" Haise suggested as I sipped the scathingly hot liquid.

"Probably," I admit, and I set the pen down on the table. I've reached the end of the horribly long document, and there's only one form left: my emergency contacts. I can't exactly put down Uta or Itori, considering the fact they're both _ghouls_, and I'll be damned if I put down Father, who's on just about every one of the CCG's most wanted lists. "Hey, Haise?"

"What's wrong, Hide?" Haise asked me as he set his cup down. He's wearing a pale suit today, almost the same color as his eyes. I wonder if he owns anything besides formal wear.

"I'm trying to find family to put on my emergency contacts slot, but I keep coming up empty. I don't have any siblings or aunts or uncles, my mom's dead, and my dad lives four and a half hours away in the 20th Ward," I explain, reminding myself I told him I was from the 20th Ward previously. "I don't have any especially close friends-- except you. Can I put you down as my emergency contact?"

Haise was very quiet for a moment, looking rather solemn. Eventually he put his hand over mine in a reassuring gesture and said, "Of course you can, Hide. But nothing will go wrong. The CCG has the best doctors preforming the surgery. You'll be fine, so don't worry, okay?"

I smile back at him. "Okay, Haise."

_If only you knew._
Chapter Notes

Not really a chapter, since it's only 1,286 words, but it's... well, an interlude. I hope you can see a bit of Haise's development here.

It was the night before Hide's surgery would take place, and Haise felt his stomach churn anxiously as he lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling. He wants to get up and find a good book to lose himself in, to do anything besides sleep. He is afraid to fall asleep, so very afraid, because Haise knows with a certainty that because tomorrow is such an important day he will have another terrible nightmare that he can never rarely-- if ever-- remember upon awakening. They always end the same way, with Haise waking up near-screaming in a cold sweat, heart pounding and head throbbing.

Except for the one nightmare, when he awoke with tears stinging his eyes.

Haise wishes, suddenly, that he had tried harder to go against the surgery. Hide shouldn't change, shouldn't become like him, part monster. He should never have spoken such praising words about Hide to his superiors, should never have let him near the Serpent fight, should have dissuaded himself from electing Hide as a candidate for the surgery in the first place. Maybe it would have been better to never meet Hide at all, to look over him just like the other Academy students. Hide would have never gotten hurt from the fight, would have never fought Arima and gotten a concussion, would never have been near the CCG's doctors and their scalpels--

But no, Haise is a terribly selfish person. He doesn't want to imagine never meeting Hide, now that he knows just how bright his life could be. He doesn't want to go back to a world without Hide, to a world that would be monochrome-like in its dullness and lack of colour. Because without Hide, that's what the world would be: bleak and gray. His fashion sense reflected his childishness perfectly, leaning towards neons and bright colours, and his smile was like a sun, as bright as his hair.

Haise didn't want to live without that smile.

That night, when sleep took him, Haise knew well he was asleep and dreaming, and he braced himself for the moment the blackness of the dream would shift into something terrible.

He could feel that dark presence behind him, the monster. Haise waited for it, waited for the taunts and the jeers that poked fun at his deepest insecurities and fears. Haise waited, bracing himself to the best of his extent, closing his eyes shut painfully tight.

But no taunts came.
Instead, when Haise opened his eyes, he was sitting on a rough plastic surface, the cool night wind ruffling his hair while he stared up at the twinkling stars. Haise was in a small playground, sitting on top of a large plastic whale. A bag of fast food sat beside him, burger half-eaten and the french fries nearly gone. Beside the bag was another person... a little boy? It was too blurry to be certain, but Haise thought he could make out a garish mixture of bright clothes and a blur of orange in the place of a face and hair.

It brought up a swelling of nostalgia, for reasons Haise didn’t know but ached to remember. Images--no, scenes, as if from a movie reel--started to flicker through his mind, all of them sharing the same warm, fuzzy tint that made it hard to make out fine details, like faces.

A study that smelled like musky books. White roses, on a table, in a pretty vase. A girl in a waitresses uniform, an old man in a waiter’s uniform, a coffee shop that smelled pleasant and safe. A small boy in a backpack that charged him and gripped him in a hug around the waist and spun him around, and suddenly it wasn’t a small boy, it was a man with a blinding smile and a happy laugh even through the blurry haze.

A single phrase that resounded through his mind like it was branded there: "Rabbits die from loneliness."

They passed faster and faster, now. A man with glasses that smelled like instant coffee. A tall man, his hand extended, hair and face a purple blur. A little girl, in a sweater and skirt, a book in one of her hands and the other held in the hand of a slight woman in a dress, who held an umbrella in her other hand. A child's drawing in coloured pencils and a kanji-filled notebook.

A happy laugh, the words "Onii-chan!" burning him like fire, but not in an unpleasant way. A way that makes him ache and reach out, but the image had already faded and blended into another.

Again it's the man with the blur of orange concealing his hair and face, but now it's only him, over and over and with no order. The man, sitting across from him at a restaurant, or sitting on the opposite end of a serving counter. Smiles and laughs and a restaurant with waitresses in American-style uniforms, and a hamburger steak.

And then the images fade and he's standing in front of the shape of a man that is entirely solid black, broken only by a fringe of white hair and broken silver chains around his wrists and ankles. A pair of cold hands grip his own, as cold as a corpses, and the chains clink as the man whispers in a voice like dry leaves,

"Please, please, stop him. Stop him, stop him, don't let them change him, don't change him. Don't let them take him away too."

The pleas jar Haise to the core, down to his very bones, because they sound human.

For the first time, Haise does not sit bolt upright, drenched in cold sweat from nightmares he can barely recall. Instead, his eyes open slowly, to stare at the dark ceiling. There are tears, hot and wet, spilling down his cheeks, and his chest feels tight.
He remembers his dream, for the first time, in the same vividness he had dreamt it.

Haise wondered why he felt like there was something vital missing, and why he had the urge to cry like a baby. No, he didn't wonder. He knew the people, the hazy people and the warmth they gave, back then, didn't he? Those people were the monster's friends, his family, weren't they?

It was a certainty. The monster had pleaded with him to save something, to stop someone, but who? Haise didn't know, but he had to mull the thought over.

_Did monsters even have friends, and family? Do they have loved ones, too?_

Haise wasn't sure. He had tried very hard not to think about it. This was his body now, and he had to keep his mind from straying from whoever he had been in the past, the "him" that the monster symbolized. He had a family, Haise told himself. Arima was like a father, Akira a mother, and the Quinx were as good as his adopted problem children. He had good friends, comrades-in-arms, people who were kind to him.

Hide, his smile like the sun, flashed across Haise's mind's eye, and he closed his eyes again, the ache not as bad.

That's right. Haise had things he needed to protect, that's why he could never become like the monster he used to be-- the monster he _had_ to have been, to be a ghoul. Haise could never allow his mind to stray. He had family and friends and people who loved him and people he loved, after all, and they made the ache bearable. That's the reason he had to put all his faith in the CCG; Hide's surgery would go fine, because it _had_ to.

If something went wrong... Haise wasn't sure he could bear it.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Haise was burning breakfast, Mutsuki noted as he emerged downstairs. The skillet where he had been cooking what appeared to be a Western-style breakfast of scrambled eggs was smoking, the bottom of the eggs blackening, but Haise didn't appear to notice. His mentor was very out of it today, it seemed, because even though Haise was staring directly at the skillet, Mutsuki didn't think that he was seeing it.

Today was the day of Hide's surgery, though, so it was understandable if Haise was a little out of it.

Opting out of tapping Haise on the shoulder-- Mutsuki would rather not start his morning out by getting brained by a hot skillet, something that may well happen by reflex if he were to do that-- so he called out his mentor's name.

"Sasaki-san."

To no avail. Haise didn't even flinch.

"Sasaki-san!"

This time, Haise jolted and jerked the skillet off the burner, blinking. "Mutsuki...? Oh, good morning."

"To you as well," Mutsuki replied out of habit, before continuing. "You were burning breakfast, Sasaki-san."

"I was what...?" Haise glanced down at the blackened eggs, wrinkling his nose at the foul smell. "Ah, sorry. I'll cook something else. I don't know what came over me."

"It's because today is the day of Hide-san's surgery, isn't it?" Mutsuki waited for his mentor's nod of confirmation before he continued. "It'll be okay, Sasaki-san. You even told Hide-san so, didn't you?"

"I do. And it's not like I don't have faith in the CCG's doctors, because I do, it's just that..." Haise bit his lip as he scraped the burned attempt at breakfast into the kitchen. Mutsuki opened the kitchen window and watched the foul-smelling smoke begin to float out with relief.

"I don't know. I've just got a bad feeling, that's all," Haise said with a smile that seemed worn-out. Mutsuki wondered if his mentor had been having nightmares again, but he didn't ask. That was a little too personal, and despite the long-given advice to talk about it, Mutsuki knew there were some things you needed to keep quiet about.

Maybe it was a nightmare about Hide's surgery...? It seemed like a likely possibility.

"Your his emergency contact, though, so if anything goes wrong, you'll be the first to know," Mutsuki assured Haise. "Not that I think anything will."

"I know," was all Haise said, but he offered Mutsuki another smile as he washed the skillet out and started a new batch for breakfast. It was something Mutsuki had learned about his mentor: while doing things for himself was hard, doing things for other people was easy, and it genuinely made Haise happy.
Urie was the next one downstairs, but Mutsuki could hear Shirazu banging loudly on something and shouting for Saiko to get up. He'd been getting better at it, lately, although the task seemed to be wearing him down. Urie sat silently next to Mutsuki at the bar instead of the table, his ear buds in, and Mutsuki wondered what he listened to. Maybe he didn't listen to anything and just used them to get out of conversations.

Mutsuki gave up on such thoughts as Haise sat a plate down in front of him. There was no point in perusing such thoughts. In a moment, he'd get up and tell Shirazu that the food was ready, and Saiko would trudge out of bed with the smell of food as a motivator. Everything was normal, their daily routine going smoothly, and Mutsuki took it as a good omen.

If he could survive the surgery, after all, then Hide, who was so much stronger and livelier than he was, would surely make it alright.

Wouldn't he?

Haise had tried to take Mutsuki's advice. He threw himself into work that day, investigating the Nutcracker case like the world would end if he didn't. He went over the facts, over and over, and he reviewed everything at the meeting with Juuzou and his squad. In fact, he practically lead the meeting.

And he smiled. All morning, oh god did he smile. Haise smiled so much that his face hurt.

But he didn't fool anybody.

Juuzou studied him with a frown once the meeting let out, looking displeased, even holding his snacks. He wasted no time in approaching Haise, nor did he waste time with pleasantries. No, Juuzou cut straight to the point.

"What's wrong, Haise? You look worried." The red stitches at the corner of Juuzou's mouth gleamed when he frowned.

Haise smiled again, wondering why it was so tiring to smile today. Even after nightmares-- although last night's wasn't a *nightmare,* it still left him unusually tired-- it was never this hard.

"I'm fine, Juuzou-kun," Haise assured him. "Its nothing to worry about."

It didn't seem to take effect in Juuzou. He saw right through Haise, it seemed.

"It's the one you like, right?" Juuzou's grin added to the miniature heart attack Haise was feeling. Juuzou was always direct-- the Associate Special Class Investigator didn't care for things like tact-- but Haise never thought he'd outright say it. "The one with the bright hair-- Nagachika. He's going in for surgery today, isn't he?"

And *how* Juuzou knew what was supposed to be confidential, Haise would never know. He didn't want to know, didn't want to even ask. It probably was something that broke protocol and multiple
laws.

But Haise would never have to answer Juzzou, thankfully. His cellphone rang, a shrill, piercing sound that made everyone in his relative proximity wince. Haise kept meaning to change his ringtone from that horrible default, but it seemed to always slip his mind.

Haise didn't recognize the number. It wasn't one of his contacts, but the area code was in the Chiyoda area, so he answered the call anyways.

"Hello? Am I speaking to a Rank 1 Ghoul Investigator, Sasaki Haise?"

The voice was unfamiliar, but there was a polite professionalism to it that made Haise wary. "This is Rank 1 Sasaki Haise. Might I ask who this is?"

"My name is Yamaguchi, and I'm with the CCG's Surgical Hospital. You were listed as the emergency contact for Nagachika Hideyoshi, so I would like to inform you that there has been an issue with his procedure."

Haise's heart stuttered. His fingers felt numb, and he almost dropped his phone. When he spoke, his throat was dry, and his voice cracked midway. "What do you mean, an issue with the procedure?"

"His body isn't taking to the transplant. His condition is severely critical, and we recommend that you get here soon."

Haise heard the words unspoken, however much he didn't want to. Be might not have long.

"I... I understand. I'll be there soon. Thank you for informing me."

"Please don't thank me," the operator responded, just before Haise hung up. "Not for this."

The line went dead then, and Haise didn't move for a moment. It felt like his feet were rooted in place, and his muscles were frozen.

Shirazu, who had remained inside the meeting room, speaking with a brown-haired man on Juuzou's squad, was the first to speak.

"Sassan? Who was that?"

Haise found that his voice didn't want to work properly as he answered. "It was the hospital. Hide's surgery didn't go right. He's in critical condition-- I've got to leave now. Please excuse me."

Juuzou, who was solemn for the first time in Haise's memory, gave him a nod. "Go on, Haise."

And Haise left.

His heart was pounding when he entered the lobby of the hospital, uncaring of the terrible antiseptic smell. The nurse he'd spoken to-- his name was Yamaguchi, according to his nametag-- was waiting
"Nagachika-san has been moved from the ICU to a more private room," Yamaguchi explained, ushering Haise into one of the many elevators and hitting the button for the seventh floor. "There's nothing we can do for him at this point, so we've made him as comfortable as possible. He's lost a lot of blood. The survival chances are extremely slim— but not nonexistent."

"Hide is strong," Haise said. He wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure the nurse or himself. "He'll make it. The change takes those who are strong."

"About that," The nurse said, showing him down the hallway quickly to a room with the door closed. "There's something you should know. It was an issue with the frame—"

Haise wasn't listening, not really, and he had swung the door open, cutting off the nurse. He almost wished he hadn't: Hide was propped up in a hospital bed, retching into a pan-like bucket.

The minute Haise had stepped into the hospital room, he had been assaulted by a smell like no other. It was as sweet-smelling as chocolate was to human, almost enough to make his mouth water. The metallic tang was gone from Hide's scent, leaving only the intoxicating sweetness.

Haise shook the thoughts out of his head, feeling guilty.

Hide managed to sit back with a groan, wiping his mouth with a wet and bloodstained cloth. There was still a smear of red on his lips, the only colour to his face. His skin was parchment pale, and his hands shook. But that wasn't the thing that drew Haise's attention, no, not in the least. It was the blood red iris of Hide's right eye, and the black schlera it was set against. The black schlera. Not grey like a Quinx: black like a ghoul's. Black like Haise's.

Haise stepped back outside the room and shut the door. It was pounding painfully hard against his ribs, and there was a fury boiling up inside him like no other. Haise was not a person to get unnecessarily angry. He had a very good hold on his temper, and he had a very high tolerance for stupidity and irritation. But he had trusted those doctors, damn them, so what had they done to Hide, his Hide?

Haise wondered if he was imagining the feeling of another consciousness stirring inside him, the feeling that normally came just after his nightmares, when the monster hiding inside him was awake. For once, though, he wasn't afraid. The monster didn't radiate malicious intent like normal: he seemed furious, and Haise shared the sentiment.

"Hide, Hide, why?" A dry voice rasped, like the rustling of fallen leaves. Haise saw a flickering at the corner of his vision, and thought he glimpsed a man, as solidly black and featureless as a shadow, the only features snow-pale hair and gleaming silver chains that broke off in sharp ends, bound to the apparition's wrists and ankles. A single kakugan gleamed in his eye, but Haise blinked and the apparition was gone.

His rage was not.

Haise gripped the front of the nurses scrubs, hoisting the man a few inches off the ground so he was eye level. The nurse—Yamaguchi, that was his name—let out a panicked squawk and wiggled in an attempt to get free, which was useless, considering Haise was ten times stronger than this stick-armed nurse.

"What," Haise hissed through gritted teeth. "Did you do. To Hide."

"W-We followed the procedure to the T!" Yamaguchi squeaked. "But there was a malfunction in the
frame system-- it had to be, because none of our needles can pierce his skin now! They all shattered! He's not a Quinx-- he's a full Half-Ghoul!"

A long sigh was heard from behind him, and Haise turned around-- Yamaguchi the nurse still held far above the ground by the front of his scrubs-- to find Akira standing behind him, tapping her foot rhythmically.

"Haise, put that nurse down. I've just driven here from all the way across Chiyoda because Mutsuki informed me that you rushed to the hospital, and I want an explanation now."

She was using the mother tone-- Akira rarely used that tone of voice. She was stressed, then, and close to being very aggravated. At who, that was debatable.

Haise reluctantly released the nurse, not so gently, and the man scrambled to catch his footing and scurry away from Haise a short distance, so he was standing closer to Akira.

"I'm trying to get this nurse to tell me what they did to Hide!" Haise said, his anger still seething and making his blood boil. "They did something to him, Akira-san! Hide isn't a Quinx-- he's like me!"

Akira took a long breath, like she was very close to snapping. Finally, she spoke in a strained voice, directed at the frazzled nurse.

"Explain."

"W-We preformed the surgery exactly how it was planned," The young nurse explained, fiddling with his hands nervously. "But something went wrong. Not a full ten minutes had passed when we were settling him into the ICU after he had been restitched, but his stitches suddenly just closed on their own. It was like the skin just stitched itself together, good as new," Yamaguchi shivered. "Afterwards, he woke up-- which he shouldn't have, because the sedative should have lasted for another half-hour at least-- and he started coughing up blood. We tried to start an intravenous drip to replenish some of the blood he was losing, but our needles broke against his skin."

The young nurse took a deep breath, gathering his wits before continuing. "I contacted his emergency contact-- Sasaki-san-- and we moved him into a regular hospital room for more... privacy. There's nothing we can do if we can't even break his skin. The doctors came to the assumption that the frame system malfunctioned and fragmented inside of Nagachika-san, causing internal damage and exposing the kakuhou directly into the body. From there... it's unpredictable what will happen, but the doctors have announced that Nagachika-san's surgery to transition him into a Quinx was a failure. He is a full half-ghoul, but we aren't sure if... if..." Yamaguchi swallowed. "If the patient will survive the transition."

Akira looked like she had a massive headache. But she gave a sigh through gritted teeth and looked Haise dead in the eye, her unusually coloured eyes reflecting the light oddly.

"Haise. I'll sort out this mess and call the higher-ups, but you-- I'll excuse your behavior because of the circumstances, but that doesn't mean that threatening the nurses was the right decision." She waited a moment, then closed her eyes and pointed at the door. "Go on, you stay with Nagachika. He shouldn't be alone right now."

"I-- Of course, Akira-san." Haise said, his fury leaving as abruptly as it appeared and leaving him feeling drained and tired. "Thank you."

Akira did not answer him, nor did Haise expect her to. He pulled open Hide's hospital door, greeted with the sight of the orange-haired man half-curled into a ball, looking like he was about to be taken
by the Reaper. The bloody smear on his mouth seemed to have gotten larger.

Hide looked up as Haise entered, sighing.

"Sorry, Haise," he rasped. "I figured they'd call you in. Did I interrupt your meeting?"

Haise gave a small laugh, and he sounded dismal, to his own ears. "No, no, you didn't. My meeting let out awhile ago. Don't worry about things like that, Hide."

"Thanks for coming to visit," Hide croaked out, smiling. The attempt was ruined by the fact that his normally blindingly white teeth were stained bloody crimson. Hide blinked at Haise's horrified look, then his eyes widened and he clamped his mouth shut, slapping a hand over his mouth and fumbling for the towel, attempting to wipe the rest of the bloody remains from his face.

"Did I get it?" Hide asked quietly.

Haise didn't have the heart to tell him that he had just smeared it more. Instead, Haise took one of the folded towels and wet it with the bottle of water on the bedside table. He said quietly, "Here," and dabbed at Hide's face gingerly. The blood, still fresh, came off easier than Haise had expected. Hide took a drink of the water from the bottle, swished it and spit it out into the pan-like bucket full of alarmingly red blood.

Hide grinned weakly, and his teeth were still pink, but not as crimson as before. "Thanks for everything, Haise."

Haise stiffened next to where he stood beside Hide's hospital bed.

"Don't you dare say that," Haise scolded. "Don't you dare. You are not saying goodbye, do you hear me?"

Hide looked a bit surprised. "I guess it did sound a little like goodbye, didn't it? Well, I didn't mean it to. Come here and sit down-- don't make poor ol' me crane my neck to look at you."

Haise frowned and rung his hands. "Hide, I shouldn't--"

Hide patted the bed by his legs, the hospital-pristine white bed-sheets crinkling under his hand.

"C'mon, Haise. I really can't see you, and it's not like I'm made of china. I won't break. In fact, I've got an upgraded--" Hide winced, a hand fluttering up to rest on his lower abdomen. "--durability. I break steel needles now. No shots for me, huh?"

Haise sat down, careful not to sit on any part of Hide and sitting as close to the edge as possible. He looked at Hide worriedly. There was a bitter note to his voice that was so unlike Hide Haise needed to do a double-take.

"Hide... It'll be okay, I promise. Your strong. The Change only takes those who are strong." Haise found his hand to be fist ing in the sheets. He wasn't sure why: was it fear, worry, anger, or a mix of all three?

Hide's hand closed over his own, a reassuring warmth that made Haise relax, ever so slightly. It was odd: Hide's hand was pale and shook with faint tremors-- by all expectations, it should be cold. But it wasn't. Even if his skin was pale and had temporarily lost the warm glow that Haise associated with Hide, his skin was still warm. Small comforts, Haise supposed, would choose to stand out at the oddest times.
"By 'the Change', I assume you mean the fact my surgery didn't go right?" Haise jolted-- surely the nurses hadn't told him...? "I'm not a Quinx, am I? I'm more than that. I'm a ghoul."

"Who...?"

Hide smiled, but it was tinged with a strange sort of sadness and something that looked almost prideful. "I'm a Ghoul Investigator, remember? I know the signs. It was pretty easy to figure out when the needles shattered against my skin. Besides, hospitals have lots of reflective surfaces. I got a glimpse of my eye," Hide tapped his right eye, with it's ghoulish kakugan flickering into existence momentarily. Hide frowned, and his hand twitched on Haise's, like he was irritated he couldn't control it. "The sclera is black, not grey. I'm not a Quinx. I'm a ghoul."

Haise flipped their hands, so he was holding Hide's gently in his own.

"Not a ghoul," He corrected softly. "A half-ghoul."

Hide smiled, and it was more genuine. Haise blinked, and when he did, he changed his left eye. It flickered as he opened his eye, the iris shimmering to red and the sclera bleeding black. Haise smiled, feeling the black veins creep into the skin around his eye.

"Now we match."

Hide laughed, happily and brightly, and Haise laughed with him. They laughed until Hide broke off with a cough, blood splattering onto his lips, and Haise wiped it away with the damp towel with a grimace.

Hide sighed, sitting back against the hospital pillows. He pulled at Haise's shirt edge, urging him to come with him.

"Come on, indulge me for a little while."

Haise did, after a moment's hesitation. Hide settled down, curling against his side and lying his head on Haise's arm as a pillow.

"Talk to me," Hide added, grimacing as his body convulsed again-- but it was just a spasm of pain that passed with a gasp. "About anything. Everything."

"I burned breakfast this morning and had to throw all of the eggs out," Haise started. "The kitchen stunk horribly, and there was smoke everywhere."

Hide chuckled, but he didn't open his eyes again. His knuckles were white against Haise's shirt, and Haise talked faster, about things that weren't related, meaningless things-- Juuzou searching him for snacks, Saiko falling asleep at the table and dunking her hair in her plate at dinner, Arima returning his book to him, Kafka's odd sense of humor, a new coffee shop that he had found while out with the Quinx with the most delicious coffee, promising to take Hide there as soon as he was discharged.

Haise didn't know when, but it seemed like he had been rambling forever when Hide fell into an uneasy sleep, but an uneasy sleep was better than painful awareness, and Haise kept talking. He talked until his throat was dry and his eyes slipped closed, not opening again.
Akira opened Nagachika's hospital room door, intending to call Haise out to have him give her an update on Nagachika's condition, but she paused when she had the door open halfway.

Haise was asleep in Nagachika's hospital bed, laying under the thin sheet with his head propped on his shoulder. Nagachika was sleeping curled against Haise's side, hands still tightly clenched in Haise's shirt, even in sleep. He was terribly pale, but there was a spot of color in each of his cheeks, and he was breathing, so Akira shut the door again.

She had seen all she needed to. She didn't need an update: Nagachika was fine for the moment, and she certainly wasn't going to be the one to wake them up.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so. A little bit of explaining on the surgery.

1.) One of Kanou's supporter's is the doctor, and instead of regular scalpels, he used scalpels made of quinque steel, courtesy of Kanou, so that they could act like normal scalpels on Hide during the surgery.

2.) Hide did not administer a dose of RC Cell Suppressants the day of the surgery, so his healing abilities are in full swing, hence the need for special scalpels.

3.) Hide already has a kakuhou, so there's no need for him to have another one. What happens in the surgery itself is:

The doctor implants the quinque-steel-coated kakuhou inside Hide, just as protocol dictates. But the frame system is damaged, just slightly, so once it's inside Hide and he's stitched up, his body begins to break the quinque steel and the kakuhou down into base RC Cells to absorb. This can happen because quinque steel is made from RC Cells, and so is the kakuhou, so it's just like how humans break down sugar before absorbing it.

As that happens, his healing abilities kick in, and his stitches disappear, alerting the hospital staff to the fact something went wrong. Afterwards, he woke up too soon, because the anesthesia wore off too soon (also attributed to his healing, as it is treating the anesthesia as a harmful foreign substance) and he started to cough up blood.

That's because although the steel can be broken down and absorbed, it isn't a pleasant process. It's very painful, and it cuts up Hide's insides as it fractures and breaks down, but his healing takes care of that slowly, so he isn't in any fatal danger. Just a lot of pain.

All of this was formulated by Hide and Kanou, after experimentation on Kanou's "floppies".

As always, thanks for reading!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Haha, are you ready for the angst? I hope so, 'cause this chapter is packed full of it. It's essentially 2,865 words of pure suffering.

Actually, it's nice for a little bit. Then there's a heel-face-turn and wham, angst.

It took time, but I was gradually settling into life as a half-ghoul under the CCG's monitoring. I was not a part of the Quinx squad-- since I wasn't a Quinx-- but was elected to join the Mado Squad instead, so I could stay under Akira's supervision. I was no longer Academy Student Nagachika; I was Rank 2 Ghoul Investigator Nagachika Hideyoshi, and the circumstances of my "change" were concealed, just as Haise's was. It was dull, not being able to hunt when I chose, but I wasn't starving: the CCG fed me liquefied RC Cells, in a "soup" every two and a half weeks.

And, of course, I had been taken aside by Arima and Akira to have the don't lose control or we'll be forced to subdue you talk. Basically, learn to use my kagune and control my urge to eat people or they'll kill me. After, of course, they had congratulated me on my miraculous recovery and hospital discharge.

I wasn't concerned. My plan had gone perfectly-- if a little more, ahem, pain-filled than expected. I was living in the Chateau, and I had fooled the CCG into thinking they screwed up a surgery. I had accomplished that much in only a few short months, and I felt like I should have time to bask in my rewards. And so, bask I did. I couldn't contact Uta or Itori or Father anyways, since my surveillance had been tightened.

So I submerged myself in the life of Nagachika Hideyoshi, the ghoul investigator, and I was great at it. The Nutcracker Case-- which was our new case after Serpent, a joint operation with a peculiar investigator called Suzuya Juuzou and his squad-- was running as smoothly as a well-oiled machine.

A well-oiled machine that needed constant care. In the time-span of a week, we hadn't had a single day off. On Saturday, just after (another) meeting with Juuzou, we gave the car keys to Mutsuki and sent them on their way. We walked a while in silence, the cooling fall air smelling like dry leaves as we walked slowly over a bridge with the rumbling of cars in the background. It was only mid-afternoon, and Haise had promised to take me to the cafe he said had coffee good enough to cry over.

I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. He didn't seem to be, but I didn't say anything as we twined our fingers lightly and walked towards the promised cafe.

"It's just up ahead," Haise said as we stepped off the bridge, crossed a street, and arrived in front of a small, quaint-looking building with an old-fashioned chalkboard sign in front of it. It was an odd title, simply called re:, and I frowned puzzledly at the sign.

"Re:?"

"Don't ask me how to pronounce it," Haise laughed. "I'm not sure myself. It's English, I know."
“It's like the beginning of the English words *reboot* or *retry*, I think,” I say, rolling the name on my tongue. It was foreign, unfamiliar, but not unwelcome.

Haise shrugged, and I reached to open the door, holding it open for him. A bell chimed above our heads, and I breathed in the oddly familiar smell of mouthwatering coffee. The cafe was warm and had a cheery, home-like atmosphere, with shelves upon shelves of books. I could see why Haise would be drawn to the place.

The cafe was oddly empty, though, with only a haggered-looking teenager with his hood pulled up sitting in a corner booth who appeared to be napping. I thought I saw blonde-orange hair spilling out of his hood, but I wasn't sure.

A young woman, wearing a pale blue dress and a dark apron, a notepad open in her hand, was standing at the counter. She turned to greet us, and I felt a strange apprehension as I saw short, wavy purple-blue hair and eyes that matched. I felt the blood in my veins run cold.

"Welcome to :re! Sit wherever you li..." She broke off, staring at me with a baffled look. "Nagachika-kun?"

"Touka-chan!" I beam, falling into the act easily. "I didn't know you were in the First Ward! I thought you were going to Kamii in the fall?"

Touka smiled, but shook her head. "No, I decided not to go. I co-own this place now, with my older brother. Did you ever meet Niisan, Nagachika-kun?"

"I haven't had the pleasure," I say regretfully. Touka can fall into an act almost as smoothly as I can. Admirable.

What was this about a brother, though? To my knowledge, Rabbit only had a single brother, a young man known by the alias of Black Rabbit to the CCG who was currently associated with Aoigiri Tree. In fact, I had met Ayato numerous times. But never an older brother.

Haise looks mildly surprised. "You know Kirishima-san, Hide?"

"Oh, yeah," I answer, lacing my fingers through his just a little tighter. "I knew her when I went to college in the Twentieth Ward. She was co-workers and friends with my college Senpai."

"Oh really?" Haise beamed. "That's great then! It's an awfully small world, isn't it?"

Touka smiled at Haise, and I thought she looked a little sad. "It is indeed. Sit down wherever you want, and I'll come around to take your orders in a second, okay?"

We do as she says, and Haise is still a bit surprised, but I am even more shaken. Touka has doubtless recognized Haise as Kaneki, so why didn't she say anything?

Why did she remain quiet?
The spare bedroom I had been put up in was down the hall of the upper floors of the Chateau. The Quinx, save for Saiko, had all chosen bedrooms on the ground floor, although Haise's bedroom was also on the upper floors, two doors down from my own.

It was cozy enough, fully modernized and Western-styled, with pale wood floors and a single window that let in equally pale moonlight during the night. The closet had a futon rolled in it if I were to prefer that, and my suits had been hung in the closet neatly, my other clothes folded and put away into the wardrobe on the wall opposite to the window. I didn't have any decorations, and the room was rather bare, but that didn't mean it wasn't comfortable.

It was Sunday night, and the investigation had abruptly taken a turn for the worse today when we had tried to discreetly spy on Nutcracker at a restaurant, and Shirazu had knocked his glass over. Eye contact had been made, and then Nutcracker left the restaurant earlier than planned with her acquaintance. Shirazu had been rather beaten-up about it, and I had seen him talking outside afterwards on the balcony with Mutsuki, looking faintly distressed.

I hadn't bothered them. Sometimes it was better to let them work out personal issues on their own.

So after dinner, I said goodnight to everyone, and left for my bedroom. Urie and Saiko had already gone to sleep, by then, and Mutsuki and Shirazu had been watching something on the television.

I was laying in sweatpants and a t-shirt now, sprawled on top of the comforter on the bed. I wasn't particularly physically tired, although mentally I was fairly exhausted. It was surprisingly satisfying work, that of a Ghoul Investigator, and it was equally surprising just how much I genuinely enjoyed life how it was. I liked waking up in the mornings to find the Quinx half-asleep downstairs while Haise cooked them breakfast. I liked Juuzou's antics, so childlike in nature, and enjoyed the ripples they tended to cause in the workplace. I liked going to different coffee shops every day with Haise during our lunch breaks, and every Saturday. I was able to fit into this life as easily as a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, and it was so enjoyable, it was almost terrifying.

I don't know if I've ever truly enjoyed living as much as I had at the moment.

I sighed, closing my eyes. I needed to sleep-- I should have slept, closed my eyes and stubbornly kept them closed until sleep finally gave in and claimed me-- but I didn't. I got up and picked up the case files, spreading them out over my desk and staring at them, reading them over and over until the words were burned into my memory. There was a clue in there somewhere, something about the connection between Nutcracker and the Auctions, a way to infiltrate and find the location. There was always a clue, if one looked hard enough.

I don't know how long I sat at my desk, staring at the papers, but by the time the words started blurring on the paper and I was slowly nodding off, a shriek split the calm night air and made my eyes snap open. The shriek was panicked and alarmed, but broke off abruptly and stopped there. I had already stood up and was in the hallway, standing outside the gap between Haise and Saiko's doors. Saiko slept like the dead, and that scream certainly wasn't hers. It was too masculine.

Which meant it was probably Haise.

I put a hand on the doorknob, debating. The scream had started and stopped so abruptly, I don't think anyone from downstairs would have heard it, and since Saiko had surely slept through it... I grimaced and knocked on the door, softly, just to be sure. There was a faint sniffling, a gasping sound that sounded suspiciously like muffled crying, but it broke off as abruptly as if someone had clamped a hand over their mouth when I called out softly.
"Are you alright, Haise?"

"I-I'm fine, Hide." Haise assured me, just as quietly as I had called out to him, but I didn't believe him for a second. His voice was shaking, I was sure. "Sorry if I woke you. G-Go back to sleep."

I ignored him and opened the door. It slid open silently, and I shut it quietly behind me. Haise was indeed crying, sitting up on his bed and dressed in his sleep-wear-- a t-shirt and thin pants-- a pillow clutched in his lap so tightly I feared it would break open. His grey eyes, watery and dim, widened a fraction as I walked in and Haise turned his face away, as if trying to hide his tears.

I walked across the room quietly, conscious of the bedroom below Haise which I was relatively certain belonged to Urie, and I sat on the edge of his bed, ignoring Haise's protests, which were muffled by the pillow.

"Haise," I begin quietly, honestly not sure where to begin. "Was it a nightmare? Do you want to talk about it?"

Haise shook his head, but his hands were so white against the pillow that it looked like his knuckles would break through the skin.

I sighed. "Haise, I'm not the kids. It's okay to talk to me, you know."

And abruptly Haise isn't clinging to the pillow, but to me, as if he's drowning and I'm a lifeline. It takes me just a second to put my arms around him and pull him closer. And I don't care that the shoulder of my old t-shirt is being stained by tears, or that this very moment bears an eerie resemblance to the aftermath of the Serpent fight.

I don't care, especially as Haise starts to speak, his voice muffled by the fabric of my shirt.

"It was awful, Hide. The Quinx-- I killed them, Hide, because I was too weak to save them. And he told me, he told me that I wasn't strong enough, and it was my fault they died, and Hide, what if he was right?"

Haise took a shuddering breath, shaking like a leaf, and I was almost unable to process this. "No... I'm sure it was 'give it back'."

And for a single, short second, I didn't comprehend at all. Then it hit me like a physical blow, making my eyes wide.

Kaneki. Kaneki was the one that Haise was terrified of, the one who gave him terrible dreams that left dark circles under his eyes and made his so tired Haise's hands shook when he took notes at the meetings. Kaneki was the one doing this?

Then Haise said something that confirmed it, in a whisper that was weighted down by horror and fear and terror and a dozen of other emotions all jumbled together.

"Hide... I-I think he's the past me. What if he's right, and I'm not strong enough? What if the kids get
hurt because of me?" And even quieter, so soft and afraid it almost wasn't audible. "What if he's the real me, and I'm really just a monster? Who am I?"

And for the first time I can remember, I didn't think, I didn't analyze the situation analytically and make the best move to bring Kaneki back. Before I could even begin to do so, I acted on my emotions and made the best choice... for Haise.

I shushed him and stroked his hair, whispering, "You're here, with me, aren't you? You're just as real as I am, Sasaki Haise. And you're certainly not a monster-- if you're a monster, then I am too. We match, remember?" And right on cue, the kakugan in my right eye bleeds into existence.

Haise manages to choke out, "You're not a monster."

"Then neither are you, Haise," I murmur, and my hand ceases in it's smoothing of his bedhead to pull him a little closer. "You're a Rank 1 Ghoul Investigator that burns breakfast sometimes, and you need books like other people need air. You're the best damn superior those kids could ask for, and you're my date every Saturday for coffee. You're human, and most definitely not a monster. I don't care what happened in you're past. It doesn't change who you are."

Haise lets out a choked sob that sounds like "thank you", and it's like a dam broke open. He cries for a long time and I hold him, and we stay like that until Haise falls asleep. My shirt is soaked with tears, and I feel heavy as I lay down, easing Haise down with me and drawing his blanket around us. I feel dizzy, and the room seems to spin. My chest hurts, worse than when the quinque steel was slowly breaking down inside me and being dissolved. It hurts worse than the time I was almost killed in the twenty fourth ward in a Whack-A-Mole Operation as a child. It hurts, so, so badly.

I understand now.

Sasaki Haise is strong, but he is not cruel. Sasaki Haise is innocent, even with the blood that stains his hands, but he is not weak. Sasaki Haise can love and laugh without restraint, can have eyes that are free and light. Sasaki Haise can have comrades and nice wages and be free from the fear of being hunted down like an animal, even if he must be restricted. Sasaki Haise is happy, with a home to return to, a father and a mother figure that are strict but genuinely care for him and four subordinates that-- despite how they may act sometimes-- truly love him like they're his children.

Sasaki Haise is everything Kaneki Ken ever wanted, and the only way he can achieve that is through ignorance. Ignorance of the past, but not of the fact that he committed terrible things and made horrible mistakes in the years he can't remember, and he manifests that guilt in nightmares and another self, an issue he kept to himself all this time. Even so, Sasaki Haise can live the life that for Kaneki Ken was only a happy dream, always out of reach.

And I... I wanted to take everything away from him.

I understand now, Kaneki-- no, Haise. Please forgive me.

I start crying, horrible sobs that rack my body and set my eyes on fire with the salty tears that drip onto Haise's exhausted, sleeping form. But even in his sleep, his hand twitches tighter around mine, and I cry a little harder. It hurts, it hurts so badly, and I can't do anything but gasp as I cry, wondering how I could have been so foolish and so cruel. But I understand now.

I am Kanou Hideyoshi, truly the son of Kanou Akihiro. I am Pierrot, of the Clowns.

I am the true monster.
Well, Hide's gradual realization that what he was doing is wrong... isn't so gradual anymore. Keep in mind, he may have had a rather unusual childhood, but he's actually pretty lucky he was raised by Uta and Itori. They're Clowns, but that doesn't mean they're completely without morals and conscience, like Kanou is. If Hide was raised by Kanou, this story may have taken a much darker path.

Not that it isn't grim, I'm not going to lie.

So, tell me how you think Hide's going to take this new revelation about Kaneki-- or rather, about Haise and Kaneki, being the same person? Up until now, Hide may have thought he loved Haise, but not as a person. As the key to Kaneki's return. Now that Hide realizes that he loves Haise as a person-- essentially, the person Kaneki always wanted to be, living the life he could have led-- what'll he do? Will he carry out his plan?

Don't worry, I'm not going to leave you at a cliffhanger for long. A day, at most, since I just have to beta the next chapter before I post it. Oh, and Touka does get more appearances soon.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, it's hard, so hard, to open my eyes again. They feel dry, and crackly from the salt of my dried tears, but the redness in my eyes should be long gone-- the benefits of being a ghoul, I suppose.

Haise is already up, shirtless and rummaging through his wardrobe to pull a new suit from his neatly organized set of them. His wardrobe was actually quite tidy-- meticulously so, in fact. I see him stiffen a little when he hears me shift, so I rub my eyes quickly to displace any lingering evidence of tears from last night and sit up with a yawn. Smiling is hard, but I've had so many years of practice, and Haise being Haise makes it easier. By the time he turns, suit in hand, I'm smiling through my yawn, just a bit bleary-eyed.

And then Haise laughs, that happy sound so much like the chiming of bells, and my smile is a bit easier if baffled. He waves a hand at my confused look, catching his breath with bright eyes and a beaming smile.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just that you look so funny with your bedhead-- it's like you've got an orange halo."

"A... halo?"

I blink, and my hand finds it's way to my hair, which is indeed sticking up in all directions. Like a halo, I'm not so sure. Like horns, yes, that sounds more right. Devil horns.

I laugh too, but mine is tinged with just a little irony and bitterness. Devil horns... fitting, isn't it?

Haise has recovered from his laughter, now, and he just gives a contently happy sigh as I slip out from under the blankets, glancing at the clock that blinks on his nightstand. It's six-o-five, and there's still almost an hour and a half before I need to be at work at seven thirty.

"I think I'll go take a shower," I announce. "Before Shirazu is up to take one."

Haise makes a noise of confirmation, sorting through the sets of equally neat suit pants, apparently looking for the set that matched the suit jacket he had selected. "Okay. And Hide?"

"Hmm?" I ask, stretching. I've slept wrong, with the consequences of a crick in my neck and somewhat numb fingers that get better when I flex my sore arm, where the muscles are stiff from Haise sleeping on it.

Haise smiles, so genuine and bright that it's painful to see, because he's smiling at me.

"Thanks for last night."

It makes me feel guilty that I don't mind. I'm using Haise, because I'm happy when I'm around him, and I still love him. That hasn't changed any, with last night's revelation. But now I'm guilty, because he loves Nagachika Hideyoshi, the lie-- he doesn't even remember me. I don't want him to remember, anymore. I don't want him to be ripped away from his happy life because of me. But now I'm too far into the plan to just pull out and disappear, and I don't think I could live without Haise in my life. I'm far too selfish of a person for that. I don't know what to do, and it terrifies me. Scares me
to the bone, because I've always had a plan.

I want to talk to Uta, to Itori, but they're so far away and I can't risk leading the CCG to them. That was our agreement when I started this plan: when I was in deep enough with the CCG, I had to break contact for however long was necessary.

And suddenly there's a loud *clap!* that snaps me from my thoughts. Haise is standing in front of me, still shirtless and looking amused as he brings his hands to his hips.

"Honestly, you're as bad as I am sometimes, Hide." Haise sighs. "Spacing out like that. I thought something was wrong for a minute there, you know."

"Sorry, Haise," I smile, and Haise does too, shaking his head with a fond exasperation. He makes a shooing motion, giving me a push towards the door.

"Go on. Shirazu will be up soon, so go take your shower before then."

I do laugh, genuinely, and I open the door, my back still to the hallway as I give Haise a playful salute.

"Yes sir!" I call as I turn around, still chuckling--

--and almost run directly into a half-asleep Saiko, coming from the bathroom.

She rubs her eyes tiredly, blinking hazily at me, and asks through a yawn, "Maman...?" She does a double-take, blinking faster, the haziness to her eyes clearing and replacing with a baffled curiosity. "Hide-san? What are you doing in Maman's room?"

And I freeze momentarily, wondering what sort of explanation I should give. It wasn't like our relationship-- and now that I think about it, nothing was official, was it?-- was hidden or anything. It was just... most of our flirting was done outside the view of the Quinx. Haise saves me from explaining, appearing at my side and leaning against the door-frame.

"Good morning, Saiko! Hide and I were going over some of the case notes."

And his lie was rather smooth, but it wasn't very convincing, considering that he was still shirtless, his hair almost as bad as mine, and the bed-- unmade and clearly rumpled-- was still visible behind us. Saiko's thoughts were evidently leading down that path, because she simply raised an eyebrow and gave Haise a teasing smile.

"Mm-hm. Case notes, yep. That's what you were doing."

Haise looked... scandalized. And mildly horrified that one of his beloved children would even suggest something along those lines. I did my best to hold in laughter, but it didn't work, and I clamped my hand over my mouth to muffle my laughs as I bent over. Haise gave me a disapproving-- and faintly betrayed-- look.

"Hide! You aren't helping!"

"S-Sorry Haise." I manage to gasp out, but my apology is ruined by my laughter. Saiko gave me a serious nod when I wink at her.

"Well then, ignore me. Sorry for interrupting." Saiko shrugs and calls, darting into her room, giving Haise a devious grin as she shut her door.
Haise elbows me in the ribs rather hard, and I wince.

"Hey!"

"Hide! You do know what Saiko-chan was suggesting, don't you?" Haise still seems scandalized, and it only fuels my amusement, but I manage to keep my laughter in check.

"Of course I do, Haise. It's the conclusion anyone would come to-- I mean, you're shirtless and the bed is in clear view, and very clearly not made and messed-up. And besides, case notes? I admire how smooth you're cover-up was, but Haise, it wasn't the best explanation for why I was in your room this early."

"Okay. You give me one."

I smirk. "I wanted to borrow a shirt. Or a belt. Or a tie. And that's three."

Haise deflated. "Okay... so it wasn't the best explanation. But I thought it was pretty good."

I just pat his shoulder with a laugh. "Keep practicing, Haise. You'll get there someday-- just not today."

Haise hit me on the back of my head as I passed, and I laughed, feeling more light-hearted as the dilemma slipped my mind for the comfort of routine and contented happiness.

For now, at least, I could be Nagachika Hideyoshi for awhile longer.

---

It was later, much later, when the opportunity for me to be truly alone arose. It had been a few days since the night in which my revelation was made, and in that time-span, not much had happened. Progress on the Nutcracker case was painfully slow in coming, and I had been utterly unable to focus on the case since then. I hadn't been sleeping very much, either, and I was afraid it was visible in my declining appearance. There were circles that didn't seem to want to go away under my eyes, something that I couldn't hide. It was worrying Haise, and the Quinx. In the few days, not only had Haise made a worried comment, but so had Shirazu and Mutsuki-- even Saiko had noticed, though I would admit she was getting more observant as she grew out of bad habits, slowly but surely.

It couldn't go on like this, I knew, but it was impossible to fall asleep. It was like I had turned into a chronic insomniac overnight.

The only plus that had happened, actually, was my gradual shifting of bedrooms. It was most definitely unplanned, and it surprised even myself. It wasn't something Haise or myself planned-- it just seemed that every night I would end up in Haise's room, and I ended up just sleeping there. Yesterday, it was actually studying the case notes together. The night before I had returned one of the books he lent me-- a short but rather twisted novel called *The Metamorphosis* about a man turning into a giant bug-- and the night before we were simply talking in his doorway and he invited me in.
It was absurdly mundane, but I enjoyed it. It was a bright spot, to make up for my inability to sleep more than a few hours-- on good days.

But throughout the days, I hadn't had time to mope. I was always doing something, be it working on the case or spending time with the Quinx or training with Akira to use my kagune-- a process which was completely unnecessary, considering I was born with it, though I didn't dare complain or mention that-- I had never been alone, with time to sulk about my terrible choices and horrible decisions. There simply wasn't the time to.

Until now, that is, when I was standing in the lobby of the Main Office after another dismal case report with Juuzou's Squad. Urie had, of course, gone off after the meeting let out with a mention of training. Shirazu was gone, off for investigations on his own, dragging Saiko along with him, and Mutsuki had left with Juuzou to work on his knife-work. That left only Haise and I, which would normally be excellent, but he had a meeting with Arima.

So I waved him goodbye at the elevator, and left the building.

It was getting cold, fall creeping to it's end, and I breathed in the leaf-scented air, closing my eyes for a moment. I wondered where I should go. Back to the Chateau, maybe? No-- it's too quiet there, and there's nobody to talk to, no-one to distract me from my thoughts.

So I just let my mind go blank and I walk along the streets aimlessly, letting my feet take me where they may. I people-watch as I walk, observing little quirks-- a young boy who talks with his hands, a woman that drags her feet, a man who's eye twitches-- and it's not until it's too late that I realize where I've unconsciously led myself.

:re Cafe.

Before I can speculate why my subconscious has led me here of all places, a crack of thunder shakes the sky and it splits open with rain. I curse, looking around-- the street has cleared, leaving me baffled as to why I didn't notice that particular fact before, and the door to :re opens. It's Touka, who reaches to flip the open sign to closed, but pauses as she saw me. I must have looked the part of the fool, standing alone on the street in the middle of the pouring rain.

Touka's soft expression hardens a bit, just a little reminiscent of her old hot-headed scowl, but she sighs nonetheless.

"We're closed, but I can't very well leave you out in the rain, so come in. Besides, I think we need to have a very long talk, Nagachika." Her eyes narrowed as she said it, and I sighed. The jig was up-- she had long since smelled me as a ghoul.

"Thanks, Touka-chan," I tell her, stepping inside the warm, pleasant-smelling shop. It smelled like Anteiku, almost. Homey.

Touka's look was the opposite, like ice. It was like the hot-blooded teenager was standing before me, not the warm young woman. It was oddly nostalgic.

She gestured to a door-- which, as it turned out, led to a stairwell, which in turn led to a quaint flat.

"Take your shoes off at the door and hang your coat up. I'll get a towel, so please try not to drip on my floor in the meantime."

"I can't control gravity," I protested, but Touka didn't say anything, even when she returned, simply tossing me a neatly folded lavender-colored towel. I sighed again, drying myself off to the best of my extent-- which left my hair rumpled and damp-- but at the end I wasn't dripping anymore, just a little
cold and damp. An improvement from soaked, at least.

"Put the towel in the hamper and sit down," Touka ordered, pointing to a chair. I did as requested, and Touka seemed to think for a long moment before finally speaking again.

"Nagachika. I'm trying not to come to conclusions, because I genuinely believe you were-- and maybe still are-- Kaneki's friend. And so I don't want to be suspicious, but I'd like you to be honest now." She leaned forward, her fingers laced. "What are you?"

I swallow. There's no getting around it now. Honestly, I was too tired to hide anything anymore.

"I am... a ghoul. At least, a half-ghoul. My father is human, and my mother was a ghoul." I hesitate, then, as proof, let my kakugan flicker into existence briefly. "So I'm a 'natural' one-eyed ghoul, or half-ghoul, if you will."

Touka shook her head. "Don't lie to me, Nagachika. You weren't a ghoul two years ago. I would have smelled you. And besides, you certainly weren't a ghoul when Nishiki attacked you."

So she has guessed that I was conscious...? Clever girl.

"I am telling the truth. I took RC Suppressants, and they altered my scent to make me more like a human while I took them. And that's why I didn't heal-- I couldn't even bring out my kagune or kakugan while on them, let alone fight or heal."

Touka's brilliantly blue eyes were piercing as she narrowed her gaze. I was unflinching. "That's impossible. RC Suppressants are extremely hard to get a hold of, and very expensive."

"Not for me. I've taken them since I was a little kid, courtesy of my father. I can make them with the right equipment and chemicals, in fact. It's really not as complicated as you might think."

"Nagachika." Touka said, the lightning booming outside to accent the wary flashing of her eyes. "Who exactly is your father?"

And I'm so tired. I don't want to hide anymore. I can't.

"Doctor Kanou Akihiro. I was born through a test tube and incubator, though, so we're only father and son biologically. He didn't raise me."

Suddenly, there's a sharper gleam in Touka's eyes, like broken glass, as if she is close to snapping and killing me.

I don't blame her. If I were her, I would want to kill me, too.

"Kanou. As in, the Kanou that ruined Kaneki's life. Nagachika, you've got a hell of a lot of explaining to do, and you better start now. I don't want to make a habit of killing Investigators again, so you'd better start from the beginning. Don't even think about leaving anything out, either."

And so I don't. I tell her everything-- from starting school because Uta and Itori insisted on an education and Father providing my fake papers (although I exclude Uta and Itori's names) and taking an interest in Kaneki, the shy boy with the sweet smell and the books far too complex for his age. Deciding against eating him, because he was interesting, my opposite in everything, and pretending to be human was fun. Developing a friendship, although I saw him as a plaything at that time. And then Father deciding his plan was ready for testing, and Kaneki was the optimal test subject, especially when Rize came into the picture. So the surgery was undergone, and Kaneki's transformation began.
I told her about taking Kaneki to Big Girl as a test to see if he could eat human food, and the disappointment at it's failure. I told her about it irritating me when my 'pet'-- because that's what Kaneki was to me then, like a precious pet-- distanced himself from me, but pulling strings behind the scenes to make him stronger and better. I told her about Aogiri, the place we, the Clowns, had put him into, under the careful watch of Nico, to grow stronger. I told her about joining the CCG after tipping them off to Aogiri's location, working under Akira and Amon. I told her about working my way into the field during the Anti-Eku Raid and finding Kaneki, half insane, and feeding him to heal his wounds. I told her about orchestrating the biggest test, the one that would throw the CCG into mass chaos during the Anteiku Raid: the killing of Arima Kishou, the unkillable Reaper.

I told her about my depression at it's failure, at Kaneki's assumed death. I told her about losing the only real friend I'd ever had. I told her about learning that he was alive and under the CCG's thumb, an insomniac. I told her about my time at the CCG, about the carefully planned seemingly-failure of the surgery, about my election to the Mado Squad.

I told her about my revelation a few nights prior, and being unsure about what to do now, and then my eyes burned and I cried again.

Weak, I cursed myself. *Why am I so weak, suddenly?*

And Touka listened.

She didn't say a word through the entire thing, but afterwords, she did something that surprised me. Touka hugged me, the kind of bone-crushing hug that froze me like ice and caused the tears to cease. I looked at her incredulously, unable to believe she wasn't baying for my blood yet.

"I understand now, Nagachika-- no, Hide-kun. I get it now. And I'm sorry."

"S-Sorry? For what? Touka-chan, you haven't done anything-- scratch that, you threatened to kill me, but I deserved it."

Touka shook her head firmly. "No. No, you didn't deserve it. You do care about Kaneki-- no, Sasaki-- and you want what's best for him, even if you didn't know it yourself at the time. You wanted you're friend back, Hide-kun, and there's nothing wrong with that."

"But I can't do that now," I said vehemently. "I don't *want* to. I don't want to take this all away from him-- Touka-chan, he's got everything he's always wanted. He's got a mother and a father and kids that love him, and even if it isn't a very conventional family he's got one. And if he remembers everything, all of that will be taken away, and it'll be my fault. He'll go back to being hunted down like an animal, always looking over his shoulder for Doves-- I don't want that, Touka-chan. I don't want that, but I'm in too deep to leave now and I don't *want* to leave because I'm happy too, as selfish as that sounds."

Touka looked very sad, suddenly, like she'd already reached the same conclusion a long time ago. *She has, I realized, and that's why she didn't say anything before, when she saw Haise.*

"Hide-kun, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy either. Now tell me, Hide-kun, do you know why :re exists?"

I laugh a little and smile, but it's kind of ruined by the fact I'm still crying, just sniffles.

"To bring everyone great coffee?"

Touka smiles too, but it's still soft and sad. "No, not quite, but thanks for saying my coffee is great. :re exists, Hide-kun, for those without anyone to depend on, without anyone to turn to. It's a home
for those who don't have one. If Kaneki's memories should return, then he can call this place home. But from what I've seen and heard, he has one, and he shouldn't be taken from it."

I swallowed thickly. It was the same conclusion I'd come to myself, more or less.

"That's what I think, too, Touka-chan. But I don't know what to do anymore. Father-- he's still going to try and regain Kaneki's memories, to get Kaneki to join him. The Clowns, too, but I can control them if it comes down to it, and the people who raised me, they'll understand. And I don't want that to happen, but I don't know what to do, and I don't want to have to leave the life I have now."

Touka sat back in her chair, sighing. She looked thoughtful, but when she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"Hide-kun, I don't think you need to leave. If you cut your ties with your father-- because although I would never advice severing ties with family, it sounds like there's no lost love there, and he doesn't sound like he cares for you at all-- then you can remain with Sasaki, can't you? You can stay at your home, with the people you love, as Nagachika Hideyoshi. Because if you have the chance to be someone other than Kanou's son... I think you should take it."

And the answer was so simple, it was absurd. Touka was completely right. I could even protect Haise from Father's attempt this way-- I could save him from the mess I caused.

"I will, Touka-chan. I'll do exactly that. Thank you." My hands were shaking. I don't think it's from the cold. "I can't thank you enough."

Touka smiled, that smile that was just a bit sad.

"You don't need to thank me, Hide-kun. Just keep Haise happy, and that'll be thanks enough."

When Hide had left, the storm passed, Nishiki came out from the kitchen where he had been hidden, two cups of coffee in hand. Wordlessly he passed one to Touka, and after taking a long drink of his own, he asked,

"Why did you help him? He isn't exactly a very good person, from what he willingly just told you."

Touka just gave another small sigh, her breath blowing the steam away from her cup in a billowing cloud.

"I know he isn't a good person, Shitty Nishiki. And you aren't exactly one to talk-- and neither am I. We've all done horrible things. But didn't you hear what he said as he left, the advice he gave me in return? 'Tell Ayato-kun and Hinami-chan to be careful. Ayato-kun especially, because he's attracted the attention of the doves.'" Touka smiled ruefully. "I don't know how he has ties with them, but he does, and he knows I care for them. He's trying to help me, because I helped him. So, Hide-kun may not be a good person... But I think he's trying to be one, and I believe he can be one."

Nishiki shook his head, making a sharp tsk.
"You have too much faith in people."

Touka shrugged. "I know. I took you in, after all."

Chapter End Notes

So, Touka finally makes her appearance! Well, first appearance that isn't in front of Haise, anyways.

Oh, and yes, the 'haggard-looking teenager with his hood pulled up sitting in a corner booth who appeared to be napping.' with the orange-blonde hair, who made a cameo in the last chapter? Yeah, that was Nishiki. Hide just mistook him for someone younger.

So, what do you think about Touka? She was... hard to write, and I'm still not quite satisfied with how it turned out.

Also, this is going to delve into the politics of where Kanou lies, the Clowns' allegiance and to whom, and a little bit of Aogiri Tree. It was quite CCG-centric, and it will still focus on some of the CCG, but now the other elements are taking the spotlight, especially as the Auction Raid Arc wraps up. Which won't be for awhile yet, but still, I'm giving you the notice now.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Well then, I've officially decided to break my bi-weekly update schedule. Not that I ever kept it anyways, but I'm making it official now.

Don't get me wrong. There's still going to be at least two chapters weekly. It's just, now there may be more too.

My usual amount of sleep (that is, if I'm lucky) is around four-to-three hours. More often, (if I'm not lucky) I get around an hour. I write to help tire me out and just pass the time, so blame my chronic insomnia for the rapid updates.

Akira wants to believe that Nagachika's intentions are all good.

Really, she wants to. And she does-- mostly. She almost believes everything he's told her, and almost believes that her earlier suspicions were wrong. His background is solid: he grew up in the Twentieth Ward, attended Kamii University for a few years until the Anteiku Raid near where he lived convinced him to become a ghoul investigator, and he finished up his current year and the next of college to get his degree, then enrolled in the CCG's Academy in the Twentieth Ward. A few months ago, he moved to the First Ward, and because of that, transferred Academies.

It was unusual for Junior Investigators to switch Academies so late in their studies, but it wasn't unheard of. And she had checked with the people at the Academy, and the head confirmed that they had a Nagachika Hideyoshi as a student there until a recent transfer to the First Ward Academy.

Everything in his backstory checked out. His record was spotless and air-tight, he had the proper documents to prove his identity, and he had a genius mind when it came to investigations. Akira didn't think she had seen a case move along as fast as the Nutcracker Case had been recently. It had only recently been slowing down after an incident where they had been noticed by Nutcracker herself on a stake-out of sorts in a restaurant. It involved a glass breaking or something of the like, and Shirazu had seemed pretty upset about it, but Akira didn't pry for any more information than she had learned in the report.

Nagachika had, at least, shown the proper signs of the investigation wearing him down: the sleepless circles under his eyes, the fatigue in his movements during training, proved that to her. He was human, or at least, half human.

And it was the CCG that was at fault for his half-humanness. The CCG had failed the operation, not Nagachika, and Nagachika had paid the consequence of their failure. He would never again taste human food, he was made to sustain on liquidized RC Cells, and he had to deal with his body turning into that of a monster.

Yet never once did Nagachika complain. He trained hard every Friday, when Akira or occasionally Arima himself would assess him and the use of his kagune-- and one oddity about that, Akira noted, was that unlike Haise he did not seem to have any trouble using his kagune. Also unlike Haise, however, Nagachika remembered the first twenty-some years of his life, which probably factored in.
Nagachika adapted well, Akira would give him that. And his potential was amazing: it wasn't every
day that a junior Investigator was able to match Arima in a sparring match, even if the time-span that
it lasted was rather short and ended with Nagachika having a concussion. Adding to that, he scored
perfectly on his written exam, a feat that few achieved. He, doubtlessly, had the potential to be the
best Ghoul Investigator in his generation, maybe even surpass Arima with the proper training and
time.

So why did that nagging suspicion remain in her mind? Akira didn't know, but she wished it would
go away. She wasn't blind to the relationship-- whatever it was-- between Haise and Nagachika. It
would be hard to miss the smiles and the hand-holding, and the dates every Saturday cemented it.
Akira wanted Haise to be happy, and she didn't wish ill to Nagachika, either. He was a rather likable
person; the Quinx had warmed up to him without missing a beat, and even Urie seemed to have
accepted him, which was the most to be expected from him. Nagachika had that effect on people,
being able to talk about anything to anyone. Games with Saiko, cars with Shirazu, literature with
Mutsuki, and he sparred with Urie.

Akira, for the first time, wished that her intuition would be wrong. Let the evidence be right, and
Nagachika be exactly who he said he was.

"Please confirm the data we've handed out," Hanbee announced, and I inspected the sheets of paper
with varying bulleted lists, photographs, and paragraphs of information about Nutcracker. "This one,
in particular. This is a list of all the photographs we found at Nutcracker's house."

Haise frowned, observing his copy of the list. "List...?"

Mutsuki scanned his own copy, looking rather unhappy. Shirazu was attempting to keep Saiko
awake, nudging her every time she nodded off, while Juuzou observed the entire scene amusedly.
Juuzou's squad looked almost as good-naturedly amused as their leader.

My own copy listed a few very-detailed photos of... photos. Well then, I suppose it was exactly what
it said on the tin. On closer inspection, however, it became clear that it was photos of people.

"Yeah." Hanbee confirmed. "A list of ordered ingredients."

"That's implying that there's a connection between the Madam's group and Nutcracker, isn't it?" I
questioned, noting the similarities between the people. It seemed that gender didn't matter, as there
was about an even number of males and females, so that wasn't the connection. And since
Nutcracker only preyed on men, it wasn't for her... "You mentioned ingredients. For the Ghoul
Restaurants or for the Auctions, perhaps?"

"You mean Nuts is also a kidnapper?" Haise asked.

"That's right, Nagachika-san, and you too, Sasaki-san," Hanbee affirmed. "Specifically, we believe
she might be collecting people for the Auction."
"...An Auction? Madam?" Mutsuki asked apprehensively, at the same time Shirazu elbowed Saiko and gave her a glare, hissing, "Stay awake!"

"Like the Restaurant, the Auction is one of the event's Madam's group is running." Hanbee explained. "The point is, they're auctioning off humans they've kidnapped to the highest bidder."

I jumped in here, while Hanbee paused, to answer the second half of Mutsuki's question. "Among them there's a ghoul called Big Madam. As the chairman of the Restaurant and the show, it's a bad name that has even reached us, the CCG. In the past there's been several chances to exterminate her, but each attempt ended in failure."

Hanbee looked delighted. "It seems you're as well-read as always, Nagachika-san. And you're completely right. She's an atrocious ghoul, Big Madam."

I didn't miss the way Juuzou, normally carefree and grinning, narrowed his eyes and got a serious expression. I wondered why, but it wasn't abnormal for ghoul investigators to have a special grudge against certain ghouls. Dead family members, dead comrades, dead friends... the list of possibilities went on and on.

Hanbee tapped his papers together neatly against the table, continuing. "If Nutcracker is indeed taking on work for Big Madam, this will turn into a big deal. If necessary, we might have to cooperate with Division II."

I laced my fingers, intrigued, but Shirazu looked thoroughly confused and I recalled his comment about scoring lower than Saiko on classroom knowledge. I took the liberty to explain before he could ask.

"The Ghoul Countermeasures Division II, a division that focuses on the big picture, the brains behind the battle plans and orders that become necessary for large-scale organizational fights. When general skills like instant analysis, leadership, and real battle experience are in demand... all the elite brains inside the CCG are assigned to Division II."

Shirazu looked as if a light bulb had gone off inside his head, and I smiled.

I watched Hanbee flip through his papers, scanning them to ensure he hadn't missed anything. When he had finished, he tapped the papers against the table again to straighten them and sat a little taller.

"Okay, that's it. The meeting's dismissed."

Juuzou, his previous serious expression long gone, let out a cheerful noise. His pockets were still full of the snacks Haise had prepared the night before, and I chuckled as I followed Haise's example and stood, putting my papers into a non-quinque briefcase. The Quinx followed our lead, Mutsuki quietly and Saiko and Shirazu a bit more noisily.

After saying our partings to Juuzou and his squad-- and they were all perfectly formal about it, using our rank titles and everything, unlike their leader, who merely called out a cheerful "Goodbye~!"-- we left the meeting room.

There was an upbeat tune playing in the elevator, and the ride down was uneventful, until the doors slid open and Haise sighed.

"Well, it looks like this will be a bigger investigation than we thought."

I hummed. "Yeah. It's rare to have to cooperate with Division II."
Haise seemed thoughtful. "Everything depends on Nuts... Let's be especially careful from here on out."

Shirazu didn't appear overly concerned with the topic at hand, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Yo, Sassan?"

"Hmm?"

"Urie said he had to go to the hospital immediately. Is everything alright?"

Haise lowered his eyes a little, looking worried, and I bumped my hand against his.

"I'm sorry. I heard about that as well, but I couldn't contact Doctor Shiba. I hope it's nothing serious..."

That settled it. I twined my fingers through his, and was quick to say, "I'm sure it isn't. You know he's been asking about the frame release surgery, so he's probably in for, like, a check-in on his kakuhou. To make sure he's healthy enough, or something."

"I'm sure you're right," Haise said, smiling weakly for a brief moment. "It looks like he can return home in a few days, but just because Urie's gone doesn't mean we won't investigate. Hide, Shirazu, Mutsuki, we'll meet tonight." He patted his coat pockets, then drew out the set of keys and placed them in my hands. "After lecturing Saiko, I've got somewhere to drop by, so please take care of the car."

Saiko made a squeaking noise, dismayed that Haise would lecture her. I chuckled, releasing his hand and twirling the keys around my finger.

"'Kay, I'll take the kids home."

Mutsuki blinked. "...Kids?"

I blanched, not meaning to have let that slip. Haise looked rather pale, too.

"Er, nothing. Don't worry about it," Haise covered swiftly.

Shirazu shrugged, and Saiko looked unbothered, but Mutsuki still seemed a bit confused.

"If you say so, Sasaki-san, Hide-san."

"So Torso escaped, huh..."

Haise sighed from the other side of the glass-like divider. "Sorry about that. Even with your information, Torso still got away."

Donato waved his hand. "To me, this is just one of the many conversations to kill time. It's fine." He laced his fingers, looking amused. "What happens to him has nothing to do with me."
Haise gave a nervous chuckle as Donato continued, his eyes narrowing. "Rather than that, as a ghoul like myself, just how far can he escape? I can only get my hopes up.

Haise gave another small laugh, this one a little less nervous. "Well, besides that, what about the other case you wanted to talk about the other day?"

"About a certain ghoul. But before that, Haise..." Donato paused, leaning forward. "Haise. What do you think about your own memories?"

Haise stiffened, the smile slipping off his face as his eyes widened. He wasn't sure how to answer. In fact, he had never mentioned the other 'him' to anyone besides Hide, and even then, he had been vague and mostly hysterical.

Not his best moment.

"...I..." Haise began, but trailed off. If he wasn't sure where he lay with the monster, his other self, then how was he supposed to explain to Donato how he felt?

Donato took that as an answer, apparently, and continued. "Are you tormented by conflicting thoughts like... 'My own memories don't have to return', or 'is it really fine to stay like this'? Earlier, you looked like you had gotten over it, but today you look down again."

Haise frowned, casting his gaze downward. He had been so careful to conceal it, what was bothering him, to avoid Hide or someone else, like Akira or Arima or the Quinx, from noticing. And his nightmares had quieted since the night Hide had comforted him-- and all the nights since, when they would end up sharing Haise's bed. It was comforting, in a way Haise couldn't explain, and Hide's words after his nightmare had reassured him and silenced most of his fears, quelled them.

But twenty-some years worth of memories, of people... was it really okay to forget them? And the face of the man from the Serpent fight kept coming to him, the name that had been ripped from him involuntarily ringing through his head.

"Nishio-senpai?"

Donato looked genuinely concerned. "Something happened recently, no? The failure with Torso? The cause of the failure, maybe?"

Haise smiled, but it was weak. "You help me enough by summarizing my thoughts."

Donato laughed. "Normal people hate that. Humans don't want to be analyzed."

The dull orange-brown hair, the triangle scar over his eye, the blood trailing from his mouth... the image of the man behind the Serpent mask floated through Haise's mind.

"How much do you know about Serpent?"

"Only as much as the data says. He's an S~ Rated ghoul hunting ghouls, no?"

"That's right," Haise confirmed, his eyes still dark. "If... If there's a reason why my feelings are swaying, then it might be that... Serpent and I might have been acquaintances." He sighed, and was silent for a long time, the memory of his first visit to Kirishima-san smiling warmly at him, and said, "Please help yourself." And at his confused look, she gestured. "The books."
"Ah... Thanks."

"They called you sensei earlier, the kids you were with... Are you a teacher at a school?"

_Haise took off his long white coat, draping it over the chair's back as Kirishima-san sat his coffee cup down in front of him. He smiled his thanks, answering, "Ah, no. I'm a Ghoul Investigator, and their mentor."

_Haise wondered why that particular memory came to mind, but brushed it away. "But why are we talking about my memories now?"

Donato shrugged. "The other thing I want to talk about is a certain ghoul I have an interest in. He... He will definitely be one of the keys to unlocking the door of your memories, Haise. His name is Amon. Amon Koutarou."

As Haise left the prison, Donato's parting words haunted him.

"Haise. Wasn't the one who hid the incident with Serpent yourself, somewhere in your heart, because you're wishing for your lost memories while fearing them?

"Let's wish, as friends, that what fills the empty bowl is a hot soup."

It was later that night, a short while after Haise had returned from wherever he visited-- and I didn't ask, but he looked worried-- when we were all seated around the living room table, papers and documents or all kinds spread out before us.

_Haise looked especially troubled from where he sat next to me, examining the papers but looking very far away.

"An empty vessel, huh..." He murmured.

"Huh?" I asked, confused, not sure what he'd said, because what I'd heard didn't make any sense.

Haise gave me a small, surprised smile. "Ah, it's nothing." He was quick to assure.

He touched his chin while he spoke, and I frowned. It most definitely was not nothing, but in the
middle of a meeting with the Quinx probably wasn't the best time to voice that. Later, however, when we were alone, I certainly would bring it up.

Until then, I brushed my hand over his and half-listened while Mutsuki listed off a summary of his thoughts.

"It seems like Nutcracker is carefully investigating clubs and the like in the Thirteenth Ward for people to capture. According to the list, while there are unusual targets like humans with artificial eyes and vocalists, there are those targeted for only their height and weight, and even some for vague reasons."

While I was proud of how cleanly and confidently Mutsuki was able to put together that summary—and I was proud, don't get me wrong—what Haise had said was still bothering me.

An empty vessel? Surely he isn't talking about that 'monster' again, right? I thought I had reassured him that he was Sasaki Haise, but I suppose one night of assurances can't make up for twenty years worth of memories and people lost. I'll have to say something else again to him tonight...

I reached for my glass of water, feeling parched and a little weary, and just as the glass reached my lips Haise stood up abruptly, a look of dawning realization on his face as his hand slipped out of mine.

"I see... With this list... Guys. We'll become girls."

I spit out the drink I had, choking, water spraying onto the documents on the table and splashing onto the floor when my glass fell Shirazu fumbled to hit me on the back roughly, the only one of the kids coherent enough to do so. Mutsuki looked almost aghast, and Saiko— I'll give this one to her, she was completely poker-faced. Another point to her, because she managed to sum up my thoughts perfectly, and in a single word.

"What."
I hated skirts, wigs, and high-heels. Unfortunately, I was dressed in them, with the blouse and make-up to match. Fortunately, I wasn't the only one dressed like a girl, and if this idea of Haise's were to be my downfall, I wasn't going down alone. I was sure as hell going to drag Haise down with me, and apparently the Quinx too.

Minus Urie, of course, who was still in the hospital. The problem child lucked out this time, avoiding Haise's latest scheme.

"So this is the club where Nutcracker's been frequenting lately," Haise commented, looking perfectly at ease dressed as the opposite sex.

"Looks kinda fun," Saiko chimed. She was dressed-up more than her normal t-shirts and jeans, but that was the extent of her change. She almost looked excited.

Mutsuki did not. In fact, he looked rather ill.

"I think I'm getting people-sick..." He muttered, shifting his feet restlessly. His eyes scanned over the crowded nightclub nervously. "Have you ever been to places like this before, Sasaki-san, Hide-san?"

"A few times when I was younger, with some friends from college," I told him honestly, giving him a slight smile. It didn't look like my confession eased his nerves any, however.

"Once on an investigation, with Akira," Haise admitted. His voice was... Higher pitched than normal. "She said she would only have one drink, but it took everything I had to get her to stop."

"Hey," Shirazu began, glancing around. "Ain't we... No, ain't I a bit outta place here?"

Saiko giggled. "No, no, you're quite cute."

"Hey, Shii, you have to sound feminine," Haise corrected, and I almost felt sorry for Shirazu. Mutsuki had a natural higher tenor voice, not unlike a low alto, so he could just speak normally. I had a mid-tenor, so it wasn't hard to speak just a little higher than normal.

Shirazu, on the other hand, spoke with a gruff bass, and had to make an attempt at it to sound like a girl.

"But...! But there's no girl this big 'round here!" Shirazu protested. "It's weird!"

I patted his shoulder. "Just think of yourself as a tall girl."

Saiko winked. "Yo, sexy."

"Er, facking Saiko, isn't the difference between me and Tooru a little too big?!?" Shirazu growled, stomping one of his flats angerly. His zebra-pattered scarf ruffled as he did, making the action seem comical rather than angry.

Saiko shrugged. "Well, it's easier to work with a subject of higher quality. But hey, your knees are nice and girly."
"Wa?" Shirazu exclaimed, while Mutsuki smiled nervously. "And Sassan, you dressed yourself! Who the fuck 're you!"

I was the next target of Shirazu's upset barrage, apparently.

"And you! You dressed yourself too, didn't ya? How can you be so-- so fine with this!"

"Actually, Haise dressed me. And did my make-up, as a matter of fact. It's not like I have experience doing this, you know." I rebut, offended.

"It's not like I've done this before either," Haise added. "I learned everything from books. And don't be so whiny-- I'm Sasako now."

Haise managed to look stern as he paused, even in his white dress with the frilly neckline and high-heeled stilettos. "I hope you'll make up for the mistake you made the other day. Loosen up!"

"Heavy make-up was necessary because they've seen your face before. Plus, it's funnier this way. You won't be found out, Squad Leader!" Saiko added, looking just a little smug.

I held in a snicker as Shirazu gave a huff, saying, "All right, I get it!"

"Ah, he embraced it!" Mutsuki murmured. I grinned at him, and he managed a weak smile in return, still looking faintly sick. He looked nervous, and like he might literally be sick any moment. I wondered why he was so scared. Sure, the club was loud and noisy, and the people were pretty rowdy and flirtatious, but there was nothing-- and nobody-- that was overpoweringly creepy. Just a normal club scene, really.

I nudged his arm. "Nutcracker hasn't met her quota of women yet, and we fit the bill now, thanks to Haise's evil scheme. But that's the only reason we're here: for the job."

Mutsuki gave me a weak smile that was just a little stronger than before. A hand descended on his shoulder, making him jump, but it was only Haise, with a good-natured smile and a wink.

"Mucchan. It's okay, you're cute."

Mutsuki did manage a genuine smile then, but just barely.

"Th-Thanks," he muttered, clutching at his dress.

We split up then, everybody heading in different directions to discreetly try to attract Nutcracker's attention. But Haise pulled me aside with a tug on my hand, and I paused as he lead me to a quieter portion of the nightclub.

"I'm worried about Mutsuki," He confessed, glancing in the direction the green-haired male had disappeared. "But I've got to keep an eye on Saiko and Shirazu, since we all went towards that end of the club. But you took the same section of the club as he did, so..."

I smiled. "I got it covered, don't worry. I'll keep a close eye on him."

Haise nodded, looking relived. "Alright. Thanks, Hide."

"It's not a problem; I was worried too, and was planning on keeping an eye on him anyways." I assured him.

"Good luck."
"Same to you," I said, then followed the direction Mutsuki had left in.

We didn't say goodbye. It was bad luck, that.

"Service," A waiter said, passing me a drink of alcohol-- it was amber-colored, so probably scotch. "Please, have one."

I gave him a polite but distracted smile, remembering to keep my voice higher as I said, "Thanks!" before passing on. It wasn't like I could drink liquor anyways: I had to keep up my artificial half-ghoul appearance. Besides that, I had never had a taste for alcohol-- nor it's common side-effect, a nasty hangover.

I spent the next fifteen minutes or so searching the area where Mutsuki had gone, but I couldn't find him. It seemed he had disappeared, and I swallowed nervously, setting the still-full glass of scotch on a bar-top as I left to find Haise and tell him the unfortunate news.

I found him, eyes dark, talking to Shirazu against a wall of the club.

"Saiko didn't want to be an investigator. But her mother, knowing there was a monetary compensation, immediately agreed to the operation. It seems as though the explanation about the dangers didn't get through to her, that's what I heard... I have to mentor Saiko, as a part of my job, and I plan to do just that. But you know, she became a part of the Quinx Squad and an investigator without any of her own consent. That's what I've been thinking about lately, how it's like for Saiko-- she's always so unmotivated, and being forced to do anything more..."

Shirazu looked downcast. "What a horrible mom... I guess havin' parents doesn't mean you'll be happy. She's the only one with her parents close by, since it looks like Urie's aren't 'round, and everyone in Tooru's family was killed by ghouls. And you know about my dad... I mean, my mom might be out there somewhere, but..."

Shirazu cast off the unhappy look he'd worn for an indignant one. "But I think you have to do your job to live in that house! She's just been slackin' off! Shouldn't it be fine to just cut her mother off already?"

Haise still looked sad under the flashing lights of the club, and I hesitated. It was... different, for the Quinx and even myself. We, at least, knew who our parents were, even if we didn't have the greatest-- or in my case, didn't particularly care for-- our parents. But Haise had no idea who his parents were, and honestly, I think he was perhaps better off not knowing. His mother, the horrible woman, had taken out her anger on her son whenever he had stepped a foot out of place, and his father was long dead. His aunt was no better, neglecting him and hitting him on occasion. I still remembered bandaging scratches or bruises on him as a child, swollen eyes or bleeding cheeks from nail marks. He never told me where he got them, and denied that they beat him, but that didn't change the fact that I knew-- and had blackmailed his aunt into giving him his books back, and tried to do the same thing to get her to treat him better. It failed.

Still, I had to wonder. What would it be like, to not know anything about yourself, for the first twenty years of your life? To know that blood stains your hands, but to be unsure of why or how, and to be so guilty you envision another self to haunt your thoughts and dreams?

Then Shirazu said something that made my heart skip a beat.

"Hey, Sassan... If maybe your memories return... Will you quit being a ghoul investigator?"

Haise froze, just for a moment, and I saw a flash of insecurity fly across his face. Then he covered it
up smoothly, laughing, but his laugh was off and his smile weak.

"What? Are you lonely, Squad Leader Shirazu?"

Shirazu snorted, but it looked like Haise had unintentionally struck a nerve. "Tch! Not at all! It's just, if you're gone, Urie'll get full of himself... No doubt about that."

"I won't quit," Haise assured him, and he didn't touch his chin when he spoke. I almost sagged with relief, until I saw the dark humor gleaming behind his dove-feather grey eyes.

_Oh, I see. If his memories return, he thinks he'll be executed on the spot. He'll be killed before he has a chance to quit._

I felt sick, until I spotted Mutsuki... talking to Nutcracker.

I approached Haise, tugging on his dress sleeve, feeling like I might have a heart attack.

"Haise. Haise, I've been looking for Mutsuki this entire time, and I haven't been able to find him-- until now. Haise, he's talking to Nutcracker."

"He's what?" Haise asked incredulously, but followed my gaze and paled. "Oh. Oh, no. We've got to do something, to help him--!"

"Ah, I've got an idea. You probably won't like it, so. Just stay here, okay?" I said, patting Haise's arm once. I didn't like my improvised plan, so Haise sure as hell wouldn't. But I wasn't going to let one of the kids take on Nutcracker alone, especially not Mutsuki.

"Hide, what are you--"

I didn't let him finish, striding over to Mutsuki just as he let out a happy, giggling laugh. "Oh wow! It's so stylish and fashionable! I'm gonna work to become like that!"

Nutcracker looked like she was smiling under her mask. "Thanks."

Mutsuki looked up as I approached, and I noticed that not only did he reek of alcohol, but his cheeks were flushed and his visible eye almost glassy. "Oh, Hide-san!"

I imitated his higher-pitched giggle and hoped he wouldn't hate me too much for what I was about to call him. "Mucchan! I wondered where you'd gotten to! It's not nice to ditch people, you know!"

"Oh, sorry. Did I ditch you? I didn't mean to!" Mutsuki was quick-- and loud-- to assure me. I was grateful that he was drunk enough to go along with my story without question.

I huffed. "Well, it's okay, I guess. This time." Pretending to just now notice Nutcracker, I put on my best winning beam. "Oh, hi! Are you Mucchan's friend? I'm Hide! It's nice to meet you!"

Nutcracker looked almost dazed at my abrupt entry and easy conversation, which I took as a compliment. "...It's nice to meet you, as well. I was just offering your friend a part-time job, actually. We're a bit short on manpower, so would you be interested too?"

I pretended to think it over, tilting my head and humming. "Well, what kind of job is it?"

"All you have to do is serve trays and reply when you're spoken to. There's going to be lots of high-class clients there, so you'll be getting paid well." Nutcracker informed, scanning my and Mutsuki's oddly-colored hair. "It's really easy."
I let a shine come into my eyes at the mention of money, oohing. I turned to Mutsuki and said excitedly, "What do you say, Mucchan?"

Mutsuki cheered happily. "Let's do it!"

I turned back to Nutcracker with a little skip. "Okay then! We'll do it!"

She handed us a slip of paper, which Mutsuki and I studied with wide eyes.

"The contact details," she explained. "I'll see you on the date listed, then."

"Bye-bye!" I called cheerily, waving and imitating Mutsuki's happy mix of a stride and a skip towards where Haise, Shirazu, and Saiko-- when did Saiko get there?-- were standing where I'd left them, against the walls of the club.

"Boss!" Mutsuki called happily. "She invited us to a part-time job! I've got the contact details! With this, we can already infiltration!"

"You did it, Tooru!" Shirazu exclaimed, sounding more surprised than amazed.

Saiko grabbed Mutsuki's hands and dragged him towards the dance floor. "Then, let's dance! A victory dance!"

"Hey, wait! I'm tagging along!" Shirazu called, darting after them.

"Ah, Mucchan, but..." Haise stopped, seeing as they were already on the dance floor, and he sighed fondly. "Geez."

I laughed normally, letting my voice drop down to the normal tone. "Really, though. Even if he was drunk, he did well. Let them have a little fun."

"I know," Haise said, folding his arms as he leaned against the wall, watching after them with fond eyes. "I know. I'm just surprised that nothing went wrong."

I didn't think that was it, and when I looked closer at his face, his eyes were still dark. It wasn't the lighting, and after a long moment of deliberation, I spoke.

"Haise... listen. I heard some of your conversation with Shirazu earlier. About your memories?"

Haise blinked, but he didn't look betrayed. Just... surprised. "How... how much?"

"Not all of it. Just the bit about your memories, and a little about the kids parents. But that's not what I want to talk about. I pause, hesitant, but push on anyways. "Look. Even if you can't remember anything up until a few years ago, and even if those memories were to come back, you'd still be Sasaki Haise. You're happy right now, aren't you?"

Haise looked shocked that I would even ask. "Of course I am."

"That's all that matters, then. You're living right here, right now, with me, the kids, Arima-san, Akira-san, Suzuya-san, and so many others. You exist, and you've got people that really care about you, Haise. That won't just disappear, even if your memories were to return. It's okay to live, just how you are now, in the moment."

Haise smiled, and it looked like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders.
"Thank you, Hide."

He looked as light as I had felt when Touka had told me it was okay to be Nagachika Hideyoshi, and I felt as light as helium.

And maybe it was because of that feeling that I discarded the risk of fraternization—actually, I was pretty sure the CCG didn't have any fraternization laws—and, uncaring of the risk I was taking to potentially shake our relationship, I took a deep breath, leaned down, and kissed Haise.

He tasted like lipstick and coffee.

"Say, Roma, isn't that face familiar?" Nico asked, his cherry-red lips gleaming under the pulsing multicolored lights of the nightclub. "In fact, both of them are."

"Nico? Is that really him? Ooh, and the rumored one, rumored one?" Roma sang excitedly, peering through her dark sunglasses.

"It's Pierrot indeed. And Haise... He came! Well," Nico amended, "His personality's changed and he's wearing a girl's outfit. But he sure looks like Kaneki."

"He's going all 'yay' or 'ooh'," Roma said. "Seems kinda happy. Doesn't it piss you off?"

"Really?"

"Yeah! Kaneki was beautiful in that struggling, suffering state. Being constantly immersed in a swamp of tragedy... That was a, how do I put it, 'I won't lose to any tragedy!' vibe I felt from him." Roma shivered, a wicked grin spreading across her face. "Surrender that body already! I want him to get out of that body already and bring back the white, beautiful Kaneki to me..."

She laughed, a darkly chilling sound. "Wouldn't it be great if Haise just died?"

Nico sighed, swirling the wine in his glass. "Geez... You're really selfish, Roma. But you know... The image of spilled wine is really beautiful, too..." He paused. "But Pierrot's fury is something to behold. He wants to bring Kaneki back to him, but you must remember Haise is dear Kaneki's vessel. Pierrot will fight to keep that vessel in top shape, and if you harm Kaneki's vessel..."

Nico looked at the red liquid in his wineglass, and at the droplets that had spilled onto the bar-top. They looked eerily like blood.

"If you invoke Pierrot's fury, then SS Rated Ghoul or not... Well, you're as good as dead, Roma."
It was later, as we were leaving the nightclub, shepherding three mostly drunk (and I'm pretty certain underage, but I didn't comment on that) and sleepy Quinx out the door, that I got the message.

I had a firm hand on Mutsuki's shoulder, and was steering him gently towards the door. He was an energetic drunk, but liquor could only carry him so far, and he was tripping over his feet as I guided him towards the door. The high heels probably didn't help his case any, and I was almost debating on carrying him like Haise was half-carrying and half-dragging Saiko when it happened.

A woman in a sheer-and-black dress that fell to her knees, and high pink heels with frilly black socks. She had long, peachy orange hair and pale amber eyes, not unlike her hair color. She bumped into me, slipping a small piece of paper into my hand discreetly, then stepped back with a ditzy laugh.

"Oops! Sorry there," She giggled, then passed on by me like nothing happened.

I blinked and murmured, "I-chan...?" But she was long gone. I didn't dare look at the paper yet, instead tucking it into the waistband of the long, ruffled skirt I wore, and continued to steer Mutsuki forward. Haise hadn't noticed Itori, too busy keeping a hand on the hem of Shirazu's shirt like a leash and leading Saiko towards the car ahead of me.

We loaded the Quinx into the backseat, and Haise drove, with me in the passenger seat. He laughed, still looking a little frazzled.

"Forever designated drivers, huh?"

"Alcohol tastes nasty even to regular people, though," I countered. "That's one thing I definitely don't miss. Plus, the Mutsuki will have a hell of a hangover tomorrow, and I'm sure that Shirazu and Saiko won't feel great either. At least they've got the day off tomorrow."

"Yeah," Haise agreed, starting down the correct streets towards the Chateau. "I'll have to go in, though. We can't not report the progress, when it's as large as this is."

"Yeah," I say, inconspicuously kicking my heels off. My feet hurt like no other. "Mutsuki did well, though, and so did the others. They deserved a little fun."

"That's true." Haise said, then he paused. "But Hide... Why did you risk going to meet with Nutcracker and Mutsuki? Don't get me wrong-- I definitely didn't like him talking to her alone, especially not inebriated, and I would have done the same thing too, if I thought I could pull it off."

"I did it just for that reason. I didn't want him to face Nutcracker alone." It still shocked me, the truth in my own words. Caring for someone that wasn't family-- and by family I mean Uta and Itori-- or Kaneki was still new, but it was surprising how easily it came. It was a genuine liking, but hard to describe. In fact, perhaps the best term would be storge, distinctly different from philia, eros, and agape, but still a platonic love of sorts.

"You were amazing, Hide." Haise said, while I was contemplating the four types of love. "Thank you, for doing that."

I just smiled at him, warmly. "You don't have to thank me. It's something I wanted to do."
After deliberation, Haise and I decided to leave the Quinx in their girlish get-ups until tomorrow-- or at least, until later today, as it was already early morning. Haise made them drink a glass of water (I didn't have the heart to tell him that drinking water didn't actually help hangovers) before herding them into their respective bedrooms and leaving it at that. Then Haise got into the upstairs shower, wanting to wash off the make-up, perfume, and nightclub smell, while I opted to use the downstairs bathroom.

After making sure the door was shut firmly behind me and turning on the water, I pulled out the note that Itori had passed.

It was a small piece of carefully folded paper, but in Uta's careful hand the few sentences meant more to me than anything.

_Tomorrow. Noon. :re. We'll be waiting._

I smiled at the note, then pulled out the lighter that I had taken from the garage and set the note on fire. I held it gingerly, ignoring the flames that licked at my hand and scorched my skin, until the note was completely ash. I dumped it into the shower and watched the soggy ashes float down the drain, feeling the burned skin heal all the while.

Chapter End Notes

So, did you like the club? It was interesting to write, I'll say that, considering I've never actually been to a nightclub.

Anyways, so Roma and Nico make their appearance! Brief though it may be. They'll actually play a bigger part soon, as will the Clowns.

As for Hide's-- or rather, _Pierrot's--_ ranking, that's purposely been kept vague. And will continue to be, until the very end. His kagune type will be revealed soon, though, during the Auction Raid. Anybody want to take a guess? I've given hints here and there, but I'll warn you: there's a twist.

When aren't there twists? Things are rarely straightforward, after all.

More of Uta and Itori next chapter!
After seeing Haise off with a larger-than-normal serving of coffee, I took his place as caretaker for the morning and made breakfast. Following which, of course, I brought a headband to the bathroom to hold Mutsuki's hair off his face while he puked. Saiko and Shirazu, fortunately, did not require the same treatment, and after passing a bottle of painkillers around with a glass of water apiece, they felt well enough to eat breakfast and shower, a feat which took almost three hours and was enough for me to conclude that last night was their first time drinking that quantity of liquor, and this was their first hangover. Which, of course, meant that despite being responsible adults, they needed someone to hold their hands through that process.

Being the only hangover-free occupant of the Chateau at home, that someone was me.

"I've got somewhere to be at noon, but I can take care of you 'till I leave at eleven thirty," I informed them. "And Haise won't be back until late this evening. He's got a meeting with the Suzuya-san first, so they can organize their thoughts, and then the higher-ups later about last night's breakthrough."

"Sasaki's going alone?" Mutsuki asked, looking rather miserable in only a loose grey t-shirt and sweats. His hair was still wet, and his eye-patch was... I wasn't actually sure where, now that I thought about it. Maybe still in the bathroom, but that was an issue for later, when he realized it was missing. I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up, anyways.

"Well, not quite. It's just him and Suzuya-san. Not even Hanbee-san is going."

"Poor Maman," Saiko said, the only one who had felt well enough to dry her hair rather than leave it to air-dry. "The big-wigs are scary."

Shirazu hummed his agreement, but didn't look up from his food. "What's today again?"

"Sunday." I informed, filling the sink up with hot, soapy water to begin the dishes. I hadn't actually bothered to change out of my own pajamas yet-- it might be a good idea to do so before I went to meet Uta and Itori. "Why? Is there somewhere you need to be, Shirazu?"

"Someone to visit, more like." His tone was all I needed to not ask any more questions. He said visit, but that could include a graveyard or a hospital.

"There's a nice flower shop by the train station," I informed him, thinking that flowers would work for graveyards and hospitals, or even just a nice occasion. Flowers were always a safe bet. "I got Haise's flowers there, the roses? They sell all kinds of flowers, of course, but there always fresh."

Shirazu brightened a little. "Really? Thanks, Hide-san."

I dunk the pot I had made miso in under the water, saying, "It's not a problem."

I wonder who he's visiting. A relative, a loved one, an old comrade? It's good sometimes to visit graves alone, to give closure and clarity of mind, but visiting hospitals alone could be dreary.

Well, it's none of my business, I thought, emptying the sink and rinsing the clean dishes.
When I entered :re, greeted by the warm, coffee-scented air, I felt like a child in a candy store.

"Welcome to :re," A voice that was not-so welcoming greeted me. It's owner was a man in a waiters uniform, a small triangle scar over his left eye almost hidden by glasses and a mess of orange-brown hair. "Nagachika-kun?"

"Nishio-san. You work here?" I hadn't realized that. I'd have to apologize for almost killing him, then, wouldn't I? On Haise's behalf, too. "Ah, wait. Sorry for that, awhile back. Nothing personal, it's just, y'know. My job."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Shitty Nagachika, I get it. The Manager's already explained everything. And if you're here for her, you're out of luck. She's off today."

"Actually, I'm here to meet with somebody else. Them, in fact," I pointed at Uta and Itori, where they're sitting in a cozy booth in the corner.

"Go seat yourself then, Nagachika-kun. I'm going to make an assumption and go with a straight black coffee?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that'll do. Thanks, Nishio-san."

Nishio made a disgruntled noise, but walked off towards where Yomo was working the counter. I made a note to say hello later, but approached the booth. Itori, spotting me before I sat down, got up and pulled me into one of her bone-crushing hugs, making a happy, squealing sound. "Kiddo~! I've missed you!"

"I just saw you last night, I-chan," I protested, but hugged her back in return. Eventually she released me from her grip, and I sighed in relief.

"Look at you, all dressed up," Uta crooned delightedly, smiling and ruffling my hair as I sat down next to him and across from Itori. "And it's not even neon! You're growing up!"

"I'll have you know my socks and my tie are garishly bright," I said, offended. "What, did you think a few months would negate my entire upbringing?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Itori was the one who dressed you in neon. I wanted nice, sensible black, but nobody listened to me," Uta said indignantly, sniffing. He picked up his coffee and took a sip, pointedly ignoring me for a few moments.

"Oh, don't lie. You dressed him even more horribly than I did, in blacks and neons. He was like a bad graffiti wall when you dressed him." Itori rebutted as Uta ignored her. "Well, that's besides the point. How have things been going, Hide?"

I hesitated, wondering how I should go about this. It wasn't that I was afraid to go about explaining my change from wanting to bring Kaneki back to wanting to protect Haise. I was just unsure how to begin.

So I simply stated my revelation.
"I don't want to bring Kaneki back."

And... there was no reaction. No cup dropping, no coffee spitting, no exclamations of shock. It was perfectly calm, like I had made a comment on the weather. Uta and Itori exchanged glances, and Itori sighed.

"Hide, kiddo, listen... We knew that you were going to come to that conclusion for a long time now."

"You're more stubborn than we gave you credit, though," Uta said idly, sipping at his coffee. "You get it from Itori, not me. You're like mules, the both of you."

Itori frowned. "Uta, you liar. I am not stubborn, and he can't inherit it from me. It doesn't work that way."

"I don't care how biology works. He gets it from you, not me."

"Wait," I interrupted, before Itori could refute. "What do you mean, you knew?"

Uta echoed Itori's sigh. "Parent's have great intuition, haven't you heard? We knew that eventually you were going to start feeling guilty and change your view about Kaneki-kun. That you were trying to rip him away from where he was finally happy, etc. It's the obvious conclusion to come to, even for magnificent bastards like us. Really, the fact it took you this long is surprising."

Itori actually reached over the table and smacked him upside the head. Uta looked hurt.

"What happened to breaking it to him gently? And I am not a magnificent bastard!"

"No, Itori, I looked up what it meant. It's a troupe-- like the website? And it describes us perfectly."

Uta said ruefully, giving Itori a flat look. "And besides, Hide doesn't need us to break it to him gently. He's a grown-up, Itori. He'd be mad at us for breaking it to him gently."

Itori gave a huff, and I couldn't comprehend anything they were saying. It was like their words were going in one ear and out the other, meaningless as a child's babble.

"If you knew I would come to this conclusion, then why didn't you stop me before?" I asked angrily, my kakugan threatening to bleed into existence. I held it back, barely.

"Because you're happy as Nagachika Hideyoshi, aren't you?" Itori asked, but the question was more rhetorical than inquisitive. "Hide, we tried as hard as we could, but you were never really happy as Kanou's son, were you?"

"I'm not Kanou's son!" I protested, slamming my hands down onto the tabletop and standing upright in indignation. "I am happy with you guys, as a Clown! I like to manipulate other people for my own entertainment! I laugh at their pain! I derive pleasure from other's suffering! I am Pierrot, the Clown!"

Nishio sat my cup down with an annoyed look. "Yes, yes, announce it to the whole shop, why don't you? For god's sake, Shitty Nagachika, be grateful the shop's empty!" He made an annoyed noise, then stalked off towards the counter.

I stopped mid rant, my mouth wide open, my hands still pressed against the table so hard I feared I might break it. I... I didn't get emotional. I didn't lose control like that.

I slumped down into my seat, my eyes wide with dismay. "What... What's wrong with me?"
"There's nothing wrong with you for enjoying acting human," Uta assured me. "What have I told you, time and time again, since you were a child? My pulse, it races whenever I get a human customer. I can't explain it very well. There's just something thrilling, something that makes me happy about it. And Itori doesn't just deal information to-- and about-- ghouls, you know. She deals information to humans, too."

"And dealing with human customers is more fun that ghoul, sometimes. They're my special customers, just like Uta's got his. It's exciting, fun, even more so than a tragedy. And now, Hide, you've got the chance to be human. You've got airtight papers, and the chance to become someone other than the Clown, Kanou Hideyoshi," Itori said gently. "And you want to take that chance. But you're conflicted, too, because it goes against your very nature, the nature to cause chaos and destruction. For the first time, you don't want a tragedy: you want a happy ending."

"I... I am a Clown," I said shakily. "I'm just like you guys. I--"


Uta was never a very physical person, for as long as I can remember. Not like Itori, who gave out hugs like they were going out of style. But he slung an arm around my shoulders then, as something wet hit my hands, in little salty drops. My eyes burned.

"Hide. Even Clowns care about people. We don't like to see the people we care about suffer, and be unhappy." A familiar gleam came into Itori's eyes, one that I knew well. "Now, strangers, people we don't care about... Well, that's a different story. We can enjoy a good tragedy then."

Uta gave her another flat look, like, not now. "Do you understand now, Hide? You are a Clown, not a Kanou. We've never lied when we told you that. But Hide, it's okay, because Clown's are human too-- well, not in the biological sense, but you get my point. We care about people too, and we want to protect them."

The words rang through my head like a mantra. You are a Clown. We care about people too, and we want to protect them. There's nothing wrong.

It's okay.

I understood. It's okay, it's okay, it's okay. I can be Nagachika Hideyoshi, and a Clown. I can love Uta and Itori, and want to keep them safe, while still protecting Haise, and loving him.

It's okay.

I didn't cry, not in the horribly loud, wailing sense, as a baby. Even then, I suppose, I was different. Only recently, the night I had made my revelation and again with Touka, had I cried in the true sense.

(I was lying to myself-- there were only two times I had wept, as a child, but I refused to remember them.)

But when I heard those two words-- those two little words, that seemed so insignificant but meant so much-- I cried my eyes out like a baby. The other times seemed small compared to now, when I started to cry and I couldn't stop.

Then Itori slid into this side of the booth, and they didn't say a word as I bawled like an infant. They didn't need to, because they had said all they needed to.
It's okay.

---

After I had stopped crying-- and it felt like it was a long time later-- Uta and Itori promised me that they would see me again, then they sent me on my way. We set a date for another meeting, in a week, and I left lighter than I had ever felt, although it was different than when I'd kissed Haise. That was comparable to being on cloud nine.

This... was like being free.

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The feeling didn't last long. When I got home, it was well past lunchtime and into the evening, and Haise had returned. He looked grim, and he didn't look up as I entered. Mutsuki was sitting beside him, looking like a different person from this morning.

"Haise? What's wrong?" I ask, walking towards him as I discarded my shoes at the entryway. Haise didn't respond right away. "...Haise?"

"Sorry, Hide. I was just about to talk to Mutsuki, but this conversation includes you too. Will you spare me a little bit?"

I blinked, sitting down beside Mutsuki. "You don't need to ask me that, Haise. Of course I will."

Haise still didn't look up right away, but instead took a breath that would have been inaudible if I hadn't had inhuman hearing. When he did look up to face me, he looked like he was doing his best to put on a smile to cover grim news... and failing.

"I... I got the Auction plans finalized." Which should have been a great thing, but neither Mutsuki nor myself cheered. Haise looked too grim to do that. "And you two will be the ones sent undercover, as the ones to receive the invitation from Nutcracker. Juuzou will be going along with you, but the rest of us must remain with the rest of the S2 and Suzuya Squad."

We were silent, until Haise added softly, "Sorry, guys. I tried to get the higher-ups to change their minds, but..."

"I... I'll be fine." Mutsuki said, with surprising confidence, though it sounded like he was trying to reassure himself too. "I'm going with Associate Special Class Suzuya and Rank 2 Nagachika. I'll be fine."

"He's way stronger than me, Juuzou," Haise said, and he didn't sound bitter in the slightest. In fact,
he sounded relieved-- relieved about what, I couldn't tell. "And as soon as the operation starts, a unit will rush in. We'll head over soon too. So..."

He was going to breach a very uncomfortable subject. I could see it on his face, the darkness flashing in his eyes for just a brief moment, and I could almost hear his thoughts as he seemed to force it from his gaze by sheer force of will.

*If I feel uneasy here, they'll feel even more uneasy. Don't show it.*

"As the Auction Raid is an operation of this size, we'll each need to prepare a last will and testament." Haise said, then rapidly added, "But that's just a precaution! A normal thing for operations of this scale, so don't worry. It's just a precaution!"

Mutsuki smiled at Haise, and I admired the fact that although he looked a bit shaken at being asked to write his last will and testament, he was rather composed. "I understand, Sasaki. We covered the procedure in the Academy."

Haise breathed a sigh, just a faint one, relieved that he wouldn't be the one to walk his precious kids through the process of writing their wills. Honestly, I didn't think Haise would be able to do that. He might be strong, but it takes a special breed of strong to be able to do that and come out unscarred.

"Okay. Alright, then. That's all I needed to say right at the moment, because we'll go over the plans in detail with Juuzou and his squad tomorrow."

Mutsuki nodded. "Okay. I'm going to be in my room, then."

Haise managed a smile. "Okay. Goodnight, Mutsuki."

"Goodnight, Sasaki." Mutsuki said, heading for the hallway.

I didn't comment on the fact that it was unusually early to be retiring to bed. Mutsuki was what, nineteen? Asking someone of his age to write their last will and testament was probably draining.

"So, have Shirazu and Saiko...?"

Haise nodded. "Yes. I've informed them of what they need to do already, but I wanted to talk to Mutsuki and you alone, since you're roles are different than the rest."

"I get it," I assured him. "But moving on from that for a second, how did the meeting go?"

Haise looked confused. "Hmm? I told you that we settled the Auction Raid plans, right?"

"No, not that. I mean, how did it go? Saiko said the big-wigs are scary? Is that true?"

Haise laughed, a sudden short burst that appeared to surprise even himself. "Washuu Matsuri isn't scary. He's terrifying."

I laughed with him. "Surely he's not that bad."

"No, Hide, the rumors don't do him credit!" Haise protested. "He *exudes* terror!"

"Sure he does," I say with a smile, rolling my eyes. I stood up and stretched, extending my hand to Haise. "Come on. It sounds like we've both had long days. Wanna talk about it upstairs?"

I don't add, *where the Quinx won't hear*. Haise would never talk about anything that really worried him within earshot of his subordinates.
He understands, and takes my extended hand, with a faded smile.

"I'd love to."

Haise does tell me about his day, from Juuzou standing up to Washuu Matsuri without flinching— and the eccentric investigator is either one of the bravest damn people I know or the one of the craziest— to Shimoguchi being released from the hospital, to Saiko being completely unbothered by being asked to write her last will and testament and asking him afterwards to clean her ears. In turn, I told him about meeting up and having coffee with some relatives of mine, excluding their names and simply calling them cousins.

But for as light-hearted as our conversation may seem, it took a darker and more serious turn quickly.

My suit jacket and tie had been discarded, and I was sitting on the bed across from Haise as he finished telling me about Saiko. I crossed my legs and leaned forward, propping my chin on my hands.

"Okay. So now that we're caught up on the days events, tell me what's actually bothering you."

Haise feigned ignorance. He wasn't very good at it, considering the years of experience I've had reading his facial expressions. "What are you talking about, Hide? I've told you about everything--"

"No, you've told me about your day, and I've told you about mine," I chided him. "Now, tell me what's bothering you."

Haise looked down, and he wouldn't meet my eyes again. I was afraid, for a moment, that he would attempt to evade the question again, but he didn't.

"I'm afraid that one of the Quinx, or Akira, or you might get hurt— or worse." Haise added, then took a shaky breath and added, "I'm afraid that I won't be strong enough to protect everyone."

And I was torn between berating him or hugging him, because he was exactly like Kaneki, wanting to protect everybody and never realizing that such a feat was impossible. So I chose the best of both worlds and yanked him into a hug while scolding him.

"Haise, you idiot. You absolute, soft-hearted idiot." I didn't give him a chance to interrupt. "You don't have to protect everyone on your own, Haise. The Quinx, they're stronger than you give them credit for. Akira-san, she's our superior, and stronger than we are—" Okay, so I told a little lie, but I couldn't well tell him that I was stronger than she was. "—so you shouldn't worry about her. She can take care of herself, and me? You haven't been to my training matches with Akira-san and Arima-san. I'm not defenseless, so you don't need to protect me."

"But I want to be strong enough to protect you all," Haise said firmly. "I want to be strong, so I don't lose anybody precious to me."

I sighed. "Haise, listen to me and listen good. 'Cause I'm going to say something that'll be hard to
hear, but you need to hear it. *You can't protect everybody on your own.* It's impossible, illogical, unfathomable. And if you try to take on all of the weight yourself, eventually you won't be able to keep anyone safe, because it's not possible to do so and still be able to function. If you bear the load alone, then you'll fail, and your kindness will be your downfall."

Haise looked hurt, and that was a bit painful to see, considering I was the one who caused it, but I continued on. Haise needed to hear this. He couldn't be allowed to relive Kaneki's mistakes, his tragedy. "*But you aren't alone.* The kids, they're behind you in whatever you do, even if it might not seem like it. Akira-san, Arima-san, they're strong enough to help you too. Suzuya-san, he's eccentric, but he volunteered to go with us to help you protect us, even if he has his own motives, because he's your friend." I paused, then said, firmest of all, "And I'm here. I'll help you, so you don't have to do it alone, Haise."

And then the moment was shattered by Shirazu, folded paper in hand, sticking his head through the still-open door.

*Did we really forget to shut the door?*

"Hey, Sassan! Here, my testament!" Shirazu stopped in the doorway, blinking. "Oh. Um, am I interrupting something?"

Chapter End Notes

So Uta and Itori make their appearance, and they're going to make appearances more frequently. Their roles may be minor, guiding hands for now, but it won't remain like that for long.

Anyways, guess who makes his biggest appearance yet next chapter? That's right, everybody's (least) favorite father, Kanou! Hide will finally try to sever his ties, but it's not going to go well. After all, Kanou's not just going to let his two masterpieces walk away now, is he?
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I was sitting against the wall of a spacious, large room in the Chateau, Saiko's head in my lap as I watched Haise spar with Mutsuki and Shirazu. I was smiling, faintly, as if amused, and my eyes were hazy, almost distant. It was as if I was spacing out, but in fact, it was the exact opposite. I was analyzing their fight like a computer, sorting the data I collected in my head. Haise would obviously win the fight, that was clear, and had been from the start of the fight. But that wasn't what I was interested in, no, I was watching him too, but mostly I was watching Mutsuki.

He was small, too much so, and aptly described as almost fragile or delicate. But I wasn't fooled. Small opponents could easily prove to be the most dangerous, especially if their size was enough to cause you to drop your guard, which was something only fools did. Fools, or combat-inexperienced, kind-hearted Ghoul Investigators.

As I sorted my collected data, I noted everything. Physiques, relative muscle, strengths, weaknesses. And I felt stupid for not doing this before. If one of these kids got hurt because I neglected to do everything in my power, then I had failed in my promise to Haise.

Speaking of, Haise looked nothing like the calm and kind superior that made breakfast and cleaned Saiko's ears. His grey eyes were cool but not cold, and he was focused completely on improving the Quinx severely lacking combat abilities.

Shirazu lunged for him, leading with his head (and internally, I grimaced, because if this were a real fight and his opponent wasn't a complete idiot Shirazu would be dead). Haise barely moved to sidestep it, not taking his eyes off Mutsuki as Shirazu tumbled into the wall, his momentum sending him crashing. Mutsuki almost landed a blow on Haise's side, and by almost, I mean he almost grazed the thin, loose black tank top Haise wore. And the only reason he got that close was so Haise could grab his wrist and flip Mutsuki over his shoulder effortlessly, tripping the younger boy up while he was at it.

I did take a moment to admire how damn graceful he was, like a dancer, even in the act of tossing one of his subordinates over his shoulder like it was nothing.

Mutsuki shrieked as he landed, surprised, but Haise didn't even glance back. His gaze was honed on Shirazu now, and he jabbed a finger at the orange-brown haired boy, shouting, "Don't space out! Take cover!"

Shirazu did exactly the opposite, snatching his wooden pole up and charging Haise with a battle cry.

Haise reacted faster than Shirazu probably was able to follow, leaping inhumanly high and striking a fast kick against Shirazu's arm, hard enough to bruise for weeks on a normal person. Shirazu let out a chocked cry as his arm twisted and slammed against his side, his weapon clattering to the ground. Haise's eyes narrowed, and he turned as fast as a whirlwind, flipping sideways mid-air and kicking out at Shirazu. It connected with Shirazu's jaw, and sent him flying against the wall with a resounding thunk next to Mutsuki as Haise cried, "Don't let go of your weapon!"

Neither Mutsuki nor Shirazu attempted to get up again, panting and groaning as they propped themselves up into sitting positions. Haise didn't take time to catch his breath or wipe sweat from his brow-- he hadn't once started breathing heavily nor had he broken into a sweat-- before he rose into a
standing position, falling naturally into a fighting stance.

"No good at all!" Haise exclaimed. "Neither kagune or quinque will be of any use if you don't have basic fighting skills! Ghouls don't hold back!" His voice was a desperate sort of angry, almost having a hysterical tone. He was thinking the same thing I was, then.

_Haise, barehanded, against the three of them is like child's play. No, easier. If this was true combat, the Quinx would be long dead._

Haise turned to where Saiko still lay, with her head in my lap.

"Saiko," Haise accused. "You didn't even come at me once. Why?"

"I'm dead," Saiko announced. "Deeeeeeeaaaad!"

Haise gave her a flat look. "Be serious."

Saiko sulked, and her pout deepened when I lifted her head off my lap and plunked her onto the floor gently. I stretched with a loud sigh, and I rolled my shoulders before stalking to stand next to Haise. I put my hands on my hips and gave the Quinx my best stern parent look.

"This is advice for all of you. Stay on your feet and keep moving, and protect your face. There are weak spots all over the body, but the greatest number are collected above the collarbone. If you get hit there hard enough, the fight is over, then and there." I sighed.

"But moving on to you're fighting. You, Mutsuki," I announced, "you don't throw enough force behind your punches. Act like you're trying to punch through your opponent, and twist your midsection with the blow. It'll increase the power you throw. Shirazu, you stretch out too much with every strike you attempt. Keep the blows short, quick, and fast. You're an ukaku user, so speed is all you, but you've got to throw controlled attacks, not random. You leave yourself too open."

Shirazu, still gasping for breath, but neither Haise nor myself are looking pitying, manages to ask, "How d'ya know so much 'bout fightin'?"

I smile, but it's faint. "Some relatives of mine have been teaching me since I was a kid, and I did pay attention to the classes at the Academy, you know."

"You weren't exactly the best when I was at the Academy," Haise chided, but there was a playful glint in his eyes now.

I scoff, faking offense. "You've never seen me go all-out since the Serpent fight. Wanna see just how much I've improved, Haise?"

"I'd love to. I need a workout too," Haise added, as a little jab to the Quinx. I smiled. He was a ruthless instructor, Haise.

I took a few steps back, falling into a relaxed but ready stance. "Alright then, kids, watch and learn!"

I noticed Mutsuki mouth 'kids?' to Shirazu, who looked just as confused. But I didn't spare them any more attention, because then Haise smiled, a toothy grin, and waved his hand. "Come at me, then."

And I did, no longer needing to hide my ghoulish speed or strength, and unlike the one Haise had with the Quinx, it became a _real_ sparring match. Haise responded with a little less speed, blocking my kick with his forearm in a move that was akin to the one Arima had pulled, during our first sparring match, what seemed like so long ago now. I didn't hesitate, twisting with a grunt and
slamming the heel of my other foot into his shoulder. Haise skidded backwards, but just a few inches, and he retaliated with an exhilarated look, striking a hand down, towards the crook of my neck. I was faster, and dodged out of the way, leaping up just a bit to avoid the foot sweeping under me where my feet had been, and, to top it, stomped down on his feet to immobilize him.

Haise grunted, looking surprised, but reacted instinctively and drove his shoulder into my chest. I leapt backwards, but still didn't quite manage to avoid the blow, and grinned like a Cheshire cat when I saw my opening. I had fought Haise long enough to prove my win wouldn't be a fluke.

It was time to end this.

I leapt forward, and Haise, anticipating a blow to the torso, tensed. But I didn't hit him--I wrapped my ankles around his and twisted, driving him to the floor with me. As we fell, I grasped his wrists and turned us, so that I landed neatly on top of him, his wrists pinned to the floor and waist firmly pinned underneath me, my legs on either side of him.

"I win," I declare, just a tad breathless. Haise's pupils were dilated, more black than grey, and he's breathing more heavily than I am. I'm proud, actually-- he's sweating, and our match has taken more of a toll on him than me, so I haven't lost my touch. The sparring matches with Akira and Arima really are worse, though, so it's not surprising.

"Yeah," Haise laughed, still a little breathless. He doesn't look upset that he lost: he looks exhilarated, and I gave him another smile before releasing his wrists and standing, offering him a hand. He takes it, and I pull him back up. Perhaps my hand lingers just a bit longer in his than it really needs to, but Haise certainly doesn't seem to mind.

And just as I'm about to pull away, Saiko chimed, with a gleam in her eyes, her voice saturated with feigned horror, "Maman, Papa, is this domestic violence I'm seeing?"

Haise had a meeting with Akira, Mutsuki was with Juuzou working on his knife skills, and Saiko and Shirazu were out with Hanbee--a lunch to which I had politely declined, saying that I had other plans. And I did, in fact, have other plans, but I declined also for the fact that I couldn't actually eat anything.

Well, I could. Just not to the knowledge of the CCG, so it was better safe than sorry and just skip out on human food completely. It wasn't like it was going to be some great sacrifice: the only time I actually ate human food on a regular basis was as a child during school lunch, and as I grew out of high school and into college I only indulged in the occasional snack or soda. Human food didn't have a negative effect on me, like normal ghouls, but it was still something that I would eat in place of human meat, so that was effectively not raising my RC Cell Levels at a steady and uninterrupted pace, something that greatly displeased Father.

Sometimes I had eaten regular food just to spite him. He was not my master, he did not control me, and it was one of my many forms of quiet rebellion. Quiet rebellion that I no longer needed.
I smiled as I walked into :re. Nishiki was working as the only waiter again, Yomo standing behind the bar, polishing a cup silently. He nodded to me as I walked in, and I beamed, waving. Nishiki made an annoyed noise, like my very presence irritated him, but he waved a hand at the same corner booth.

"Welcome to :re, or whatever. Go seat yourself, Shitty Nagachika."

"Hello to you to, Nishio-san!" I chirped happily, walking towards where Uta and Itori were seated, this time side-by-side. Again, before I sat down, Itori leapt up and scooped me into a hug.

"Kiddo~! How's work been? How're the kids? How's Haise-kun?"

Laughing at her bombardment of questions when she released me from her vice-like grip, I slid into the side of the booth opposite where Uta and Itori were seated.

Uta raised a pierced eyebrow, his dark sunglasses glinting in the shop's lighting. "Well, I think she asked everything I wanted to."

I deliberately skipped over the first question, knowing that Uta would work the Auction, and that Itori was likely to attend. In fact, I normally hosted Auctions with them, as a bodyguard, the strongest of the Clowns. It did good to further my ties with high-class ghouls and provide a little entertainment.

But now I wouldn't be working it. I would be attacking it.

"Haise is doing well," I said simply. "He's been training the kids like a demon, lately. He does his best to hold back, but in real combat, ghouls won't hold back. So he doesn't go all-out, but he pushes them hard, and they always end up a little battered. I've been doing my best to help train them, too, since Akira-san is too busy to keep up our training sessions now."

Itori looked horrified. "What have you been doing to my poor grandchildren? I raised you better than this! You don't beat your children!" She turned to Uta. "This is your fault!"

Uta sighed, but he looked rather amused. "You blame all his faults on me."

"Are not."

"Are so!" Itori accused, and I just gave a half-amused smile. I was more mature than she was, I would swear.

Deciding to end the argument before Itori actually made it into something serious (and she would, occasionally. Uta didn't help, because he baited her.) I said, "So, I-chan, have you heard anything about the recent Auction?"

Itori ceased her arguing immediately, the information broker in her perking up. She sipped her coffee casually, slyly. "Oh, yes. I'm quite excited. I've heard it's going to be an eventful one."

Uta smiled, innocently. "Well, I'm still hosting it."

I sighed. "Really, Uta, I would advise against it."

"I know. But I've heard I could meet my son-in-law to-be there, and what kind of parent would I be to pass up this opportunity?"

I had the urge to bang my head against the table. Hard enough to break the table. Unfortunately, I
valued my brain cells.

"I-chan, Uta, I'm serious."

Itori giggled, "Aw, U-chan, he's really concerned for us!" She narrowed her eyes. "Oh, kiddo, don't forget who raised you. Who killed all the Doves when you ran away and got caught in that Whack-A-Mole operation? We did! Who taught you how to fight? We did! We're Clowns too, Hide."

"We always get the last laugh," Uta echoed the sentiment that had been taught to me since infancy, smiling faintly.

I exhaled through my nose, but whatever concerns I had about their well-being had been replaced by a calm security.

"I know that. It's not that I doubt you both. It's just going to get very messy, that's all."

"If you're done with your happy family bullshit," Nishiki interrupted. "Can I take your order already? I've been waiting for, like, fifteen fucking minutes."

"I'll just have a plain coffee. The normal." I said, and Nishiki muttered something under his breath, not even bothering to write it down. He walked away, looking irritated.

But then again, when did he not seem irritated? Perhaps that was just with me.

Well, I did try to kill him. I suppose that couldn't be smoothed over with a single apology.

We walked out of :re together, Uta, Itori, and I. They were talking about a recent decrease of Doves in the wards on patrols and the like, while I listened. It was because of the preparations for the Raid in a week, I knew.

Itori paused, smelling the cooling night air. "Ah, it's good to get outta the bar once and awhile. You should stop by more often, U-chan! Oh, or maybe I can stop by HySy again soon! My mask needs repainting."

Uta blinked owlishly. "Oh, my. How did I forget something so important?" He murmured. "Dear me."

"Well, painting my mask is pretty impor--"

"No, not you," Uta interrupted. "Hide. Kanou recently commissioned a mask from me, and although I value customer privacy, this is something you really should hear about."

"Father? Commissioned a mask?" I asked, incredulous. "That's absurd. He doesn't even do any front-line fighting."

"It is absurd indeed, which is why I feel the need to tell you this," Uta said urgently, in a tone I rarely heard him use. "This was before you came to us about your revelation, of course, and I didn't see
anything too strange about it then. In fact, I thought he might have requested it for you, but that isn't the case, is it?"

"No, I didn't ask him for a new mask. I would have gone directly to you to ask, if I needed one. Why? What mask did he commission?" I asked cautiously, not liking where this was going. The only times Uta ever used that tone of voice was when--

"Ah, Hideyoshi, I thought you would understand such a fickle question as to 'why?'".

And there, standing in the middle of the sidewalk a few paces in front of me, was the one of the CCG's most wanted men, Kanou Akihiro. He was dressed in simple clothes, comfortable-looking slacks and a pale, soft blue sweater, and if I didn't know better I would say he was a kindly old man.

I did know better, unfortunately. Ha. A kindly old man. As if.

This man was a monster, a monster of the cruelest sort. The kind of monster that wields charisma and sweet words like weapons to lure you into his clutches. And the worst part was, once you had just a little of his praise and attention, you didn't want to let it go. You would crave more, more, and become an obedient little puppet under the monster wearing the guise of a kindly old doctor.

But not me. Perhaps it was because I was, genetically, half him, that I was never drawn to him. I was never fooled by his sweet words and charisma, because my own skills were so alike it was eerie. We had even used them for the same purposes: to hurt and deceive and cause tragedy.

Not anymore, I vowed. Not anymore.

I put on my sweetest smile, my eyes soft and alight with warmth. But there was a menacing, cold undertone to my expressions, and Father could see that.

"Oh, Father. What a surprise, for you to come and visit."

"Is it so wrong for me to come and see my own flesh and blood?" Father asked innocently. "Besides, I wanted to show you a little memento that I had Uta make. This should bring back a few of his memories! Look here, isn't it wonderful?"

Around his finger he twirled Kaneki's mask, or at least, a very good copy of it. The shiny black leather and red gums gleamed like something from a horror movie in the dying afternoon sunlight.

And suddenly, I was sick of our game of words. I was taking Touka's advice and severing my ties, once and for all, with Father-- no, with Kanou.

"Give me that mask, and then get the hell away from me and never show your damn face again. I'm done with you, Kanou, " I hissed. Uta and Itori looked a bit taken aback, but pleased.

Kanou looked hurt. "Hideyoshi, is that any way to talk to your dear, loving father?"

"You aren't my father by anything but biology, and you certainly aren't loving," I spat the word like venom. "Give me that mask, and don't you dare interfere with me, Uta, or Itori. Don't come near anyone I care about again. Just go and rot in your laboratories, surrounded by your precious experiments," I said viciously, and it felt good. So, so good, do simply be straightforward and not worry about crafting elegant sentences and carefully hidden barbs.

Kanou looked the part of the disappointed father perfectly. "I see. So my fears were true, then, and the CCG has warped your mind completely, like a weed invading a beautifully maintained garden." He paused briefly. "I suppose I'll just have to weed out the weeds then, won't I? Perhaps I'll start
with those pesky knockoffs of my ultimate artificial creation."

_The Quinx. He’s talking about the Quinx._

Something snapped inside me, and I was lunging forward, but Uta and Itori were latching onto my arms and holding me back. The street was unusually deserted, so I didn't see why. In fact, I _couldn't_ see. All I saw was Kanou's smug, disappointed expression, and red, red, red. Furious red. Had I ever been this angry before? I didn't think so. It would have been scary if that beautifully furious red hadn't tainted my vision, so, so temptingly. I wanted to throw away all regards for the consequences and release my kagune and lunge at this man and throttle him. Kill him painfully, slowly. Make him suffer for suggesting such a terrible thing.

"Don't you dare touch my kids," I growled, my voice a furious hissing that surprised even myself. "I will kill you before you can, Kanou! Do you understand? I will _murder you_ if you lay one finger on my family!"

"Whoa there, killer," Itori murmured. "He's baiting you. Calm down." But her eyes were dark, and her expression stormy. Uta had a chilling look on his face, like he was a statue made of the darkest, blackest ice.

They looked terrifying, and for the first time, I could see why people feared the Clowns.

"We won't stop him again," Itori warned Kanou dully. "The only reason we stopped him now is because dealing with your bloody, mangled corpse in the middle of a street that could fill up with people again any minute now would be irritating."

"My, how considerate of you!" Kanou exclaimed delightedly. "But I didn't come unguarded. Aogiri Tree is rather full of strong ghouls, you know."

"He really will carry out his threat," Uta said mildly, smiling coldly, his eyes flashing with a look I knew well, because I had worn it before many times, as many times as I had worn my mask. It was a look that yearned to cause malicious destruction and inflict pain, the look of a hungry Clown. "Hide keeps his word. We raised our boy that way, didn't we, Itori?"

"We did, Uta," Itori said happily, cheerily. "And I'm going to release our boy in about fifteen minutes and let him exact his revenge as he sees fit. A very angry, powerful ghoul loose on the streets would be rather hard to deal with, even for Aoigiri Tree. Hide would squash them like bugs."

Kanou raised an eyebrow, unaffected by Uta and Itori's verbal barbs. He just smiled and turned around, twirling the mask around his finger and whistling a happy tune, strolling down the street like he didn't have a care in the world.

Fifteen minutes after Kanou left, Uta and Itori released me as promised. They seemed as cheerful as ever, as if the confrontation had never happened.

"So, Kiddo, what're you going to do?" Itori asked me, beaming like she already knew the answer.
I didn't need to think. I answered without a heartbeat to spare in-between.

"I'm going home. To Haise, to the kids. I promised that I'd make dinner for the kids, since Haise is at a meeting until late tonight, and it's getting late."

Uta just smiled, and his silver lip ring caught the last rays of the dying sun, dyeing the silver as red as blood.

"That's our boy." He said fondly, ruffling my hair like I was a child. "That's our boy."

Chapter End Notes

Everybody's (least) favorite father has finally made his appearance! What do you think Hide will do now that he's made his decision? There's no turning back from severing his ties with Kanou, and Hide always carries out his threats.

I hope you liked the chapter!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Are you ready for the Auction Raid?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night before the Auction passed like any other, really. We trained the kids (minus Urie, who trained in solitude)-- and they had improved, but not enough for me to feel comfortable sending them into battle-- and Haise and I sparred. I won, again.

We took turns showering, then Haise and I made dinner and we sat around the dining room table, eating (minus Haise and I, who drank water) and going over the plans one last time. Afterwards, we watched a few shows on television and then decided to call it a night. There was a big day ahead, and we couldn't afford to be tired.

Haise and I saw the Quinx off, turned off the television, and headed upstairs silently. There were no more ruses and coincidences that I ended up in his room, anymore. My own room went unused as of late, and we turned in without any difference to the nights before.

Except we didn't sleep. We lay there in silence, and I stared upwards at the dark ceiling, ignoring the uneasy feeling that made my throat thick. Finally, Haise rolled over to face me, and he said, "Hide, I'm afraid."

And I didn't need to ask him 'afraid of what?' because I knew. I was afraid too, but I was determined not to show it.

"Don't be. Everything's going to be fine, and you're going to make yourself sick, worrying." I told him, but my tone wasn't scolding. It was soft, and I snaked an arm under his neck to drag him closer and run my hands through his two-toned hair. He smelled like shampoo and laundry detergent, with the undertones of the distinct smell of a half-ghoul, sweet and spicy at the same time. Everybody smelled differently-- Eto, for example, smelled almost purely human, despite her being one-eyed ghoul-- but even as Kaneki, he had always smelled sweet. Sweet and soft and warm, like caramel candy, but now spicy and sharp too, like a ghoul. A nice mix of both.

He was what I imagined home would smell like, if it had a smell.

"I can't help worrying," Haise protested. "You're going to be going in to a place filled with hostile ghouls with only Mutsuki and Juuzou, and it's not that I don't trust you, but I'm still scared for you, because you don't seem like you're afraid at all!"

Haise is gripping my other arm, which had been stretched lazily across his waist, with a painful, vice-like grip. He's shaking, and I sighed.

"Haise," I said gently. "I am afraid. I'm afraid for the kids, even though I know they're competent enough to hold their own. I'm afraid for you, that you'll be hurt, even though I know you're strong. I'm afraid that someone I care about will be hurt or taken from me, because that's the natural thing to do."
"Then how can you be so calm?" Haise whispered, his grip on my arms fading as he slumps back into the bed. The moonlight coming in through from the window paints his eyes the gleaming color of quicksilver and casts his skin silver-white. Unearthly beautiful, like a ghost. Like something that doesn't belong in this world.

"Because I've got faith in you, and in the kids, and in myself. We can make it through this, and we will." I said, offering a soft smile. "So what do you say? Can you have faith in me?"

"That's a stupid question to ask," Haise muttered, closing his eyes. "When I already do."

"Good," I said, and I pull him even closer, until our positions are reversed from the day I was hospitalized, with Haise curled up against me rather than vice-versa. "Then go to sleep, or you'll make me worried that you'll fall asleep in battle, or something."

Haise laughed, but it was muffled by the fabric of my t-shirt. "I don't think it's possible to fall asleep standing up."

"Horses do it, so people can too."

"Just because a horse can--"


Haise didn't respond, or open his eyes, but he smiled, and the tightness in my throat lessened.

The next day, I was dressed in a short orange-blond wig that fell to my shoulders, shiny black stilettos, and a dark blue dress with a black belt around my chest. I wore light make-up, and there was a dark blue headband in the wig, all neatly picked out and put together by Haise, minus the transmitter in my ear, unnoticeably small. Mutsuki was dressed similarly, in a sky blue dress with a dark blue belt in the same place as mine, except his was pinned up by a pale blue flower pin, and he wore flats. Juuzou looked like a china doll, his stitching removed except for a portion on his face, porcelain-pale skin and long, dark wig contrasting nicely, making his delicate features and large eyes stand out. His black dress was adorned by his polka-dotted suspenders, hanging loosely to his waits, and he wore a black choker with a dangling rose and a set of strappy boots with terrifyingly thin heels.

He, unlike myself and Mutsuki, seemed perfectly at ease in women's clothes.

Haise, Shirazu, Urie, and Saiko were in the crowd somewhere, watching us leave. Hanbee and the rest of the Suzuya Squad were, too.

I nudged Mutsuki lightly. "What do you want to bet that your mother is worrying himself sick right now?"
Mutsuki blinked. "My... mother?" It dawned on him to whom I was referring to, and he let out a nervous chuckle. "I wouldn't bet against it."

"Smart choice." I agreed, but continued. "Anyways, would you do me a favor?"

"What is it, Hide-san?"

"Relax a little. You'll be more confident if you can fake confidence, I promise." And Haise might not worry about us so much, I thought, but I didn't add that.

Juuzou gave an encouraging, if a little vague, nod, so Mutsuki raised a clenched fist in determination.

"Okay, I'll try it," He declared softly. His voice tremored, but his hand didn't shake.

"Atta boy." I patted his shoulder, then grinned. "Alright! Let's do this!"

Together, we strode towards the car Nutcracker, where she was standing beside a shiny black car and smoking. She saw us approaching, and she snubbed out her cigarette, pulling her mask back onto her face. Her mask indented, as if she was smiling behind it, and she said, "Hello. I'm glad you both, and your friend, could make it." She gestured to the car, and slid into the drivers seat. "We should get going."

We did, Juuzou to the far right and Mutsuki in the middle. The car looked just as shiny in the inside as it had on the outside, but it didn't have that new-car smell, I noted as we drove. In fact, there was a smoky smell to the car, a haziness that I couldn't explain, one that was definitely not cigarette smoke.

I resisted a frown and tried to decipher the smell, knowing it wasn't just the fact that I was in a car with Nutcracker and on the way to the Auction that caused my flight-or-fight (or rather, beat the hell out of somebody) response to kick in, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

And then there was a gentle weight on my shoulder, and I saw that Mutsuki was nodding off, using my shoulder as a pillow. Which would have been endearing, except for the fact that Juuzou was as still as a corpse and sleeping like the dead. My eyes widening fractionally, I turned my head to look at Nutcracker and cursed under my breath as my suspicions were confirmed.

She was wearing a gas mask.

I tried to move or call out, but my vision was getting fuzzy and my movements and thoughts were lethargic and slow. I tried to say Mutsuki's name, and Juuzou's, but my tongue felt thick and my lips dry, like the dentist's Novocain would work on humans.

My vision was just a blurred canvas of colors now, and my heart was racing, pounding in my ears. Nutcracker met my eyes and I think she grinned smugly as my eyes slipped closed.

*Damn it, don't fall asleep, don't fall asleep! I promised Haise I'd look after Mutsuki! I've got to stay awake!*

It was no use. My limbs felt as heavy as concrete, and I wasn't able to open my eyes. I fell deeper into unconsciousness, managing one last coherent thought.

*Fuck.*
When I was able to open my eyes, I was tense and battle-ready, but I was no longer in Nutcracker's car. I was in a steel box, and I remained still for a moment, listening. It wasn't hard to hear around the layers of steel, with my superhuman hearing, and I didn't hear anything besides calm breaths of subdued or sleeping people. Dozens of sets of breathing, calm and quiet, and a few snores. How many kidnapping victims were here? Probably nearing a hundred, maybe more.

I picked my transmitter out of my ear and said urgently, "This is Rank 2 Nagachika, reporting in."

No response, just static. I cursed. I had to be underground, and too far away from the CCG for them to hear me. I tucked the transmitter back into my ear, sighing. Hesitantly, I tapped the steel box, over and over, trying to decipher how thick it was. It would be easy enough to break through, not made of a kagune-base like quinque steel, and it seemed that the thickest section (which made a heavier, duller sound) wrapped around the box in two different strips of metal and bolts, or something of the sort. Maybe it was just thick bars, but I would still have to tear the box apart to get out.

Well, hell. What should I do now...?

I didn't have to wonder long. The sound of metal grating against metal, like a door sliding open, made me freeze. Sets of footsteps became clear, one a set of woman shoes (probably heeled boots, from the sound) and one... no, two sets of men's shoes. Maybe more, but it was hard to say.

"Carry that one," Nutcracker ordered, and even if I couldn't see her, I gritted my teeth. That woman... I would kill her myself, if I had the chance, and I hoped that I would.

Then the footsteps grew quiet and vanished, and I gritted my teeth harder, clenching and unclenching my hands. I continued to do so, even when my jaw ached in protest and my palms bled.

I hated being indecisive.

Mutsuki was disoriented, his head spinning as he was thrown to his knees on the stage, wincing as he hit the hard wood. The spotlight on him blinded him momentarily, but he pulled himself to his knees and folded his hands in his lap, to terrified to do anything else as he froze.

_Calmly analyze the situation... This is the Auction Hall..._
Mutsuki gulped as a shadow fell beside him. He turned his head, and saw a man in a black-and-white, zebra-printed pants and a fine, similarly patterned shirt. He wore a double-breasted, grey-and-white overcoat, and he carried a shiny, long cane that was obviously for show. He had a tattoo around his neck in strange characters, long black hair parted over the side, and pierced ears. But the most terrifying thing was the mask that covered his entire face, resembling a bird with a wide beak and four small holes. Through two of them, Mutsuki could see two black eyes with crimson irises.

This man is a ghoul. I am... merchandise?

Suddenly the masked man was right next to Mutsuki, smelling him deeply, and Mutsuki flinched back. But the masked man just hooked a finger around his eye-patch string and pulled it off with a surprisingly gentle snap!

"Haha, this one smells very unusual..." The man broke off as the crowd went wild with exclamations of 'what?!?' and 'a one-eye?!?' as Mutsuki's single kakugan was revealed, grey sclera gleaming. The man merely said, softly, "Oh, dear me."

The small girl behind him, wearing a strange get-up and a rodent-like mask with star patterns and a round red nose looked delighted, and she chirped, "Oh wow!"

And then it clicked. The people on the stage were the Clowns, the infamous ghoul group not even Special Class Investigators wanted to get tangled up in. Mutsuki felt the urge to laugh hysterically, and just barely contained it as he buried his face in his hands as the man continued. "Well, well, this is rare. So... please understand the price will be raised quite a bit. We'll start... at ten million!"

At the man's shout, the crowd erupted in more excited cheering, so loud it was deafening. Mutsuki's thoughts were scrambled and scattered in pieces and bits.

What? Can someone tell me? Did they figure out my identity? Will I... Be killed? This many... Is way more than I expected! They have yet to realize I'm an investigator. What do I do? I'm scared. What happened to the operation? I don't know... Do I fight? What can I do alone? What should I do? Suzuya-san, Hide-san, save me. I want to be useful. I want to... fight... here... with Sasaki and Hide-san and Suzuya-san and everybody... I'm weak...

My life hasn't been pretty... I want to see my family...

He was hyperventilating when a hand descended on his shoulder and the man leaned down, close to his ear, and whispered, "The operation has failed. None of the CCG will make it here to save you in time."

Mutsuki stiffened, his thoughts freezing. But the man wasn't finished, and what he said next made his head ache in confusion, and suddenly it was impossible to think at all. Mutsuki processed everything going on around him, but he was as limp and still as a rag-doll. "But that doesn't mean help isn't coming. Be patient, little one."

Then, just as he was pulling away, the man paused and chuckled softly, almost whimsically. "Trust grandpa, won't you?"
I had been sold without too much of a fuss, and I was letting myself be guided without a fight to wherever I was being taken when I heard the shrieking behind me. It was the terrified shrieking of many people, which meant that Juuzou had made his move.

"Ah," I said. "Finally, my cue."

The two ghouls who had my hands behind my back gave me odd looks and the one holding my wrists gave me a little jerk when I stopped walking.

"Whattaya talkin' 'bout?" He said, in rough speech, tightening his bruising grip on my wrists. But I didn't give him a chance to say anything else, testing his grip and giving my wrists a little tug. They didn't budge.

I sighed. A pity, that, but I suppose that made my next route unavoidable.

I somersaulted forward, taking my captor with me, and I flung him into the wall of the hallway hard enough for it to split the skin of his skull open. Blood splattered, but I leapt up and swung one of my feet, much harder than I ever had with Haise, and I caught the second man directly on his head. My other foot caught him on the other side of his torso, and his head went flying in a separate direction than his body with a fine spray of rotten-smelling blood. I yanked at the cuffs on my hands so they shattered in a burst of steel, not meant to hold ghouls.

The first man started to get up, but I broke his neck before he could and wiped my hands on my already bloodstained dress. My earpiece had been busted, and I discarded it with an irritated noise. My first priority was to find Mutsuki. My second, to kill absolutely as many ghouls as possible on my way to rejoin Haise.

Mutsuki... I ran back to the Auction Hall, where Juuzou was causing mass slaughter quite beautifully, while laughing manically. He would be fine, I decided, but before I could run to him and ask about Mutsuki I was snatched by a hand. It was Uta, a little bloody but seemingly unbothered by the fact he looked like a pincushion for knives.

"My grandson is down that hall," He announced, pointing back down the hall I had come from. "He was here a turn before you. Hurry, and you'll catch him."

Before I could thank him, Uta disappeared as abruptly as he had came, without a word. I sighed-- he had always been like that, it was nothing new. Besides, Uta could take care of himself-- and took back off down the hall, shedding my high-heels as I ran. Annoying things, those. I couldn't see how women wore on a regular basis.

Ghouls were scattering everywhere, in groups or individuals, shrieking and running in the direction of what I assumed were exits. To me, they seemed like mazes of hallways and corridors that looked exactly alike. If I were to take a wrong turn, I could get hopelessly lost.

I didn't pause to dwell on that particular fact as the walls of the hallway blurred around me.

I burst into a storage room, just in time to see Mutsuki flinch as a purple haired man sliced a cut across Mutsuki's arm with his well-maintained fingernails, sending droplets of blood sailing. The purple haired ghoul touched Mutsuki's blood to his lips and shouted something in excited... German?
There was some Japanese mixed in, but I wasn't able to understand what he was talking about, just that he was crying and did a strange, curtsy-like bow. And I was about to launch myself at the ghoul when another ghoul barreled past me and threw himself at the purple-haired ghoul, much to my bafflement.

M Miracles do happen, apparently. I didn't question anything as I darted forward, skirting around the fighting ghouls, and running for Mutsuki. His eyes widened, in relief or just shock, I didn't know, but I reached a hand out and pulled him to his feet, a bit rougher than I intended to. Mutsuki stumbled, but I caught him and steadied him, gripping his still-bound hands and tugging him after me.

"Come on!" I said, so quickly it was almost a hiss. Mutsuki, eyes still wide and mismatched, his one kagune contrasting sharply with his normal eye, followed me without complaint.

The ghoul that had attacked the purple-haired one cried out in disbelief. "Ah, why? It's me! It's Torso! I'm sorry I hit you back then! Hey, Tooru!"

*Torso?* I thought incredulously, but didn't falter. I did shiver and freeze when the bloody purple-haired ghoul wheezed, "As... if... I'd... let you run!"

The kagune came out faster than I thought it would, and it seemed to move in slow motion when it was close to us. Mutsuki wouldn't be able to dodge it, I knew. He couldn't move fast enough.

I could.

I moved instinctively, grabbing Mutsuki as if I was going to hug him and twisting, so that my back was to the kagune and Mutsuki and I had traded places. I shoved him to the ground as the rinkaku pierced my abdomen, right where the black belt ties around my dress, easily cutting through a few of my ribs and nicking my lung. I gasped in reflex as the serrated segments of the rinkaku ripped through flesh and bone and sprayed an inordinate amount of blood. Some of it splattered onto Mutsuki, and I grimaced.

The wound ached, especially as the rinkaku began to tear back out, but I grabbed the ends of the rinkaku and held it firmly in place, ignoring the skin of my hands tearing to shreds, and I summon my kagune for just a brief moment, slicing through the weakly-bound RC Cells of the rinkaku like tissue paper. I dropped to the floor as the purple-haired ghoul shrieks, wincing, but I don't hesitate to clean up the mess, drawing my kagune back into my skin, vanishing like it had never been there in the first place. I staggered to my feet, pushing aside the heaving of my chest as one of my lungs slowly filled with blood and my side screamed in protest. It would heal, so I ignored it and snatched the horrified-looking Mutsuki up by his hands and dragging him behind me. When he couldn't move fast enough, I hauled him to the side without the wound and draped his arm around my neck, wrapping an arm around his waist and taking off.

*Speed, speed, I need more speed. I can run faster than this. I was built for balance and speed, I can run faster than this!*

I coughed, and bright red blood splashed onto my lips, tasting metallic and sweet at the same time. But I did run faster, so fast that we had put enough distance between us and the two ghouls within two or three minutes. To be safe, I ducked into a small room-- another storage room, but this one deserted, by the looks-- and sat Mutsuki down on one of the empty, dusty wooden crates that littered the room. He looked horrified, traumatized, and the guilt in knowing I had failed to protect him, emotionally, was a terrible thing.

"Are you okay? Did it cut you anywhere? Are you hurt?" I demanded, gripping Mutsuki's hands-- and they were cold and shaking-- pulling them apart gently and tearing the handcuffs apart. I left
bloody hand-prints on his hands and wrists, and I looked down at my own hands in dull surprise. It seems my body had prioritized fixing internal damage first, and my hands hadn't really begun to heal yet, the skin just slowly growing back. I wiped his hands on my bloody and torn dress, mostly cleaning them.

"H-Hide-san, you shouldn't be asking me that!" Mutsuki cried, looking terribly pale, his normally warm complexion ghost-like. "Y-You're hurt!"

"It'll heal. It didn't hit anything vital," Well, besides my lung, anyways. "So don't worry. Please, Mutsuki, tell me if you're hurt."

"I'm not injured at all," Mutsuki said finally, in a soft whisper. "Hide-san, please, sit down. There's got to be something to treat your wound with--"

"Here, look," I said impatiently, although the room was a little blurred around the edges from blood loss. I tore off the hem of my dress and hiked the fabric up to bind the cut. I shouldn't have let Mutsuki see the ghastly wound, I realized, shouldn't have shown him the massive amounts of exposed muscle and bloody, broken ribs jutting out of the torn skin. Too late now. I wrapped the torn strip of fabric around the gory wound to bind it as a makeshift bandage. "There. It's good enough."

"H-Hide-san!" Mutsuki protested. I couldn't assess the emotional trauma, but he seemed to be holding up well, actually. The horrified look remained in his eyes, and he shook with faint tremors, but his voice was surprisingly firm, although it faded back to a mostly-whisper as he dropped his head.

"Why?" He asked, and I blinked. "Why did you save me?"

I laughed, and wiped my hand on my dress to clean off the remaining blood from the brand-new skin, then I ruffled his hair.

"What kind of parent would I be otherwise?"

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think? Did you like it?

As a side note, what type of kagune do you think Hide has? (I know, I've asked before.) But it's going to be out there soon anyways. However, like I also said: there's a twist. To anyone who can correctly guess it, in full, I'll give a shout-out to.
Mutsuki didn't protest when I said we needed to get moving, to find Haise and to get our quinques. I
didn't particularly need mine, but Mutsuki couldn't even bring out his kagune yet, so he did need his.
I didn't mention that, but as we started out, Mutsuki reversed the way we had been running before,
draping one of my arms over his shoulders.

I smiled as we walked, fast but not running, but the smile slipped off my face as we emerged into one
of the main corridors. There were a few investigators at the end of the hall, looking overwhelmed by
the sheer number of high-class and decently strong ghouls in the hall. They would die soon, surely, if
no aid came.

"Mutsuki. Stay here for a minute," I declared, gesturing for him to stay in the branch hall. "You're
unarmed, so until we meet up with Haise again and get our weapons, I'll take care of offense."

"But Hide-san, you haven't finished healing yet," Mutsuki said, looking nervously at my torso,
where the blood had soaked through the makeshift bandage and begun staining my dress, but with a
glance at the investigators he saw what I had, that their deaths were imminent if aid wasn't coming
soon. "I should help too!"

"Mutsuki," I reminded him gently. "You're unarmed. I'm not. I'll be fine, I promise. I'm almost
healed anyways, and none of these ghouls are particularly strong, it seems. Just wait here." My eyes
gleamed a little, sterner. "Don't make me order you."

Mutsuki looked downcast, but almost relieved. He nodded, stepping back into the shadow of the
branch hallway, and I stepped forward. I hadn't completely lied to him: fighting wouldn't take long,
but I wasn't almost healed. That damned rinkaku nicking my lung made it hard to breathe, and every
time I coughed, I coughed blood. But I could feel the regeneration working it's magic, a strange,
tingly feeling, and the wound in my side was stitching itself back together, slowly but surely.

There were maybe twenty, thirty some ghouls in the hallway. The back of my dress tore as my
kagune, a long and serrated bikaku, with a tip like a spade, emerged from my tailbone, and the noise
drew the attention of one of the ghouls closest to me. It was a middle-aged man, I believe, dressed in
an Aogiri cloak and a standard Aogiri mask, implying he wasn't very strong. In fact, all of them were
dressed the same. Odd, where were the customers for the Auction?

"Who are you...? Huh? You're one of the girls from the Auct--!"

He didn't get a chance to finish before I severed his head. His blood smelled foul, and some of it
splattered onto me, but I ignored it, slicing ghouls in half, decapitating them, cutting off limbs and
ducking kagune swings that seemed comically slow compared to how fast I moved. They screamed,
but it seemed distant, and when the last ghoul fell, the CCG Squad in front of me looked slightly
awed and slightly terrified. There were four of them left, it seemed, and there were six bodies dressed
in CCG combat gear on the ground.

The leader was a grim-looking woman with hair pulled back into a tight bun and a short, stout nose.
She looked wary as I approached her, and I stopped a short distance away.

"I'm Rank 2 Nagachika, a Ghoul Investigator," I introduced, offering a bow and being pleased when
I found that my wound had healed completely, allowing me to do so without difficulty. My breathing hadn't eased, though, and it still rattled slightly when I breathed. "Of the Mado Squad."

"Why is someone from the Mado Squad over here?" The man behind her declared, raising his quinque to point it at me. "That's a lie. She's nothing but a ghoul trying to fool us, Squad Leader."

"Stand down, Rank 2 Fukui," The woman snapped. "He was one of the operatives sent undercover, with Rank 3 Mutsuki and Associate Special Class Suzuya. You would know that if you read the mission briefings!" With a sigh that told me this happened often, the woman directed her flat glare towards me. "I'm First Class Inoue, Squad Leader. Where are the others?"

"Rank 3 Mutsuki is unarmed and unable to fight," I covered swiftly. "He's in the branch hall still, watching for more of the ghouls. Associate Special Class Suzuya was in the Auction Hall, the last I saw him, and heading to meet up with his own squad and retrieve his quinque. We were attempting to do the same with our squad. But our earpieces are busted, so could you point us in the direction of--" Don't call him Haise, she won't know who that is, I chided myself mentally. "--Rank 1 Sasaki and the Quinx Squad?"

Inoue nodded slowly as she processed my report. "The Quinx Squad is attempting to make their way deeper into the building from the second entrance, the last I heard. If you take that hall--" She pointed to my left, to a large, main hallway. "--you'll probably catch them before they arrive. We're headed down that hallway, to mop up any of the ghouls left in the main Auction Hall. So good luck to you, then. And thank you for your assistance."

"Good luck to you as well!" I called, as they disappeared down the hall next to the one Mutsuki was in. Speaking of, why hadn't he come--

"Well, Well. And where are you going, Kaetzchen (kitty cat)?"

It was that damn rinkaku again. I gritted my teeth and crept back towards the hall to find Mutsuki backing up, towards the main hall I stood in, his back to me as he faced the purple-haired ghoul, who had completely healed. "Oh, aha... So the wound I inflicted healed already? Tooru toll (that's nice)! That mean you can repeatedly entertain Master Shuu!"

Mutsuki tripped backwards, just a few feet between me and the ghoul, trapped in the middle. He appeared unaware that I was just behind him, behind a wall. The ghoul seemed unaware that Mutsuki had never been the one to take the blow, but then, the ghoul had been on the ground and a bloody mess at that point. And Mutsuki was covered in my blood.

"And, the fact that you heal mean that it's fine, no matter how many times I hurt you!" The purple haired-ghoul let the ribbon-like rinkaku shoot towards Mutsuki, deadly points that were woven into one long, thick tendril. The scene made me furious, almost as mad as I had been with Kanou.

I jumped forward, landing in front of Mutsuki with my kagune braced to take the impact instead. But at the same time I had jumped forward, so had another person, landing beside me with a quinque ready to divert the impact as well. Between the two of us, the rinkaku skittered away, deflected against the quinque and my kagune without making a scratch.

"Sorry I'm late," Haise said, but he never took his eyes off the rinkaku ghoul, tense but calm.

"Sasaki...? Hide-san...?"

I smiled. "I'm sorry too. I got a little held up, but I'm back."

Urie, ignoring us completely, kicked the purple-haired ghoul in the abdomen and brought his
quinque down in a long, sweeping arc that the rinkaku just barely blocked. Looking annoyed, Urie took a step back, and said, "He has a rinkaku."

"...Yeah." Haise said, looking like he had during training, cold and tough, intent on causing pain to anyone who would dare touch his precious subordinates.

The rinkaku ghoul reeled back, a strange look on his face. "This... this smell! Are you... Sasaki Haise?"

But the ghoul never got an answer, although I tensed at Haise's name, bristling. Shirazu and Urie struck the ghoul simultaneously, but they didn't land a hit. The ghoul took a step forward and did a flip, kicking Shirazu in the face and cutting Urie's arm with nothing but his well-manicured fingernails. Haise and I ran forward in almost-perfect synchrony, and it went in silent agreement on what to do. He knew what I would do, and I him. Haise struck the ghoul's torso and I the ghoul's legs, but both were shallow cuts, just enough to knock him backwards and stumbling.

"Urie! Shirazu!"

They responded to our cries, and they slashed powerful cuts that sent blood flying and the ghoul flying backwards with a choked cry. A set of rinkaku tentacles, different from the purple-haired ghoul's, shot out and caught the purple-haired ghoul in a cradle-like fashion, drawing him back a few yards to rest next to the newcomer, a female ghoul with a dark black bob cut and an unadorned mask that covered her eyes.

The purple haired ghoul rasped something-- a name?-- that I couldn't hear. Suddenly, the floor erupted with sharp cracks! Haise held his arms out slightly, to stop Urie and Shirazu from starting forward, and I watched in shock as sharp pieces of kagune shot out from the floor, twining up until they hit the ceiling and forming a wall made of kagune. Urie disregarded Haise's warning and dashed forward, slashing at the wall, but it didn't even make a dent.

As I retracted my kagune, Urie made a disappointed clicking noise. "They got away."

"He detached his kagune...?" Haise muttered quietly, inspecting the kagune wall hesitantly. "So they can do that kind of stuff...?" He sighed. "Well, that's not important. Is everyone alright?" His eyes scanned the kids, but the cut on Urie's arm-- it had been shallow and barely bled-- had already closed, and the indentation where the ghoul's foot had struck Shirazu's face was long healed. He stopped on Mutsuki, who I extended a hand to and helped up. "Mutsuki? The ghoul said something about inflicting a wound on you?"

"A-Ah, no, the ghoul was wrong." Mutsuki said quickly. "Hide-san saved me. He-- He got hurt instead. The blood is his, not mine."

"Hide?" Haise said, turning that soft, gray gaze on me, looking startled. "All of that blood is yours?"

I looked down at Mutsuki and I. We were rather bloody, Mutsuki splattered in my blood, and I was absolutely drenched in it, the fabric of my torn dress sticking to where the wound had been and stained a dark red. There were other splatters of blood on me, from the ghouls I had killed. But the blood was mostly mine, I supposed. An inordinate amount, that.

"It's not as bad as it looks," I assured. "The wound in my side is gone now. I'm fine. Besides, some of the blood is from the ghouls I killed out in the hall back there," I said, about to make a gesture towards the hallway in question, but found that Haise was holding my hands in his, examining me for any other visible wounds.
"You aren't lying to me," He asked, worried and fearful. "Right?"

"I wouldn't," I promised, offering him a smile. "I'm good as new, and we're fine, just like I said we'd be."

Haise released my hands, relief evident in his expression. "Alright then. I'm going to make a call in to mission control."

I gave him a thumbs-up, and he pressed a hand to the transmitter in his ear. "This is Rank 1 Sasaki." He paused briefly as a voice on the other end said "This is Washuu," then he said, "We've regrouped with Rank 3 Mutsuki and Rank 2 Nagachika, but are unable to advance due to a kagune wall. We're opening a way through now."

I gave Mutsuki a grin, and said, "I think that's my cue to help, huh?"

I walked towards the kagune wall, studying it for a moment while Shirazu bombarded it with ukaku shards that had almost no effect. I pressed a hand to it, and narrowed my eyes. It was brittle, with a scaly texture and little give. Another rinkaku, then?

"Shirazu, hold on for a second," I said, backing up. "A barrage of short, quick attacks will break through eventually. But I think I might have better luck."

Again, my bikaku made an appearance as I took a step forward, lashing at the wall with it. It cut long slashes in the tendrils, cutting a choppy hole in the wall about the size of a door-frame, working much better than the suppressed abilities of the Quinx.

"Yes, a passageway has been opened." Haise frowned, touching the earpiece and narrowing his eyes. I strained to hear what the voice was saying.

"Rank 1 Sasaki, what do you think of the corpses lying around?"

"Personally, I feel a bit uncomfortable."

"In what way?" The brisk, uncaring way of the questions, like it was an interrogation, made me tense. Were they testing Haise? Just because we were ghouls didn't mean we would suddenly go crazy from being around a ton of corpses.

But Haise answered without hesitation. "Most of the ghouls we've faced were from Aogiri Tree. There should be customers, if an Auction was taking place."

Ah. So he'd realized it too, then? They were testing his intuition as an investigator, not his feelings as a ghoul? It... admittedly made sense, and I relaxed a little as Shirazu said, "Whoa! That was pretty cool, but how come you were able to cut through it so easy?"

I smiled teasingly. "I actually payed attention to the classes at the Academy. The wall is made from a rinkaku, meaning the RC Cells are brittle and weakly bonded, so a bikaku is best suited to cutting through it."

"Which means that Madam and the other customers are under the protection of Aogiri and are hiding somewhere in this facility. They're waiting for the right time to escape. We should've been able to expose their cover with the information of the Oshiba Squad. They were headed to the administrative building. But, Oshiba's Squad was annihilated."

I see Haise stiffen, paling at the new information. Urie is inspecting the kagune wall, Shirazu is talking to Mutsuki, and they don't see it. But I do.
"The ghoul they engaged in combat with was just Nutcracker, and Nutcracker alone. It's ranking has been changed from A to S. The Quinx Squad will head out to exterminate Nutcracker. We'll have Ato's Squad head over too."

"Roger," Haise said, still looking pale. Did he know Oshiba, I wondered? "Associate Special Class Washuu?"

"Hmm?"

"It's just my opinion, but Rank 2 Nagachika is exhausted and injured. It will be hard for him to carry on. Please give him the order to retreat. Rank 3 Mutsuki can escort him back to the medical tent."

I stalk over to Saiko, who had remained back for the entire battle and was now kneeling beside Tooru, and I noticed that she and Shirazu had given Mutsuki his quinque. I also notice that, in one of his rare acts of goodwill, Urie had given his long white trench-coat to Mutsuki, and it falls all the way to Mutsuki's mid-calves. I held my hand out with my brightest smile, and said, "Hey, Saiko? Will you let me borrow your earpiece for just one sec?"

She did, handing me the small black device. I placed it in my ear and said cheerily, "Hi, mission control? This is Rank 2 Nagachika of the Mado Squad, here with Rank 1 Sasaki and the Quinx Squad. Would you put me through to Associate Special Class Washuu? I know he's talking to Rank 1 Sasaki, but it's urgent."

There's static for a brief moment, and Haise blinks as his com experiences static when mine picks up.

"Rank 2 Nagachika? What's so urgent?"

"Yeah, hi, and all that. Well, I wanted to report in that I was wounded, but my regenerative abilities have healed me up good as new. I'm not tired at all, either, so I'm fine to continue. Rank 3 Mutsuki might need to return, though, hang on a second," Cheerfully, I put my superior on hold and asked Mutsuki, "Do you need to head back? Answer me honestly, okay? Because if you're hurt I'll escort you back to mission control. There's absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to retreat. You've done well today, and nobody will blame you for heading back. Technically, our mission has ended: our job was infiltration, and we did that."

And Mutsuki met my eyes with a firm resolution. "I don't want to retreat. I want to be useful. I want to fight, with everyone."

"Alrighty then, Associate Special Class Washuu, Rank 3 Mutsuki and I are fine to continue. Our comms just broke during the struggle, so can this be taken as our official check-in and report?"

Washuu Matsuri sounded almost amused. "Duly noted. It can be taken as your official check-in report, and your new orders are to continue on with the rest of your squad."

The earpiece went dead, empty static taking it's place.

"Thanks again, Saiko!" I said cheerily, handing her the earpiece back.

Saiko looked a little bit suspicious, I thought, but I couldn't fathom why. She simply said, "It's not a problem, Papa."

Ah, the nickname strikes again. Not that it was an unpleasant nickname: I just wondered why she liked French so much. I put the thought aside for later as I approached Haise, smiling innocently as he finished his conversation with Washuu Matsuri. When the call ended, Haise looked like he was trying very hard not to say something he would regret.
"Hide," He managed to say, eyes closed. "I know that you heard my call. What made you call Associate Special Class Washuu and override my decision? You were injured, and regeneration can take a lot out of you sometimes."

"I overrided a wrong decision," I said, letting the innocent smile slip away. "I am one hundred percent fine. In top condition, minus the fact that it is really damn cold in here and I'm just wearing a torn dress. I promised you that you wouldn't do this alone, and I intend to keep that promise." I paused, briefly. "Not that I don't appreciate the gesture, because that was really sweet. Like, one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me. But if Mutsuki was wounded and needed to go back, you can bet that I'd have left without complaint."

Haise looked torn between letting the matter go and trying to argue it out further. Eventually, he sighed and removed his coat, offering it to me. I must have looked confused, because he elaborated.

"You said you were cold." He muttered as he draped the coat around my shoulders. "We'll move out in a second. When we do, I'll lead, if you take the rear. Before we do, though, I want to congratulate Mutsuki on his achievements."

I nodded. "I think he needs it. I mean, I sort of did when I asked him if he wanted to retreat, but coming from you... I think he'd really like that, Haise. It'll mean a lot to him."

"You did well too, Hide," Haise said quietly as he slipped past me, towards where Mutsuki was standing, wrapped in Urie's double-breasted coat, which had been buttoned up to conceal his bloodstained dress. He had discarded his wig, and I reached up to do the same when I paused, feeling a light tug on my hand.

It was Saiko, looking strangely serious, her blue eyes dark.

"You lied to Maman, didn't you?" She asked quietly. "You're still injured."

"Ah..." So that's what had caused her look earlier, suspicious and quizzical. She had the most acute hearing of all the Quinx: it's not surprising she could hear my breath rattling. "I did, but it was just a little fib. When I got cut, it nicked my lung. Just a little cut, really, but it filled one of my lungs up with a little bit of blood, so my regeneration had to get rid of that before it could heal the cut up. But it's healing up now, so it wasn't really a lie. I'll be at one hundred percent soon."

Saiko still looked worried, so I ruffled her hair with a smile. "I'll be okay, Saiko. I promise. But I made a promise to Haise, too, and I intend to keep it. So can we keep this between me and you, and not tell your mom?"

She smiled, just a little twitch of her lips, and she nodded. "Okay. But I think I'll walk next to you, Papa."

I gave her another smile, a beaming grin. "Sweet! That means I get company. Bringing up the rear would be lonely otherwise, y'know."

*I intend to keep everyone safe. I won't let anyone I care about be taken from me.*

Chapter End Notes

Haha, look at me. Two consecutive updates. I'm taking the ACT's right now, and I'm
stress-writing.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Everything Takizawa says in the manga is in bolded italics. I didn't want to put everything in bold, so it's just... italics. I can't figure out why everything he says is in bold-italics, either. I think it may be because he's screaming everything he says, but that's debatable.

On a side note: this was meant to be one chapter but it got really long, so now it's two. The second will be up a short time after the first.

The air outside seems even colder than the air inside as we exit the main building and run towards the administrative office, but Haise's coat is warm, so when the hair on the back of my neck stands up and a chill goes down my spine, I know that it isn't the cold. It's my fight-or-flight instinct, better referred to as the beat-the-hell-outta-someone instinct.

We stop abruptly as a CCG officer, who I had previously thought of as a corpse propped up against the concrete divider for one of the gardens, let out a groan.

Haise looked incredulous as he peered closer at the man's face. "You're Oshiba Squad's..."

"It's Hayashimura," The man said weakly. "So you're Rank 1 Sasaki, huh? Nutcracker's up there. The Squad Leader and his junior are still..." He broke off, wincing.

Haise had paled considerably, his eyes turning dark. I recalled the words from Haise's comm call, and I understood why.

_Oshiba's Squad was annihilated._

To give him credit, Haise recovered quickly when Hayashimura winced, and he knelt down beside the Oshiba Squad survivor. "Ah... Are you injured...?"

"I fell, but a tree cushioned the impact. I'm lucky it's only a bruise."

My fight-or-flight instinct _screamed._

"I'll call the medical squad immediately," Haise said, reaching up to touch his comm--

--and I dove for him, shoving Haise backwards into Shirazu, who sent Saiko, Urie, and Mutsuki flying like a domino effect. My quinque, given back to me by Haise before we started out, was flung up just in time to catch the kick that would have snapped my neck. The sheer force sent me sliding backwards, onto one knee, and I moved one hand up to catch the blade before the kick's force could cause it to cut my shoulder open. It bit into my hand instead, but it gave me the leverage to shove back.

It was Takizawa, and I don't think I've ever been so glad that I was wearing a wig and make-up.

Takizawa screeched in joy, or maybe suprise, and shrieked, _"Seriously?! This chick stopped me!"_
"Hide!" Haise shouted, the first to recover his wits from the fall.

Takizawa was the first to cave in, as I shoved everything I had into the quinque and forced him to skid backwards as it sliced through his sandals. A bit of my blood, from where the quinque had cut through the skin and tendons in my hand, causing it to go slack until my regeneration began repairing them, splashed onto Takizawa's face and he made another screeching noise as he licked my blood off his face.

"Delish! I've never tasted anything this exquisite!"

Why he felt the need to screech everything like a banshee, I'll never know. I did know that it gave me a terrible headache.

I shook my hand out, sending blood splattering onto the concrete, testing out the repaired tendons and skin by flexing my fingers. I had full mobility of my hand back now, and readied my quinque.

Saiko looked distraught, Mutsuki shocked, and Urie mildly surprised. Shirazu started forward, shouting, "Hide-san!", but Haise held out an arm to stop him, and I gave him a thankful smile.

Shirazu looked confused, or maybe baffled would be a better word, like he couldn't fathom why Haise held him back. "But Sassan, Hide-san's--!"

Takizawa looked puzzled for a second. Then he laughed, a crazed, chilling laugh. "Sassasasasassasassasassasa! I see, so you're him! Is that why I was sent here? That bastard Eto! What a sardonic way to set things up!" Then, abruptly switching topics, he grinned and started towards me again, leaping incredibly fast. "I wonder how the meat tastes!"

Before he could even get within a few feet of me, Haise's rinkaku, just two tentacles, had pierced Takizawa's abdomen in a gaping hole. Without hesitation and without mercy, Haise flung him across the pavement a good four yards, leaving a bloody skid behind. He was beside me in a split-second, helping me stand and inspecting my hand worriedly. Normally, I would have given him a smile, said reassurances and held his hand, but now I just closed my hands around his fearfully and gripped them painfully tight.

"Haise," I hissed softly, too softly for the kids, who had cheered when Haise flung Takizawa away, to hear. "That won't take care of this one. This one is strong. Too strong for the kids. If they fight, they'll die. Do you understand what you need to do?"

Haise, grave and serious, nodded. I released his hands and he turned to the kids, his eyes still mismatched, one the soft dove-feather grey and the other black and red.

"Shirazu! Go with Rank 1 Hashimura and run! I'll stay here with Hide and deal with the ghoul, so for now, just go!"

Wide-eyed at the genuine fear and anxiety in Haise's voice, Shirazu hoisted Hashimura to his feet and shoved a fearful Mutsuki and Saiko forward, and I knew Haise had made the right choice for squad leader. But Urie stayed, a gleam in his eyes that was greedy and hungry.

"I'm staying. This is my chance for a promotion! I won't let you both take the credit for the take-down!"

Haise looked ready to argue, but I spoke first, aware of Takizawa twitching and stirring a few yards away.

"Urie, you fool! We're holding the ghoul back to get you guys to the administration office faster, to
deal with S-ranked Nutcracker! If you want a promotion, then go there, not for this ghoul, who's maybe an S-rank!"

The greed must have been blocking his ability to think, because Urie didn't consider Takizawa to be any stronger than I had said. He just took a step backwards, then turned and raced after the others with vigor. Sure that Urie was out of hearing range, I turned to Haise and smacked him on the back of the head.

"Haise, you idiot!" I hissed, hand raised to smack him again if need be. "You said you understood! Why didn't you go with them?"

His fingers curled around mine gently.

"Because I won't let you fight a ghoul who has to be ranked S or above alone," Haise said simply, apparently unbothered by the fact I had just hit him.

"Haise!" I protested. "The kids--!"

"Will be fine. Didn't you say so yourself? To have faith in them?" Haise lowered my hand, with the same gentle touch. "So have faith in them, and in me. We'll deal with this one together, and then get back to the kids."

I sighed as my own words were thrown back at me. I gave his hand a squeeze, then released it and gripped my quinque, readying it. Haise did the same thing, just next to me, and suddenly we didn't just match in kakugan.

Takizawa stood up, still grinning, and he cackled. "This isn't enough to shake me up! It doesn't hurt at all! Because I'm used to it!"

Then Haise's comm crackled, coming to life in a burst of static. "Rank 1 Sasaki, Rank 1 Hayashimura. Rank 1 Sasaki, relay information to Rank 2 Nagachika." I nodded, confirming I could hear it for Haise. "We are going with a temporary rating of SS-. Rank 1 Sasaki and Rank 2 Nagachika will fight alone. Rank 1 Hayashimura, you're the only one alive from the Oshiba Squad. Work together with Sasaki Squad and head for the administrative tower once again."

I could hear the shocked exclamations, and Hayashimura's dulled "Roger." from over the comm line. Shirazu, loudest of all.

"He-Hey! What the fuck's up with that?! You tellin' me to abandon Sassan and Hide-san?! That's screwed up! Tell us to fight together! Are you really a commander?!"

Hayashimura's voice broke in, stern. "Rank 3 Shirazu, watch your language! You're talking to an Associate Special Class, Division II Commander! And one of the Washuu's! Nobodies like us can't speak our minds to them! We're going for Nutcracker above. Come with me if you got that!"

Please, go with him, I thought. Don't turn around now. Keep going.

Washuu Matsuri kept talking regardless. "Rank 1 Sasaki and Rank 2 Nagachika. Fight as far away from the administrative tower as possible. Lure that ghoul away."

Haise looked grim. "Roger..." Then, as Takizawa cackled again and started towards us with staggering steps, he added, "Shirazu, Urie. Take care of Saiko and Mutsuki."

If it weren't connected to Washuu Matsuri, I was sure he would have said, take care of your sister and brother.
Shirazu's broken, strangled reply came through, and it was enough to make my heart heavy.

"Ro... Roger!"

The comm line went dead.

Takizawa paused, just a yard from us now. His smile was cruel and cold, the smear of my blood flashing like a neon sign against his deathly pale skin. "You're an ideal boss. Letting your underlings escape... I don't hate that. My boss was also good at that... Let's talk about some secrets, just you, me, and the lady."

Then he was in front of Haise, faster than Haise could even react, and his ghastly pale hand squeezed Haise's throat, holding him off the ground as he made a choked noise. Something in me snapped, and I tossed Haise's coat aside (for the life of me, I didn't want to ruin his coat, why exactly I couldn't say). I dove and skidded underneath the arm holding Haise up, my kagune slicing along Takizawa's forearm, deep enough to cut through bone and muscle, severing the arm. I caught Haise, lowering him to the ground gently as he held a hand to his throat, coughing and gasping. Unfortunately, Takizawa caught his severed arm, and his regeneration reattached it.

"Owwie!" He wailed. "Why'd you do that, lady?! I was just having soo much fun! I've got to weaken the enemy before I can talk to them! Why won't you let me?"

I ignored him for a brief second, looking back to see that Haise has managed to stand, but there's an already-darkening bruise on his neck in the shape of a hand (hopefully it won't be there long, with his regeneration rate), and he's breathing raggedly. Statistically, Takizawa, in accordance to the CCG's rating scale, is one rank or possibly higher than Haise is. Haise would possibly die if he fought Takizawa alone, of that, I have no doubt.

But he's not alone.

Statistically, I could handle Takizawa alone, if it came down to it. Without injury, no, but I could kill him alone and escape with injuries that wouldn't be life-threatening. I have no doubt of that.

But I'm not alone. I've got to protect Haise.

During my thinking, Takizawa has started rambling again. "Between first and second, there's a huuuuuge gap. Being second is just a consolation prize for the loser. Yes, a consolation for them not to think that. But as long as there's someone above them, they're nothing but a loser! The gap between a perfect 100 mark and a 99 isn't just one point! I've got to prove myself now! You were the doctor's masterpiece once! I wonder, how about now?"

Takizawa lunged forward, reaching for Haise again, but I threw my quinque like a lance and leapt upwards and forwards. As the lance pierced his ribs with the precision of an archer's arrow, knocking him back onto the concrete and pinning him there like a captured, broken butterfly, I brought my kagune down with everything I have in me. Takizawa just managed to scramble out of the way, biting his fingers with blood-stained teeth. I broke the concrete into pieces, but managed to kick Takizawa's shoulder, hard enough I heard a pop! and his arm hung limply.

Takizawa screamed, and a shard of ukaku the size of a fist tore it's way through my lower abdomen. I cursed, but reached down and ripped the shard out with a splash of blood. It would heal faster that way, I knew, but that didn't make it any less painful.

Takizawa popped his arm back into place with another shriek. "You're mean, lady!"

And his ukaku changed shape, shifting into a long, crystalline wing. It sliced across the front of my
legs, making them buckle for a moment as I fell to the ground, cursing. The muscle and skin knit itself back together, and I stood again, ignoring the aching protest of my body. Pain was nothing, insignificant. I could handle more than this.

Then, with another cold grin, Takizawa lunged forward again. But he soared right past me-- right to Haise, who he picked up by his neck and snapped him forward, throwing him into the side of the building. I shouted a curse, running forward and grabbing Haise mid-air, trying to slow his momentum. The skin on my feet tore and I grimaced, realizing that it wouldn't be enough to stop our impact into the building. So I moved, and just as I had done with Mutsuki, I wrapped my arms around Haise and twisted, but not in time. We struck the building together, and although I had managed to absorb some of the impact, Haise had still taken the brunt. To make it worse, ukaku shards shot at us in barrages, pinning us to where we hit the building like painful tacks. I coughed as Haise's back arched, and a fine mist of blood seemed to envelop us. Blood from the impact and broken bones that pierced the skin, blood from cuts and torn skin, blood from the ukaku shards, blood from our mouths-- so much blood, blanketing us in the sweet-spicy smell.

We were ripped from the building by Takizawa, and Haise let a pain-filled cry escape as he was thrown upwards and me sideways. I skidded across yards of the concrete, and as my skin came in contact with it, it tore and shredded. My regeneration was unable to keep up, overwhelmed by the sheer amount of wounds. For a moment, just a short moment, the world went dark.

Haise gasped and choked on his own blood as the ghoul batted him up further, snatching him and dragging him along the building. Far below, Hide wasn't moving, completely still and bloody.

He tried to save me. Hide's always saving me. I've got to save him.

I... might die today. No... to be correct, it's either I die or I disappear.

Chains clinked in his mind as his vision blacked out, clacking in a way that made the blood in Haise's veins turn to ice and his bones to liquid.

There's only two options. The power I need to deal with this ghoul is... far too great...

There's that dark shadow in his mind, sitting calmly in his chair, all a black shadow except for his silver chains and snowy white hair that covers his eyes.

Haise, the shadow whispers, tempting him. Please. Look at me. Say my name.

If I have to resort to using him... I will... disappear... But Hide will live.

His resolution was easy to make, so easy, as he caught one final glimpse of the bloody and still body, far, far beneath him. Then the ghoul chucked him inside the hole in the roof and he crashed into the floor, wood and stone splintering around him. More blood sprayed, from his mouth and his wounds, and Haise found that he couldn't taste or smell it anymore. He was too used to the taste and scent of his own blood.
When I opened my eyes, fighting my way back to consciousness, not much time had passed. At least, I didn't think. My wounds had begun to close, but some of the newly-healed skin that had been torn away in my skidding still ached painfully, a pink color. I'm laying just next to Haise's coat and my quinque that I had discarded earlier, and I picked them up as I stand, gripping them in my hand tightly. Haise and Takizawa had gone up and over the building, hadn't they? Everything was a little blurry from blood loss, but I tucked the quinque into one of the many holes in my dress (I wished I had belt loops) and slung the coat around my shoulders. That done, I charged the building, the coat fluttering as I dug my hands into the glassy side of the building and ignored the pain that bloomed as the glass shards sliced into my skin. I hoisted myself up the building at a neck-snapping speed, my hands leaving bloody hand-prints behind when I hauled myself up onto the roof. There's a gaping hole that leads to the Auction Stage where I had been sold, and I made it just in time to see Takizawa be pierced by Haise's rinkaku, but he didn't even flinch.

"Heeeeey!" Takizawa said gleefully. "I was compared to someone like you? You're too weak... Sa~sa~ki~!" He said each syllable in a horrific, sing-song way that was completely and utterly terrifying. It also made me furious. As if throwing Haise into the ground from almost the height of the ceiling (again) wasn't bad enough, he's got to go and mock Haise's name?

Then comes the worst part. "Really, what are you hesitating for, Sasaki? No... Kaneki Ken."

Haise screamed, a pain-filled, terrified scream that filled the air and made a terrible rage fill me from head-to-toe. "No!" He screamed, louder than Takizawa, louder than any scream I'd ever heard. "No! I am Sasaki Haise!"

I leapt down, landing with extreme prejudice directly on Takizawa's back, smashing him down into the floor. I stabbed my quinque through him, but thanks to my blurred vision, I'm mostly certain I missed his heart. For good measure, I remove it and stabbed down again, this time aiming for his lungs. There's a satisfying crunch as I missed and broke a rib or two, so I gave the quinque a savage twist. This time, I'm nearly positive I hit his lungs. Probably.

Takizawa shrieked and screamed, but I brought my foot down as hard as I could on his ankle, then his lower leg, and his upper. After that, I do the same thing to his other leg, and there's a satisfying crack! and scream accompanying each stomp. Over and over, I broke bones and shattered others, leaving Takizawa twitching and bloody. I wanted to make him scream, scream a hundred times for every single time he made Haise scream, make him pay tenfold for ever touching Haise, my Haise. But Haise is more important than making Takizawa suffer, as hard as it is to stop.

I don't feel any remorse whatsoever as I kicked his fallen form one last time, before I ran towards where Haise was curled in on himself, like he was trying to make himself as small as possible, clutching his head so tightly it would leave bruises. He's rambling, like Takizawa had been, but Haise's rambling is hysterical, mixed with ringing, sobbing wails. His screams are so much louder than Takizawa's, so loud that they can surely hear them all the way at the command center.
I dropped down to the ground next to Haise. His eyes are closed, and he's clawing at his head, clutching it. I grabbed his hands and he screamed again, a horrible, agonized sound, jerking away like I burned him. For a moment, I froze, then reached out and pulled his hands away again.

"I am Sasaki Haise... Today I am Sasaki Haise... Sasaki Haise am I... I was Sasaki Haise... I don't know of a rank 3-2-1 Investigator Kaneki Investigator I don't know!" I didn't let go of his hands, even as he screamed those horrible, hysterical screams, and I didn't let go when he fought and tried to draw away as he shrieked his mumblings. It wasn't this bad during the Serpent fight. It wasn't this bad before, and I don't know what to do.

And then Takizawa laughed. He held a small black remote or something like it, and he cackled as I approach. Haise's screams are amplified-- Takizawa is broadcasting it, broadcasting Haise's pain across the speakers-- and he wheezed another satisfied laugh.

"You're cute, suffering. I can sympathize. Nobody's coming to save you. That's just how the place you're at is. They're just using you how they see fit, and they'll throw you away like trash. You're empty, a sausage without meat, a person without a reason to exist." Takizawa, he had the nerve to cackle again before he shrieked the rest of his speech. "At least give me a reason! Are you trash, are you treasure?"

And Haise's screaming pauses for a brief moment as he sobs. "...don't want... I don't want... don't want to... disappear..."

Takizawa, in a vicious retaliation, swipes my legs out from under me and leaps up. My legs buckle under the force of the bloody cuts left behind by his claw-like hands, and he's going to go for Haise again but I can't reach him in time---

Another kagune swept in and snatched Haise before Takizawa can get to him, drawing him away. Takizawa is visibly annoyed, and he calls out, in a sing-song tone, "Oh?! Why are you getting in my way~~ Hina~!"

And he's right. I'm looking at the shining, v-shaped mask of Hinami, her red Aogiri cloak fluttering around her as she cradled Haise's bloody, sobbing form like he was a small child. She held him like he was a treasure to cherish, and her kagune curled around them protectively.

I smiled, because it seemed Haise has a way of finding help in the most unexpected places.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter of the Auction Raid. Are you ready for it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Whyyyy are you, Hina~chan, my friend.... getting in my way?" Takizawa shrieked, dismayed.

Fueguchi Hinami stood her ground, unflinching, her bikaku still wrapped around Haise protectively. She faced off Takizawa without an ounce of fear despite being only sixteen and against an SS~Rated ghoul, perfectly looking the part of 'Master Yotsume'. "He should still be valuable to us. More importantly, you should return to the entrance and back Rabbit and the others up."

I knew her, just like I knew all of the Aogiri Tree executives. But although she knew me as Kanou's son and the scientist, she was also aware that I had, like Touka, pretended to be human. She knew that I had been Kaneki's best friend, and I had mourned his death with her.

She definitely didn't know me dressed in women's clothes, wielding a quinque and probably looking rather beaten-up.

Hinami was also very trusting, even after being in Aogiri Tree for so long, that I knew with a certainty. But she didn't trust Takizawa, apparently, because she tensed when he stood and his ukaku tore out of his ragged black cloak, the long and crystalline wing gleaming as he leapt up. I realized what he was about to do a split second before he would and dashed forward.

"That's what... Oniisan will decide!"

A barrage of ukaku shards pelted Hinami and Haise, and her bikaku moved rapidly to deflect them, but she couldn't stop them all. I stopped the ones she couldn't, with my quinque and bikaku. The shards pelted the floor around us, dangerously close as they splintered floorboards and the tiered seats of the Auction Hall.

"You should also return to your position!" Takizawa threw her words back at her with a laugh. "I'll take responsibility for the trash and eat 'em!"

Hinami didn't falter, nor did I, and I took a step closer to her to avoid shouting, so that Takizawa couldn't hear us.

"Hinami-chan, it's me. I promise I'll explain later, but do you remember what you told me, a long time ago? You said, 'Oniichan was someone who found words pretty, and that was really refreshing.' I paused, slicing an ukaku shard out of the air and slamming it into the ground.

She knew the sound of my voice-- or maybe it was my smell-- and she didn't question why I was with Haise, or a Dove, or dressed like a woman. Thankfully, she took my word and promise to explain later, but when she spoke, I thought there was something like despair or maybe desperation in her voice.

"I remember. Kanou-kun, is this person really just a container? Is he the same person, who found words pretty?" She asked, and her voice broke as she spoke. "Even... Even if it's empty, even if he
doesn't know who I am... If only the vessel of his soul is here, then I-- I will protect this person!"

"Hinami-chan," I reassured her as quickly as I could, wishing that I had time to talk to her properly. "The person behind you isn't just a vessel! It's complicated, but he's still your Oniichan, even if he's different!"

Takizawa gave up on his mid-air assault and charged Hinami directly. But her eyes narrowed frighteningly, barely visible underneath her mask, and she said with a firm resolution, "I won't let him fight alone anymore."

More serrated, segmented bikaku appeared, making the total count come to four, and I raised an eyebrow as she absolutely shredded him. His arm (the same one I cut off earlier) fell to the ground, severed cleanly at the wrist, and Takizawa screamed, falling. "It hurts, It hurts!!"

Then his arm started to reattach itself, and Takizawa stood once more. "You sure are strong, Hinaaa! I sure... got done in..." The blood in my veins chilled when I saw that he was an incomplete kakuja, the mask growing and creeping to cover a full side of his face in a long, ragged beak-like thing. "Yo!"

Haise twitched and stirred behind Hinami, and he muttered something that made me freeze. He was still conscious...? Could he hear what we were saying...? This could be bad, even if the fact that he was coming to his senses was good.

"Hinami-chan," I said lowly, urgently. "I need to get Haise out of the direct area, so he can't be hurt more. Can you hold Takizawa off, for just a moment?"

She gave me what could have been a smile, just briefly. "I can. I'm not a defenseless little girl anymore."

"I'll be back soon. I promise." I said firmly, then I turned tail and ran back to where Haise had been placed, just behind Hinami. I dropped my quinque to kneel down next to him and try to pick him up, but he held up a hand to stop me. Haise twitched, and his eyes were open, half-lidded and hazy. Blood was trailing from the corner of his eye like he had cried it, and from his ears, which was worrying. But his regeneration was crazy, so hopefully it would kick in soon.

"Hide," He rasped, and his fingers twitched around my dress to grip it fretfully. "I thought you..."

"Died?" I finished, grinning, but it was strained. "Nah. It'd take more than that to finish me off. I just hit my head and had to take a little nap while my regeneration worked it's magic. So now it's your turn, okay buddy?"

"Hide, that girl..." Haise managed, his eyes flickering to where Hinami was standing alone, fighting. Takizawa as a half-kakuja was terrifying, and Hinami was barely holding her own, her mask cracked. "She was protecting me, wasn't she?"

"Yeah, she was. I guess Aogiri is pretty strict on it's members, if even a little girl like that felt the need to discipline a rouge member," I lied smoothly, trying to pick him up once more. But again, he stopped me.

"I don't think that's it," Haise said, and he looked weary but almost... serene. "I think I knew her, before. When I was Kaneki Ken."

Hearing the name Kaneki Ken coming from Haise's mouth was almost enough to make me cry. It was a terrible thing, to see him get this close to his former identity. I didn't want him to. I opened my mouth to speak, to say something, but Haise hauled himself upright with a painful grunt. He
staggered up and to his feet, wincing, and he swayed on his feet. Then there was a tremendous crash that shook the ground and caused a part of the roof fall in further, a little ways from us. Hinami had thrown Takizawa into the wall, and he remained on the floor, curled in on himself and mumbling.

Hinami slumped to her knees, and I caught Haise, steadying him before he fell.

"Hide," He said, grasping onto my hand to keep his balance. "Please, let me go. I need to fight."

"Haise, you're delusional!" I declared incredulously as he staggered forward, towards Hinami. "Haise, you are loopy from blood loss! There will be ice in hell before I let you fight again!"

But Haise ignored me, pausing before Hinami for a brief moment. "Please go," He said firmly.

Hinami looked up from where she was kneeling on the ground, as he walked away, towards Takizawa. "Oniichan...?"

"I am no longer... the person you once knew..." Haise said, his voice still raspy from screaming. "Even though I might have Kaneki Ken's body... I am Sasaki Haise... Ah, but... I'm sure that Kaneki Ken was a great person... if he was remembered like this..."

I was frozen, stock-still, unable to move in the least. My bones felt like liquid, my blood like ice, and his words echoed like a mantra through my head.

"I'm sure that Kaneki Ken was a great person... if he was remembered like this..."

He wasn't afraid of himself anymore. Haise had come to a conclusion like I had-- or something like it-- that the monster in his head wasn't a monster at all, but a figment of his imagination, to remind him that he had been someone else once. A reminder of the past mistakes, of his past life, so he didn't repeat them. My eyes burned, and I feared that if I reached up I would find them spilling tears.

My hand stretched out, and I opened my mouth to call out to him, to stop him, at the same time Hinami did, whispering, "Please don't fight, Oniichan..."

But another shriek broke through, covering my almost-cry and Hinami's plea.

"Maman!"

It was Saiko, standing among the broken rows of seats, just a few yards away, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Do-- Don't go!" She begged.

It was, perhaps, the sight of her crying that broke me from my spell and gave me the push I needed to leap forward, to run, to grab Haise by the sleeve of his torn black shirt and to hold his arm with bruising strength.

"Haise," I pleaded. "Please, listen to her. Let me fight alone. I'll be able to fight and beat that ghoul if I don't have to worry about you getting hurt."

Haise just gave me a soft, sad smile. "Hide. That ghoul is SS~ Rank. You can't beat him."

He sounded so sure. I wanted to scream, scream my head off, as he gave me another sad smile. If he knew my ranking, if he knew who I really was, then he wouldn't be so convinced that he had to fight.

*He wouldn't be trying to accept the monster in his head for power, the power of Kaneki Ken.*
His fingers gently pried mine from his arm and he strode forward. I heard Saiko sob, and my vision blurred, something hot and salty dripping down my cheeks. Haise held onto my hands for a brief moment, meeting my eyes. His were soft, but the dove-feather gray shone with a dull determination and a firm resolution.

"Hide," He said gently. "Please go. Take care of the kids, okay?"

And then he dropped my hand, and I dropped to my knees. It was like all of the bones in my body were liquid, nonexistent, as he walked to Takizawa.

"It's okay if I disappear," Haise whispered to himself. "So... please give me the power to protect."

He cracked his index finger.

"Haise," A voice whispered inside his mind. "Am I... scary?"

"...Yeah," Haise admitted, his steps slow and sure as he walked past Hide, towards the screaming half-kakuja.

"Why?"

"You're asking... why?" Haise wondered, leaping forward with sharp, quick steps and kicking the screaming ghoul. "Because you are... strong." Haise said, landing for a short moment before taking a running leap and slashing down with his kagune, the rinkaku tentacles sending the ghoul flying into the wall. Blood sprayed from the ghoul's mouth, and Haise continued. "And... There's a large gaping hole. It seems like I was swallowed into that hole (lie)."

Haise grasped the fallen ghoul with his rinkaku, flinging him up and slamming him down, rocking the floor with the force of impact.

"It's a huge hollow," Haise said, as the ghoul shrieked, "Ta-Ta-Ta-Tasty!!!" "I need the strength... to plug that gap!"

The ghoul rocketed towards him, kicking him and sending him crashing into the abused floor, and Haise felt suddenly scared, but not from the cracking of his bones as he hit the ground. No, his bones mended. The thing that scared him was the fact that he didn't know which one of them was controlling their body anymore. At this rate, he realized numbly as the ghoul slammed down on top of him, sending more blood flying, they would both disappear. His consciousness was already slipping again.

And then Haise felt numb, but now with dread, because Hide crashed into the ghoul pinning Haise down and went flying off with him.

"Haise... listen." The voice in his head whispered. "I'm not all that strong. Look... at me. Please..."

"Haise, damn it, don't you dare give in!" Hide, sounding far away, screamed at him.
And so Haise didn't. He looked towards Hide instead, standing on top of the ghoul and pinning him into the ground with his bikaku, his eyes wide and adamant and beautifully mismatched.

But even as he looked towards Hide, Haise saw clearly, from the corner of his eyes, a baffling sight. A small boy, looking much too sad and too solemn for such a small, small boy. He wore a shirt as pristinely white as his hair, a black belt and pants, brown suspenders, and a small brown string in the place of a tie, knotted like a bow. Haise should have been too far away to hear anything the boy said, but as the boy's lips moved, Haise could hear everything as clear as day.

"Don't erase me."

This wasn't a monster at all. The him from his past life was sad and solemn, but gentle, and had to be no older than six, which was absolutely confusing, but it made an odd sort of sense.

I see... I was not the only one who was afraid. You were as well...

I want... to save you...

But the boy shook his head, smiling oh-so sadly. He held a finger to his lips like he wanted Haise to keep a secret, and a single kakugan gleamed in his eye. He turned around, and began to walk away, casting a forlorn glance in Hide's direction. He faded, until he was no more than an outline, and then vanished completely.

Haise's head ached, and he felt oddly alone. It was as if all of the fight had gone from him, vanished as soon as the boy had, and he closed his eyes, unable to fight the black creeping in at the edges of his vision any longer.

I screamed Haise's name as I saw him close his eyes, but Takizawa retaliated, and I jolted as ukaku shards embedded themselves in my torso, piercing me through. I staggered, and Takizawa leapt up, but I carved a deep gash through him, hitting multiple vital points and, if I was lucky, his heart. Takizawa held a sudden expression of fear, even through his crazed, half-kakuja state, and he staggered away.

I could hear footsteps, distantly approaching, and I dashed to Haise's side, but before I got there, I realized it. Hinami was there, and I pretended to stagger and fall, landing flat on the ground next to Haise's coat. I heard Saiko scream my name, and Haise's, but I moved subtly and quickly. If I didn't Hinami would be caught.

I dipped my finger in my own blood and wrote a message on Haise's white coat. November 25, eleven am, re coffee shop, First Ward. A date, a time, a place.

I staggered to my feet and towards Haise, my back to Saiko, and I mouthed to Hinami, Go. Go now.

Hinami swallowed, but dashed to her feet and leapt up, climbing the debris, Haise's coat clutched in her hand. She was through the roof in seconds, gone without a trace.
I slumped down next to Haise, and I realized I didn't need to pretend. My vision really was blurring, my healing slowed, and with a slight terror I realized that everything was spinning, slowly, and the footsteps approaching seemed too loud. I sunk down to the floor, just next to Haise, and I fought to keep my eyes open as Saiko ran towards us. Takizawa, who must have heard the footsteps as well, followed Hinami through the roof. I threaded my fingers through Haise's, holding onto his hand tightly, looking for something to ground me as the world spun faster.

But even I couldn't hold out against blood loss forever, and I closed my eyes, giving in.

Saiko reached the fallen forms of Hide and Haise as Arima himself strode into the battered Auction Hall, followed by a group of white-clad investigators. Saiko paid them no mind, kneeling beside the bodies of her mentors.

"Maman, Papa," She said, hiccuping. Her eyes burned with the tears that splashed onto the prone bodies beneath her, and her vision was blurred enough that she couldn't tell if their chests rose and fell. She couldn't tell if her substitute parents, her mentors, were breathing. "Maman! Papa!"

A hand descended on her shoulder, and through her blurred vision she saw Akira, who pulled her to her feet gently.


Those two little words, "They're alive.", were enough to make Saiko cry harder, her knees buckling. Next to them, Arima was making a call to the medical squad for an immediate dispatch, and Saiko felt a weight gone from her chest.

It's okay. It's alright.

And Saiko had never really felt that motherly feeling from Akira, but the hands that held her up were soft and gentle, and Saiko didn't care if Akira was stained by the blood of countless ghouls. Akira was there, and Saiko was glad for someone to hold her while she cried.

Chapter End Notes

To summarize:

The Quinx, with Hayashimura, fought Nutcracker. Yep, Saiko was still the one to beat the daylights out of her, and Shirazu was still the one to deliver the final blow. Afterwards, Mutsuki and Urié, in the best shape, were sent to deliver aid to Juuzou, who had made the discovery of the Auction customers. Shirazu, Hayashimura, and Saiko remained to hold down the Administrative Tower. Saiko, of course, disobeyed her orders and found Hide and Haise, fighting Takizawa.
To clarify:

"Kaneki" didn't completely disappear. It's impossible to completely discard a part of yourself, after all. It's almost as if "Kaneki" is his subconscious, being aware of everything he's done in his past.

But there's a clear divergence here from the manga; in the manga, "Kaneki" has always wished (and intended) to die. That, and because of Hinami's capture, are the factors, I think, that led to his 'awakening'.

But here, Hinami was never captured, and he's been relieved of the guilt that he killed Hide. He's realized that he's got something to live for, so subconsciously, he's purposely trying to keep his memories suppressed. To keep 'dreaming'.

But "Kaneki" doesn't want to *erase* his memories. No, he just doesn't want to remember them.

Excuse me if all I did was confuse, rather than clarify!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This is a monster chapter with 5,297 words, and I don't regret any of it. Hinami makes an appearance again, a little bit of Hide/Haise, and the Quinx. Not necessarily in that order.

(At the moment, I'm sitting in the basement of my great-grandparents basement while my siblings watch cartoons on the television and eat pizza, while I attempt to read classic literature over the noise. There's a tornado watch-- nothing new, in Kansas-- so yeah, I have ample time to write. Expect another chapter soon, and thanks for reading!)

The hospital wouldn't discharge me, even after I had woken up completely healed roughly a day after I had been admitted by the CCG the night of the Auction Raid. It didn't matter how much I protested: because of the severity of my wounds, they were going to hold me for another twenty-four hours. Which was stupid, because I was completely fine, but apparently I didn't have a say. Despite being legally old enough to discharge myself at will.

I stayed anyways, because Lady Luck took pity on me and put my room right next to Haise's.

Well, it was either luck, or the fact that besides wrapping us in bandages, they couldn't treat us since we were half-ghouls. Or maybe it was because we came in the same ambulance, with almost equally life-threatening wounds.

Luck sounded better.

But they did give me the freedom to walk around as I pleased, so the second the nurse's left, I debated on whether to go see Haise or the kids first. Haise was just next door, but the kids--

The image of Saiko crying, calling our names, came to mind. I decided to go and see the kids first.

Mutsuki was the nearest to me. He and Urie had been injured when they split off from the others to back up Juuzou's Squad while Shirazu and Saiko held down the administrative tower with Hayashimura. But to my surprise, as I entered the room, Saiko, Shirazu, and even Urie were gathered in the same room already. I wondered briefly how they had dragged Urie into coming too, because surely there was no way he'd come visit the others of his own free will.

Then I noticed they were all leaning over a paper and talking in excited voices. Until I opened the door, and everybody froze and looked up, then sat as still as statues, like they couldn't comprehend the fact I was standing in front of them.

I laughed. "What's wrong, guys? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

And then a pair of arms, in a flurry of blue hair and hospital gowns, wrapped around my waist with enough force to knock me back a step. I smiled, wrapping my arms around Saiko, and I ruffled her hair.

"I missed you guys too," I said brightly.

"They said you wouldn't wake up for another day at least," Saiko whispered.
"Aw, the doctors are monkeys in lab coats. They don't know anything," I declared.

"They know more than you do," Urie said flatly. His earbuds were around his neck, stark against his hospital gown. "They have their PhD."

I pouted. "That was mean, Urie! I'll have you know, I suffered through two years of college to get a degree in International Studies!"

Shirazu, cradling a cup of water as he observed the papers the Quinx had previously been studying, looked up at this. "You went to college?"

I gasped in mock-offense. "I'll have you know I went to Kamii! The smart-people college!"

Saiko snickered, but Mutsuki just sighed, a small smile on his lips. He gestured to the paper.

"Have you seen the reports for the Auction Raid, Hide-san?"

I brightened considerably, walking towards the paper excitedly. "I haven't, actually. I just woke up like an hour ago, and most of the hour I've been awake I've been arguing with nurses," I admitted, peering at the thick stack of documents. "What's it say? Anything good?"

"Hell yeah it does!" Shirazu said triumphantly, thrusting the paper forward so I could read it. "Look at it!"

"Okay, okay," I laughed again, their excitement intoxicating and practically tangible. Even Urie looked rather pleased, and when I read the document, I understood why. "Commission of Counter Ghoul Investigators mentioned for especially distinguished service: Associate Special Class Washuu Matsuri, Associate Special Class Suzuya Juuzou, Suzuya Squad, First Class Mado Akira..." I trailed off, my eyes lighting up as I continued. "Rank 1 Sasaki Haise, Rank 1 Hayashimura Naoto, Rank 2 Nagachika Hideyoshi, Rank 2 Urie Kuki, Rank 2 Shirazu Ginshi, Rank 3 Mutsuki Tooru, and Rank 3 Yonebayashi Saiko."

It took a moment for it to sink in, then I grinned so largely that it hurt, grabbing each of the Quinx and yanking them to their feet, drawing them into hugs. Even Urie was pulled into the reluctant group hug, and I restrained myself from screeching. Even still, my voice was rather loud. "You guys did it! You did great! You did awesome! I'm so proud of you!"

Saiko laughed happily, and Shirazu's grin was pleased. Mutsuki's smile was a bit more faint, but he looked rather happy and content. Even though Urie's face remained as emotion-deprived as ever, I liked to believe he was a little happy too, even if he was mostly just irritated at the physical contact.

"Hide-san, you're name was on the list too!" Mutsuki said as I let them go reluctantly. Urie stepped back like I'd burned him, but not as far as I expected him too. Small progress, but progress all the same. "And so was Sasaki's!"

Shirazu grinned, that sharp, shark-toothed grin. "You must've done great with that ghoul! I bet ya kicked his ass, didn't ya?"

So Saiko didn't tell them about the fight? That was odd, but it must've been traumatizing for her to witness. It'd only be normal she didn't want to talk about it. Once again, I found myself wishing that Haise had let me fight alone, and felt a bit guilty that I wished he had stayed unconscious. If he had, he wouldn't have been hurt further, and I could've battled Takizawa alone. If I had, I could've escaped with much less severe injuries-- I would have been able to fight at full power, but I doubted I would have needed to. I would have killed Takizawa before then.
I wouldn't have let Haise be hurt. I wouldn't have let Saiko be scarred. I wouldn't have let Hinami, the dear little sister he cherished back before he lost his memories, be dragged into this. I wondered how she was faring at Aogiri Tree. Had she been punished for fighting Takizawa? Had she been k--
No, I veered my thoughts away from that particular train. Hinami wasn't the sweet, defenseless little girl anymore. She was still pretty sweet, but she wasn't little or defenseless. She held Takizawa off for a nice chunk of time, after all, and she was an executive of Aogiri Tree by her own power.

And I would see her again, in two weeks. I would ensure that she was safe, for Haise's sake. She saved him, so I as good as owed her my own life. The least I could do was give her answers.

"Well, Haise and I fought him for awhile. Then I got knocked out, and when I came to and jumped back in, and Haise was almost unconscious for a little bit, then he got up and fought again and I healed a little, then Haise got knocked out completely and I may have killed the ghoul, or hopefully at least injured him beyond repair so he'd die later." I said thoughtfully. "But we were helped along a bit by another one of the Aogiri Tree ghouls, believe it or not. Think about how strict they must be on their executives if an itty-bitty ghoul like her felt the need to discipline him!"

I've got to make the CCG think Hinami's intervention wasn't related to Haise or myself. I've got to divert their attention back to Aogiri, make sure they never had the chance to be suspicious.

"Itty-bitty? You tellin' me a kid fought this monster?" Shirazu repeated incredulously. Mutsuki had seated himself back on his hospital bed, next to where Saiko was stretched out to cover most of the bed. Urie had sat down on one of the plush armchairs, so Shirazu and I were the only ones still standing.

"No, a young female ghoul fought an, older, male ghoul," I corrected. Ghouls weren't people, in the CCG's eyes, and it was better not to argue the fault of their views, even if it did make me a little angry. But humans were stubborn creatures, and their view of ghouls were going to be slow to change, if ever.

"Well, yeah, but did the little one win?" Shirazu asked excitedly, like he was talking about two dogs fighting. And it wasn't a fault in his heart, because Shirazu was a good kid; it was simply the way he was raised.

I smiled gently but firmly. "No. She didn't. In fact, she may be dead now. She couldn't have been older than fourteen or fifteen," My mouth tasted acrid with the lie and the statement that followed, but I continued, deciding Saiko would have been too far away to make out specifics like age. "And she looked like she could become even more powerful. Best we nipped this one in the bud."

"If she happened to still be alive, though, she'd make a good target for hunting down. Aogiri executive, young, and the potential to become at least S~ranked," Urie mused, looking intrigued.

I laughed, covering the lurching of my stomach. "True. But that's enough talk for the future! Today's a day of celebration! You're all shoo-ins for promotions, so when we get out of the hospital, you'll be damned certain I'm taking you out for dinner or lunch or something! For now, though, I'm going to go visit your mother and inform him of your progress!"

"Is Maman awake?" Saiko asked, sitting up a little with a hopeful expression.

I shook my head. "Sorry kid, but no, Haise was still sleeping last I heard. I'm going in to wait for him to wake up!"

Mutsuki shifted a little, making the bed-sheets crinkle noisily, but he didn't seem to notice as he asked, "Will you tell us when Sasaki-san wakes up, Hide-san?"
"Of course," I assured. "I'll come in and tell you as soon as he's awake. So you guys rest up and get better before then, 'kay?"

"I don't think that's physically possible." Urie muttered.

"It is. You're a Quinx: anything is possible!" I declared, ducking out of the room with a wave.

At the other end of the floor is my and Haise's rooms, and I knock as a precaution before entering. There is, as expected, no answer. I open the door and enter the room, finding it to be a duplicate of my own and Mutsuki's. His heart monitor is beeping away steadily, but he isn't on a ventilator or anything of the sort, and Haise almost looks serene. The pristine white covers are pulled to his chest and his arms folded neatly over the blanket. I note that his neck and arms-- the only visible skin-- are wrapped in white cotton bandages, like I had been when I had awoken. Excluding that, someone has even washed the blood out of his dual-colored hair, which is beginning to be an equal amount of black and white, or maybe even more black than white.

I debated on the armchair in the corner or the smaller plastic chair by his bedside, frowning, when I yawned. I wondered what time it was-- was it night or morning? Afternoon, maybe?-- and searched about the room for a clock. It read seven-o-seven, but whether that was seven am or pm wasn't specified. Before I could decide, however, a voice broke the silence of the room.

"You can sit on the bed, you know. I'm not made of china. I won't break."

I jumped a little, admittedly, as Haise shifted a little and coughed. I poured a glass of water from the bedside table and handed it to him, remembering how parched I was when I woke up. Haise accepted it with another cough, and after a few drinks, his coughing ceased. His voice, however, was still horse.

"How are you? How are the Quinx?"

"The kids are okay. Still being treated and held, because they don't have our godly healing, but they're good. And I'm fine. The hospital's just being a stick in the mud and holding me for another day, even though I woke up healed. But," I said, poking his bandage-wrapped arm and obediently sitting on the bed, "how are you doing?"

Haise blinks owlishly, as if he hadn't considered himself yet, and he flexed his bandaged fingers experimentally. They curl and uncurl on command, so Haise declared hoarsely, "I'm fine. My wounds are gone too, I think, even if I'm a little sore."

"That'll fade soon," I said, offering a grin. "At least, mostly."

"That's reassuring," Haise croaked, smiling. And it was easier to breathe, suddenly, but I hadn't realized it was difficult until then. "What time is it?"

"Seven-something," I said vaguely. "Morning or night, I can't say. I only woke up like, an hour and a half ago and I haven't actually seen any windows, since they're covered with curtains in my room and yours. I can go look, though," I offered, going to stand but stopped by a hand on my wrist.

"No," Haise said, and I stayed. "That's alright." He said it with a fearful expression, and I wondered if he had been having nightmares before. Maybe I had come at the right time, then: Haise would never ask for comfort, but it was better for someone to be here than for him to be alone. Despite sleeping for a solid twenty-four hours there were shadows under his eyes, weary and dark things, so I tossed aside other concerns and decided to tell the kids about Haise waking up later.

What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them, after all.
Plopping down next to him, Haise did nothing but stare at me for a moment, where I sprawled out on the space next to him. Then, he tentatively asked, "Hide? What are you doing?"

"I'm going back to sleep," I declared firmly. "And you are, too."

"But Hide, I just woke up--"

"No 'but Hide',' I said, mimicking his tone. "You're still tired! And how often do you actually get days off? Not often, that's what. We've got meeting with Suzuya-san's squad Sundays and work half-days most Saturdays. So you're going to take advantage of this golden opportunity and sleep. And when you wake up, the kids have a surprise for you."

Haise looked almost wary as he reluctantly laid down, and I shifted under the thin blanket.

"...A surprise?"

"Yep. A surprise!" I said excitedly, eyes bright and grinning. Haise's bedhead was, yet again, absolutely terrible. "Our kids have made us proud, Haise! Even Urie."

"Well, I'm proud of them all the time, regardless," Haise said, relaxing into the hospital bed while the heart monitor beeped steadily. "But what did they do?"

"I'm not telling you! It's not mine to tell, and I'm not telling the Quinx to come visit until after you take a nap!" I announced. "Haven't you heard that you heal faster while asleep?"

Haise looked skeptical. "I thought that was a myth."

"You're doubt and skepticism pains me," I sulked, then announced, "Not only does higher cellular division occur during sleep, but it takes a cell less than half the time to divide during sleep than it does during wakefulness!"

"Where did you read that?" Haise asked, still doubtful. "I don't remember much about the human anatomy, except for the fact we have one hundred and six bones, and I know even less about ghoul biology. But that doesn't seem--"

"Shh," I cut off. "Less talk, more sleep. Just trust me."

Haise laughed, but obediently closed his eyes. I did too, relaxing and laying back. Hospital beds weren't terribly uncomfortable, and it was surprising, but I was still tired. My body ached a little still, in spite of all of my wounds healing already. But I was warm enough and comfortable under the thin sheets, using Haise's arm as a pillow. And I was almost asleep when Haise kissed me, softly but slowly, and when I blinked my eyes open he smiled.

"I do trust you."

When I woke up again, two bouquets of flowers sat on Haise's nightstand. One was a bouquet of irises, beautiful and bright blue and yellow. Symbols of good news-- not uncommon to send to
hospital patients, I supposed, and being careful not to move too much and disturb Haise, I reached over to read the card around the first bouquet. In neat, clear handwriting, someone had written:

*To: Sasaki Haise*

*From: Mado Akira*

Beside it lay a book, store bought and bound in paper, so that I was unable to see the title. But it too had a tag, and in similarly neat and clear but obviously different handwriting, there was printed:

*To: Sasaki Haise*

*From: Arima Kishou*

I closed the small card attached to the string, examining the second bouquet, dethorned pink roses. Opening this card, I paused and had to re-read it.

*To: Nagachika Hideyoshi*

*From: Mado Akira*

I smiled. Pink roses, huh? A sign of trust. Perhaps the ice queen was finally warming up to me, after all.

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Two weeks after the Auction Raid, the Sunday of November 11th, I told Haise and the Quinx that I was planning on going and meeting some relatives of mine, to let them know I was alright and catch up a little, and that I would probably be gone for awhile. I walked to :re, as I always did, and I was dressed casually for once. Normally I dressed in suits and white coats, because I would come directly from meetings, but today I was dressed in a nearly-neon blue-and-green long-sleeved shirt, a bright yellow-and-black jacket that was reminiscent of my college days, and blue jeans. My shoes were neon green, and traced with orange.

The air was chilly, but I didn't mind as I opened the door to :re, at five minutes before eleven. Touka was nowhere to be seen, and I wondered if she had all Sundays off. Nishiki was working the counter, and when he saw me, he grimaced.

"You look like a rainbow shit on you."

I beamed. "Thanks, Nishio-san!"

"That wasn't a compliment."

"I'm going to take it as one!" I declared. I didn't bother telling him my order, because after weeks it had fallen into a routine and Nishiki knew my order like he knew the booth I would sit in, and I walked towards said booth, normally already occupied with Uta and Itori. But they wouldn't be here for another hour, whereas Hinami was supposed to be here any minute---
the door to :re opened with a jingle, but none of the other customers (two high-school aged girls and an old man with a cane) looked up. Hinami, hair cut neatly and dressed in a plain white blouse and a black skirt. She stared blankly at Nishiki for a moment, then asked incredulously, "...Nishio-san?"

Nishiki looked just as incredulous as he stared through the smudged lenses of his glasses to her. "Hinami-chan? The hell? I thought you were with--"

"Nishiki, that's no way to talk to our customers--" Touka began, but stopped just as fast, emerging from the stairs that led to her apartment, cutting Nishiki off at just the right time. It would probably be a bad idea to mention Hinami belonging to the notorious ghoul group to the customers. "Hinami-chan?"

"Oneechan!" Hinami exclaimed happily, and Touka looked close to tears. I wondered why; surely she had known Hinami was alive, and Nishiki obviously knew that Hinami belonged to Aogiri. Was it that they hadn't had contact in two years? Oh dear. I hadn't planned for that. The reason I chose :re was because I thought it would be a comfortable environment for Hinami to have a chat in. But this could be a bit awkward, now.

Apparently not, because Hinami threw her arms around Touka's shoulders as if she had never left and Touka gave her a sad smile and ruffled her hair, and for a moment they resembled the hot-blooded high-school girl and the orphaned, childishly innocent little girl.

"How have you been, Hinami-chan?" Touka asked once Hinami released her reluctantly. Her tone was careful, cautious, and Hinami knew it.

Hinami, once more subdued and sadder than she had been, again the grown young woman instead of little girl, stood a little bit straighter and kept her answer just as careful and cautious. "I've fared well enough. Ayato-kun is kind, and not everyone is bad."

Touka was hesitant, but she asked, "...Oh? And how is Ayato?"

Hinami's smile was sad. "He's doing well. He's gotten much less hot-blooded than he used to be, and he's strong."

Touka's smile seemed bright, but there was undertones of reserved sadness, like she had accepted the fact her little brother was the notorious Black Rabbit a long time ago, and had accepted the fact that she was no longer a part of his life.

"I see. Thank you for letting me know." And after a short moment, in a lower, less bright tone, Touka asked, "Hinami-chan. Are you in trouble? Is that why you've come?"

Hinami shook her head. "No, no, I'm fine, Oneechan. It's nothing like that, and I hadn't even realized that you worked here. I'm here to see Kanou-kun."

My blood turned to ice. Ah, I had forgotten. She had always addressed me like that, after learning that Nagachika wasn't my true surname, and it had never bothered me before. But now that I had severed ties with Kanou, well...

"Nagachika's over there," Nishiki gestured towards where I sat, and I waved, regardless of the chill in my blood. It wasn't Hinami's fault. She was unaware of everything that had gone on, and the last time she'd seen me before the Auction Raid I had been Kanou's son, working in the laboratories on experiments.

Touka looked a bit concerned, but not for me. I didn't think so, anyways. But just like she had sadly
accepted Ayato's distance, it seemed like she accepted Hinami had to make her own choices.

"Ah. Alright then. I'll let you go then. Before I do, though," Touka said, "do you want some coffee, Hinami-chan? I'll bring it to the table for you."

Hinami beamed. "I'd love some."

And then Nishiki went back to wiping down tables, Touka went to make our coffee, and Hinami strode towards the table and sat down with her hands folded politely in her lap. It was as if nothing happened, and I was rather impressed.

Impressed, but honest with Hinami. I didn't want to lie to her.

"I'm sorry, Hinami-chan. I chose :re because I thought that it would be a comfortable atmosphere, since Touka-chan owns the place. I hadn't realized..."

But Hinami just smiled softly and said, "It's okay, Kanou-kun. I know you didn't plan this out. You're not a bad person."

Her confidence in people never ceased to amaze me. Even if she was more... jaded, and realistic now, she still had more confidence in the human and ghoul races as a whole than I ever had.

"I'm not a good person, not really," I admitted, but continued without pause. "But I promised you answers, and answers you'll get. I'm going to tell you who I really am, and what I've done, and I promise it won't be pretty. But I'll be short about it, okay?"

Hinami looked a little confused and a little cautious, but she nodded. "Okay, Kanou-kun."

Stiffening just a little, I added, "And I really am sorry to ask this, but would you mind, um, not calling me 'Kanou-kun'? It's... sort of part of what I'm going to tell you, but I'll just flat-out say it: Kanou is not my father, not in the way a father is supposed to be, and I'm not his son in anything except DNA. I've completely severed my ties-- or at least, I'm attempting to-- with Kanou, and I'm going by Nagachika now. Just Hide's fine, though."

Looking thoroughly confused now, Hinami nodded slowly. "Okay then, Hide-san."

Sighing and lacing my fingers, I began.

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Hinami didn't say anything for a long while after I had finished talking, and I waited anxiously. I had debated whether or not to leave out the facts of my life, but decided in the end it was something she had a right to know if she were to-- hopefully-- trust me.

Finally, she said, "Hide-san, please answer my questions honestly."

"I will," I answered, without hesitation or pause. Hinami nodded, looking solemn, and she began.

"Do you regret what you've done to Oniichan?"
"I do. I want to believe that I made him happier by being there for him when we were kids," and he made me happier, I thought, but didn't say. "But as much as I hate to say it... In Haise's best interest, it probably would have been better for me to have never met him as Kaneki, so that I could have never meddled in his life."

The words tasted bitter and terrible, but cruelly true.

"I don't think that's true," Hinami said, after another moment's deliberation. "I think that you really were and are his friend, but I won't sugarcoat it. You definitely haven't made good choices, and what you've done to Oniichan is terrible." She let that sink in. "But I think that you're looking out for Oniichan's best interests... and I think that you do love him."

And it baffled me, that this sixteen year old girl could be so insightful and so smart. It didn't matter a bit that she hadn't gone to school; she was smarter than anyone her age should have been. Did she learn all of this from books, I wonder? Perhaps Eto, twisted and sadistic though she may be, was a good influence on Hinami's perception of people. Eto had always been unnervingly good at reading people, and it was possible Hinami had picked some of it up.

"Hide-san. Why did you save me, back at the Auction Raid? You could have left me to die. By saving me, you could have risked being caught and your whole life as it stands now could have been thrown away. So why did you do it?"

"Because you're still Haise's dear little sister, even if he doesn't remember, and because you fought to save Haise's life, even at the risk of your own." I met her gaze steadily. "I as good as owe you my own life. No, I owe you more than if you had saved my own life. I'll owe you more than you can imagine, which is why I have a question for you, if you're done asking your questions?"

Hinami nodded. "I'm done, for now. Go on."

I took a deep breath before I continued, to steady myself. "I have many connections in the ghoul world, as Pierrot, and as a scientist of my own right and not just Kanou's son. The ghoul who foraged my papers as a child and who foraged my papers now is the best at his job. He can make you papers, and you can integrate into the human world. But I will have to warn you, pretending to be human always carries the risk of being discovered."

Hinami answered faster than I expected her to.

"Hide-san, thank you for your offer. It's kind, and more of a chance than most ghouls ever get, but I'll have to decline." Hinami said gently. "And it's not because I don't want to be normal, if you can call it that. I do. But I also wish to be strong, so that nobody I love is ever taken from me again, and that is the only reason I joined the Tree. So I'm not going to give up now."

There was a determination that most would never have in her, and a strength I couldn't fathom. But I had planned a back-up offer, and now I hesitantly began again.

"...Hinami, before I make my second offer, I need to know one thing. Please answer me honestly, because this could very well be life or death." I leaned forward and asked urgently, "Did Haise see your face, when your mask cracked?"

Hinami frowned, contemplating it. "...my mask didn't crack much, and the only time Oniichan faced me directly was brief. I don't think that he saw my face, no. Certainly not enough to identify me."

I nodded, relived. "Okay. Okay, that's good. Hinami-chan, what if I told you that I could make it so that you could meet Haise, not as a ghoul but as a human? Just a normal young woman, here, at :re."
"Hinami-chan," I felt obliged to caution. "Haise doesn't remember anything. He hunts ghouls now, and he's devoted to the CCG. He doesn't know anything about Kaneki Ken. But even if he doesn't know Kaneki Ken, he is the same person, more or less. Sasaki Haise is..." I struggled for the right words. "Not just a vessel, a shell. He is Kaneki Ken: the person living the life Kaneki Ken could have lived, the happy dream Kaneki always wanted, and could have had if his life weren't riddled with tragedy. He has a mother figure and a father figure, four subordinates that love him like children, comrades that care for him, and most of all, he doesn't ever have to constantly look over his shoulder with the fear of being hunted down. He may be discriminated against by some of our more idiotic co-workers, but he can be a half-ghoul without the constant, looming fear of death. And I want to protect him. I want to make sure Sasaki Haise can live a long life, content and happy, never knowing Kaneki Ken's tragedy. Do you understand?"

Hinami, solemn and dark-eyed, nodded. "I do understand. You don't want to bring back Oniichan's memories, and I..." She swallowed. "I think that it is the right choice to make. If... If Oniichan is happy, he should remain how he is. But I don't care if he doesn't remember me, or even if he's a completely different person, though it doesn't seem like he is. I want to see him, if I can. I would like to see him truly smile, again."

And she stopped, sounding like she was close to tears, and I had the urge to embrace her. But I didn't, because it wasn't my place and because Hinami was strong. She didn't cry, and the shiny sheen to her eyes faded. When it did, I continued.

"Haise had asked about my family, recently. I told him that my mother was deceased and my father lived hours away, but that I had some distant relatives, elder cousins, that raised me like a son, and I visited them every Sunday. I told him one of the Sundays I would take him with me, to meet them. But it would be just as easy to introduce you as the little girl my elder cousins adopted, or my third cousin, or something of the sort." I let the offer hang in the air, waiting to see if she would accept it or leave it.

She took it, with a light in her eyes that was just a bit dim. "I want to do it, Hide-san."

I exhaled and nodded slowly. "Alright. Uta and I-chan should be here soon, and we can explain this to them. And then, this Sunday or the next, we can put it to action."

"Sounds like you've been plotting without us again, Hide," Uta said, sliding onto the booth beside Hinami. "Don't you think you haven't been out of the hospital long enough yet to start plotting?"

"It's never too soon to start plotting," Itori said, sliding onto the booth next to Hinami, who's eyes widened just a bit. "Isn't that right, Kiddo?"
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Did I mention I was stuck in a basement for hours? Yep. Ample time to write!

(Which I did.)

Oh, good ol' Kansas, with it's tornados and storms and stuff. It knocked my gutters down, so I've got to get up on the roof and put those back up. After I go and take a math test, of course.

(Wish me luck.)

I hope you enjoy this chapter! It's a bit longer too, because it encases all of Christmas.

The meeting next Sunday, on the second day of December, came much faster than I expected. The CCG's workload had been mild at best, with only routine patrols and hunts of low-ranked ghouls that the Quinx could take on with ease. Even our paperwork was light, and would probably remain so until we started on our next major case, which wouldn't be until after the promotion ceremony in January.

So we walked to :re, Haise and I, with Haise looking more nervous than he need be.

"It's just meeting my family, Haise. They're a little crazy, sure, but you don't need to be nervous." I sighed.

"But Hide," Haise protested, fidgeting in his grey sweater vest with it's white undershirt, and loose black slacks. "It's meeting your family. What if they don't like me? What if I'm not dressed nice enough?"

I suppressed another sigh and a bit of laughter. Haise meant well, but if anything, he would be over-dressed. I had convinced him to leave his tie, but that was about all I had been able to do.

And they liked him well enough from before, and he would be plenty liked now, but I couldn't very well mention that little fact.

"Haise. I can guarantee you'll be dressed nicer than my family. Well, Uta, at the very least, and probably I-chan and Hinami-chan too."

It had the opposite effect than I intended: Haise looked more panicked.

"You mean I'm over-dressed? Should I go home and change?"

"We're going for coffee, Haise, not a fancy dinner. You aren't over-dressed, you just look very nice, which isn't a bad thing, so calm down. And no, you will not go home and change, because we're already here." I said, reaching to hold :re's door open. Haise and I were familiar enough with the place, since we came almost every Saturday, and I was here every Sunday as well. It was like a home away from home.
"Welcome to :re!" Touka called brightly. "Hello, Hide-kun, Sasaki-san. Uta-san, Itori-san, and Hinami-chan are already seated in the usual spot. Do you both want the regular?"

"That would be nice, Touka-chan. Thank you!" I answered, for both myself and Haise, who looked like he might be sick. But he attempted to put on a smile, which I gave him credit for, as I lead him to where Hinami was quietly reading a book while Uta and Itori chatted in the far corner booth. Itori looked up as we approached, however, and their conversation ceased as she was suddenly on her feet and squeezing the breath from my lungs in a bear hug. Itori, and I loved her dearly, had absolutely no sense of personal space. As evident when she released me and swept Haise up in a hug that was just as tight and spun him around in a circle.

"Kiddo~! How's work been? Wait, no! First, introductions!" Itori, having released a slightly dazed Haise, offered a quick dip of her head and said, "I'm Itori, Hide's second-cousin! Or was it great-cousin? I'm not sure, I'm bad with all the extended family mumbo-jumbo. I'm his cousin of some sort, but I'm like his mother!"

Uta simply waved, his dark-tinted glasses catching :re's warm light. "I'm a cousin of some sort too, but really, I'm worse than she is when it comes to keeping track of this extended family stuff. But I'm like his father if she's like his mother. We raised him. I'm Uta."

Hinami, who had bookmarked her page and set the book gently on the table, looked completely natural in her introduction. If an onlooker were to see her, they would genuinely believe that this was her first time meeting him. She was polite but not quite timid, smiling slightly.

"I'm Fujioka Hinami, but Hinami's what everybody calls me, so you can too. Uta and Itori take care of me like they did Hide-nii, because my parents passed away. Hide-nii's like my big brother, and he's told us a lot about you. It's nice to meet you."

And they introduced themselves so naturally, so smoothly, that it was nearly impossible to believe they were lying. I smiled as Haise tried his best to recover his wits and inclined his head, and he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you all. I'm Sasaki Haise, a--" and suddenly Haise faltered, like he was unsure. I thought he would perhaps say comrade, co-worker, friend, or anything in-between, since he was never very good at flat-out stating his relationship status. In fact, Rize was his first date (and look at how that turned out) so he'd never even had to broach the subject before. And now he was at a loss.

"You're what now? I'm sorry, I didn't quite seem to catch that," Itori said, looking far too innocent for how mischievous she was acting. Haise paled further.

I took pity on him and jumped in here, my tone scolding. "We're dating, I-chan. I told you that already, so quit teasing him."

Itori laughed, and Uta smiled, but he was more courteous than she was about it. By a little bit, that is.

"Don't mind her. She's awfully rude, but she doesn't do it on purpose. It's just her nature," and Uta heaved a large sigh at that, like he was exhausted by her behavior when he wasn't much better.

Haise still looked at a loss for words. Hinami, the dear girl, took pity on him like I had and she gestured to the bench across from where they sat and said, "They're both poking fun at you. They really don't mean any harm by it."

I ushered him to sit, and slid onto the seat beside him just in time for Touka to set our cups in front of us with a pitying smile.
"Thank you, Kirishima-san," Haise said, and I beamed at Touka. She had nice timing, no doubt about it.

"Enjoy," Was all she said, with another soft smile before leaving us to go behind the counter.

Haise sipped at his coffee, ignoring the scalding temperature, looking relieved for something to do. But he seemed content enough, and the conversation, though it remained playful and mischievous on Uta and Itori’s part, flowed well enough.

And then, once Haise had relaxed more, he noted the book Hinami was reading. His eyes brightened as he gestured to it.

"Is that Takatsuki Sen's book, *Monochrome Rainbow?*

Hinami brightened, and she nodded her confirmation, picking the book back up like it was a prized possession. "It is. I read it before, when I was younger, but I've decided to read it again now."

"Her stories are normally really dark, so I don't like to read them much, but I liked *Monochrome Rainbow*. Do you have a favorite short story?" Haise asked, talking animatedly now. He always gets like that when he's talking about books. He practically breathes them.

Hinami hesitated, then said, "...I liked *Showers at Sunset* best, I think."

"It was good, but I think I liked *Resentments* a little better. Any reason why you liked *Showers at Sunset* the best?" Haise was genuinely curious, and Hinami smiled fondly.

"I suppose it was because when I was reading this the first time, someone who was like... an older brother to me, was teaching me some of the more difficult kanji." She flipped open the book as she spoke, to a page that fell open easily. "I guess it's a bit strange, but this is why *Showers at Sunset* is my favorite story, I think."

She was pointing to a kanji, and Haise blinked and squinted a little, trying to read it. Eventually, he sighed and sat back.

"I'm sorry. I've got poor eyesight, but I've left my reading glasses at home. Would you tell me what it is?"

Hinami's smile was sad, but I don't think Haise noticed.

"Sure. It's read as 'hakuhyou', but it can also be read as 'usurai'."

"That one sounds much prettier, doesn't it?" Haise said, smiling.

Hinami looked taken aback for a brief moment, but then she smiled too, and it was less sad.

"It is. You know, the fact that you find words pretty... It's really refreshing."

Haise was singing in the kitchen while he cooked, slightly off-key but brightly and happily, and Saiko was decorating the Christmas tree, dancing around a little while she did. Mutsuki slumped
down on the couch with a sigh.

"Finally, a day off. Time to rest."

Shirazu, sitting next to him, copied his sigh. "No kidding. I'm still tired from the Auction Raid... The CCG needs to give us more gratitude!"

I heaved the ladder a little higher as I emerged from the garage, just in time to see Saiko gesture to the tree proudly and call, "Maman! Is this enough decoration?"

I looked towards the tree, and found all of the decorations beneath the middle of the tree. There weren't any at eye-level with me, let alone higher.

Haise echoed my thoughts from the kitchen. "It's all on the bottom half... Put some a little higher, okay?"

"But Maman, I can't reach!" Saiko protested.

"What did you think I was doing, twiddling my thumbs in the garage? Silly, I'm prepared for everything!" I declared, setting the tall ladder down next to the tree.

Saiko cheered, and Haise smiled. "Thanks, Hide!"

"Well, you're cooking, so the least I can do is make sure the decorating runs smoothly," I said, as Haise emerged from the kitchen briefly, wiping his hands on his apron. "How do you know how to make fried chicken, anyways?"

"I bought a cookbook," Haise said, like that explained everything. I took his word for it as I went about setting up the ladder and going to get the second box of decorations from the garage. When I returned with it, Haise said cheerily, "I invited some people over today, so everyone please behave yourselves."

Then a timer for something went off, and he disappeared into the kitchen again. Mutsuki smiled, bright and genuine.

"Sasaki seems to be having fun."

Shirazu snorted, but his grin was toothy. "He's treatin' us like kids, but he's the most child-like of all of us."

But before I could answer, Haise called, "Mutsuuuuuuki! Lend me a hand! And Shirazu, get to work as well!"

"Okay!" Mutsuki called back, getting up and heading into the kitchen. Shirazu didn't move for a minute, and I batted him on the head, gently.

"Go on, go help Saiko!" I scolded.

Shirazu gave me a flat look, but he rolled his eyes and sighed, though it was good-natured. But he stood up and walked towards the tree, where Saiko waited next to the ladder.

"Hey, topknot booy," Saiko called, grinning. "Please support the ladder, topknot."

"Hey!" Shirazu protested, then grabbed the ladder roughly and said, "Here, climb! Fatass."

"You don't say that to people!" Saiko said adamantly. "My belly shrinks during some nights, you
"Just get your fat feet on the ladder already!"

"Shirazu..." I heard Haise say, and I called,

"It's rude to say that to a girl, Shiragin!"

"Ooink!" Saiko said loudly, just to spite him. He jiggled the ladder a little as she climbed, and Saiko kicked him in the head, hitting him solidly and hard enough Shirazu staggered.

"Atta girl!" I said cheerily, and Haise, emerging from the kitchen for another brief moment, but this time with Mutsuki, gave me a disapproving look.

"Hide! Don't encourage violence!"

"Haise, we're ghouls. Violence is in our job description."

"Not necessarily," Haise rebuked. "Article 13, Section 2! It is--"

"--prohibited to cause a more pain to a ghoul than necessary." I finished. "I know the clauses, but that doesn't exclude violence in general from our jobs."

Haise sighed, knowing what I said was true, but I brushed the topic away.

"Well, that's enough talk about work for now. It's Christmas! And people will be here soon, so come on, let's get to it!" I announced. Haise smiled, knowing full well that I was putting the topic aside before we could bicker (and we never did fight seriously, but occasionally we would bicker over small things) and letting me do it. The matter was closed, and we let it be happily.

I went back to making sure the Chateau was cleaned spotlessly and there were little things in their places, like a Christmas-patterned tablecloth and a tiny snow-globe on the coffee table, and Mutsuki went upstairs to check the cupboards for ingredients. Saiko and Shirazu continued to bicker as they decorated the tree, though now it was more of a playful banter, Haise cooked and baked and hummed all the while, and some Christmas program played on the television despite nobody really paying attention to it.

I was content, and happy.

Then Mutsuki came back downstairs, nearly running directly into Urie, who was dressed a jogging suit with his earbuds looped around his neck. And Mutsuki made me proud, because he gave Urie a disapproving look and asked, "Urie, where are you going?"

"Going to train by myself." Urie answered without pause.

Mutsuki put his hands on his hips, looking stern. "No! Sasaki and Hide-san told us to spend the day together, and we're going to do it. It's Christmas, Urie."

Urie, with his signature flat look, said simply, "I'm fine."

But Mutsuki was having none of it.

"Urie! If you're so adamant on going out, then please go and buy some stuff!"

Urie actually looked taken aback by Mutsuki's new-found confidence. "Huh...? I won't..."
"Everyone is helping out. Even Saiko is doing her best. It's unfair when you're the only one skipping out," Mutsuki said, thrusting a list of groceries forward. "Here, this is the shopping list. Make sure you return or we'll all be in trouble."

Urie looked furious, but he snatched the list and stalked out the door. Mutsuki seemed to deflate, and not realizing I was behind him, he sighed.

"Maybe I was too harsh...?"

I clapped my hands down on his shoulders, beaming so largely it hurt.

"Mutsuki, you just did awesome! I'm proud of you, standing up to Urie like that!"

Mutsuki blinked, mouth open just a little. Then he snapped his mouth shut and smiled.

"Thank you, Hide-san."

The doorbell rang, and the moment was over, but I was still beaming. Haise was coming out of the kitchen again, now with a tray of cookies, and he looked towards the door, but I called, "It's alright, Haise! I got it!"

I opened the door, and behind it stood Itou Kuramoto, with a huge grin and closed eyes, and the ever-stoic Kuroiwa Takeomi. Kuramoto waved, to me and past me to where Haise was setting the tray of cookies down on the table.

"Haaaaise-kun! Nagachika-kun!"

"Ah! Kuramoto-san and Kuroiwa-san! Welcome!" Haise called, smiling.

"Two male investigators have arrived!" Kuramoto announced brightly. "Oooh, so this is Sasaki's house? Are we early?"

"Nah, you're fine," I assured, opening the door further. The two men stepped inside and removed their shoes in the entry way. Haise, still dressed in his pale-colored apron, came to stand beside me.

Kuroiwa bowed stiffly, formally, and said, "Thank you for the invitation."

"Ahaha, you don't have to be so polite," Haise smiled, but he dipped into a short bow as well. Feeling a bit late, I did the same.

"I heard from Shirazu a little while back that you twisted a ghoul's head off?" Haise asked, looking awed.

I was too. For a human to do that, he'd need strength greater than or equal to a ghoul's, which theoretically only about 0.01% of the population could achieve...

Perhaps Kuroiwa was a bigger threat than I once imagined.

"Not really." Kuroiwa, straight-faced and facial expression never changing, said.

"How'd it end up like that...?" Kuramoto asked, laughing. "Haise-kun, that's taken way out of proportion."

"Where's Hirako-san?" I asked, as they stepped into the living room.

"Hmm, Take said he's a little busy." Kuramoto said, but didn't elaborate further.
Haise looked disappointed. "I see... I was hoping to get to know him."

Kuramoto just laughed again. "Take's not the type to participate in things like this. By the way, I am that type."

As Mutsuki paused to talk to them, holding a bag of what looked like flower, I noticed that Saiko was perched precariously on the ladder, struggling to put it on the Christmas Tree. Shirazu was watching as she wobbled and doing his best to keep the ladder firmly in place. But Saiko was far too short, and I didn't think Shirazu had the balance. Apparently, Saiko came to the same conclusion, and she huffed and called, "Maman, I can't reach! Come put the star on for me!"

Haise smiled. "I'll be in there in just a second, Saiko. Let me finish cooking first, then I'll do it. Okay?"

"Okay!" Saiko called, happily getting down from the ladder and going to meet Kuramoto with a grin.

"Let's play some games!"

"Yeah, Bujin, let's play some games!" Kuramoto said with enthusiasm. I assumed it was a nickname- an alternate character reading for Kuroiwa's name, maybe-- when the doorbell rang again.

Haise answered the door this time, and when he saw who it was, he beamed. "Good evening, Juuzou and Hanbee!"

Juuzou was dressed in his rainbow colored bow-tie and suspenders, his white dress shirt untucked and his black coat draped around his shoulders but not on his arms.

"Trick or treat!" Juuzou declared, thrusting his hands out.

Haise looked confused. "Oh...?"

Once it was explained to the dismayed Juuzou that this was not Halloween, but Christmas, Haise saved the day with Christmas cookies and the promise of iced sponge cake with strawberries after dinner.

So Juuzou sat down on the couch with a controller munching cookies, leaving just Hanbee, Kuroiwa, Haise, and myself in the kitchen. Mutsuki had began setting the table when Hanbee remarked, "You've invited quite a few people, Sasaki-san."

Laughing over the cries of the others, mashing buttons on their controllers and cursing when Saiko crushed them without a bat of her eye, Haise said, "I was imagining some people might not be able to make it, so I invited a lot."

"I see," Hanbee said, then pointed to the tray Haise was carrying and said, "Here, let me carry that."

"Oh. Thank you, Hanbee-san."

"I invited Shimoguchi, but he immediately turned it down," Haise sighed. "Figures."
"Who else is coming?" Kuroiwa, speaking for the first time since his introduction, asked.

"Well..." I trailed, but before I could finish a new voice broke in.

"It's pretty lively around here, huh..."

Akira, her hair down and dressed in a white suit jacket, black dress shirt, and white tie, smiled. "Good evening, everyone."

"Sorry for intruding," Arima, dressed opposite to Akira in a black suit jacket, white dress shirt, and black tie offered a similar, if smaller, smile.

Shirazu sounded choked. "Akira and... Arima, seriously?!"

"Arima!" Saiko called, unbelieving. I had to stop for a moment to catch the joke, but when I realized it-- she had made a pun of his name, the clever girl, using different kanji-- I high-fived her.

"Atta girl!"

Saiko beamed. "I've learned well."

"Dinner isn't quite done yet," Haise was explaining to Akira and Arima. "So you can join the others. You're the last ones, besides some of Hide's family that's dropping by."

"You've got family coming in, Hide-san?" Mutsuki asked curiously. He had finished setting the table and had come over to just catch the last bit of our conversation.

I nodded. "Yeah, I do. The people who raised me, and they're raising a daughter of their friends, after her parents died a few years back." I was careful to keep it short and simple. Too much detail and backstories were easy to mess up.

"Are they staying for dinner?" Akira asked curiously, setting her bag down as she sat down on the sofa. Arima sat beside her, and they both looked oddly at home, considering they hadn't ever visited the Chateau before.

"Nah, they've got a KFC tradition that's like, six years strong. The apocalypse could happen and they wouldn't break it. That's why they're coming so late, actually." I said, smiling. "But they're missing out. Haise's cooking is to die for."

"So I've heard," Akira said, her lips twitching upwards into another small smile. "But you said relatives raised you? If I may ask, what happened to your parents?"

My lie was smooth, sure. "My mom died in childbirth, and my dad's always away, since he's a doctor. So a few of my distant cousins took me in and raised me, even though they were still teenagers themselves at the time. And now they're raising a girl whose parents they were good friends with, after her parents died in a car accident a few years back. She's like my little sister."

Arima was as hard as ever to read, but my story was plenty believable. There was no reason for them not to believe me, and I was confident when he said, "They sound like nice people."

"They are," I said, smiling genuinely.

Before the conversation could delve deeper into my family, there was a loud creaking noise and I looked up to see Haise, unbalanced on the ladder he stood on to hang the star atop the Christmas tree, like he had promised Saiko. He wobbled back and forth, and I had just enough time to get from
the sofa to beneath the ladder, too late to steady him but just in time to catch him.

And catch him I did, saying a mental thanks for my ghoul strength, because when Haise fell and I caught him I did so neatly, without staggering. I even managed to catch the falling star before it hit the ground, just barely.

The house was deathly silent for a short moment, and then a new voice said, "Nice catch."

It was Uta, Itori beside him, and behind them Hinami, all dressed in winter clothes (excluding Itori) and the picture of a ragtag family of three. Hinami even wore a Santa cap, over a dark green skirt and paler blouse, with a red shawl and shoes.

"I've got amazing reflexes," I said, grinning. "This is Uta, Itori, and Hinami, my family. Guys, these are my co-workers."

_Doves_, I didn't say, but the message was conveyed well enough.

And it was silent for another moment, when I held Haise effortlessly and Uta, Itori, and Hinami stated blankly at the Ghoul Investigators and the Ghoul Investigators stated back just as blankly.

Then Hinami said, "It's a pleasure to meet you all. I'm Fujioka Hinami."

Itori beamed in her thin and rather revealing dress, saying, "I'm Itori! It's nice to meet everyone!"

Uta merely waved, and said, "Hello. I'm Uta."

My co-workers followed suit, hesitantly offering introductions until the last one to be left was Arima, who stared at Uta and at Uta's eyes, and finally he said, "I'm Arima Kishou. Are you a ghoul?"

He said it casually, like he was making a comment on the weather, and Uta blinked.

"Well, of course not. What would make you think that?"

"Your eyes," Arima said. "They're the eyes of a ghoul."

And just like he had when he had explained his eyes to Haise, Uta laughed, his piercings shining.

"Oh. I see. No, they're just scleral injections. Like tattoos, but for your eyes."

"And why would you dye your eyes?" Akira asked, slowly.

"Because I'm an artist, and I like unique things. Tattoos have been done, but how many people dye their eyes?" Uta wagged a finger, "Exactly! Not many! But I do offer the procedure, if you want a set. They last for a few years, and it doesn't hurt all that much."

But Haise, who had heard the explanation before, simply rugged at the sleeves of my shirt to draw my attention. When I looked down, Haise said,

"Thank you, for catching me. But can you put me down now, Hide?"

I laughed quietly, but obediently sat him down. Haise dusted off his clothes and I helped him, and I said,

"I'll always be there to catch you, silly."

But my attention was drawn away from Haise (who's face was a pale shade of red) to Uta. Uta was
beaming at Shirazu and Mutsuki, who were standing side-by-side near the table. "What about you two? Scleras to match your hair, perhaps?"

Mutsuki looked pale, and he edged towards the kitchen.

"I-I think I'll pass, thank you. Y-You know what, I think I'll go make sure everything for dinner is ready."

"Uta," I scolded. "Quit teasing the children."

"He really doesn't mean any harm by it," Hinami said, with the bright and innocent smile of a normal sixteen year old girl. "Uta just likes to tease."

Shirazu got a little red-faced, like he did when he talked to Akira.

"W-Well, it's no problem or anythin'. A little teasin' never hurt anybody."

And Hinami, with her smiles and the reminiscent of a child's charm, won the hearts of the ghoul investigators just like that. Itori and Uta began to talk with the investigators, with a different kind of charm and a certain air of mischief, but just as subtly the air of awkwardness to the room faded, and the conversation flowed easy.

I marveled at the scene. This was a room of powerful Doves, chatting with three high-ranked ghouls about absurdly mundane things. It especially got to me when Hinami, with her smiles and charm befitting of a Clown, talked to Arima Kishou, the CCG'S Reaper, about literature, particularly Kafka and Takatsuki's works, casually and comfortably as she might talk with Haise.

Perhaps it was because of the bizarre sight that my thoughts led to my conclusion:

This, not the overpoweringly strong fighting might, is the true strength of the Clowns.

---

After Uta, Itori, and Hinami left, a little reluctantly on Hinami's part, dinner had been had and everyone was seated around the living room, when Haise suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! Hide, the presents!"

"Oh, right, I'll go get them. Here, stay here," I motioned, going to retrieve them.

"Presents?" Juuzou asked from where he sat beside Hanbee, looking confused.

"They're presents for the them," Haise said, much to the Quinx surprise. I placed a color-coded, neatly wrapped box in front of each of the kids: a purple, rectangular box for Urie; A flat, blue box for Saiko; a perfectly cubical box, bright orange, for Shirazu; and a similarly-shaped box for Mutsuki, but this one was colored green. "It's Christmas, after all!"

For a moment, the Quinx merely stared at the packages placed in front of them. In the background, the sounds of the long-forgotten video game played, the remote controls still in the hands of the players.
"Go on, open them," I urged, sitting back down next to Haise with a beaming smile. After a brief moment's hesitation, Urie moved first, pulling the purple paper off the box in a neat tear, staring at the object in his hands as if he didn't comprehend quite what it was for a moment.

"Earphones for Urie. A better set than the ones you have," Haise said happily.

"Thanks." Urie said, and I was pleased to hear that though it was said without too much enthusiasm (Urie never did speak with much emotion, though, unless it was irritation), he sounded like he genuinely meant it.

Saiko was the next to open her present, tearing the paper off in panels, and she let out an excited gasping noise.

"Ooh! It's a game!"

"What else would we get you?" Haise asked, sincerely bemused for a moment.

"You're the Queen of Games. It'd be strange to get you something else," I said, and Saiko beamed, proud at the title.

Shirazu had already begun opening his, with long, swift tears of the paper so it came off in messy orange strips. There was a box underneath it, and he tore the top flaps open, the tape making a ripping noise as some cardboard came with it.

"For Shirazu, a motorcycle model," I said, just as Shirazu exclaimed, "Ooh?!", cradling the miniature motorcycle in his hands and examining the details. "This is pretty well made!"

"For Mutsuki..." Haise began, as Mutsuki carefully ran a nail under the tape of his package and removed the paper, folding it neatly beside him. Beneath it was a box, almost shoebox-like but smaller. Mutsuki removed the lid and placed it beside him, on top of the paper, and he removed a shiny leather eye-patch. "We weren't sure what to get you, so..."

"We decided on an eye-patch," I finished, when Haise trailed off, unsure what to say. "A good-looking leather one."

Mutsuki's eye widened a little as he stared down at the leather eye-patch, and then he beamed, one of the happiest smiles I had seen him give.

"Thank you both very much!"

Haise laughed. "Actually, I was thinking about sneaking them into your rooms, but I thought it was a bit creepy."

I elbowed him. "Don't lie, Haise! You were all for it!" Turning back to the Quinx, I grinned. "Don't worry. I talked him out of it."

"Yeah, it'd be creepy." Shirazu said, after a pause. "But, really Sassan, Hide-san... Thanks."

I wondered, for a moment, why they looked so moved. Then I realized it was their first Christmas not spent alone or in a Junior Academy. It was probably the first Christmas they had where they actually received gifts in a long time.
After everyone had left, the cleaning-up done, and the Quinx gone to bed, Haise and I follow suit soon after.

Haise laughed, tiredly but content. "I'm exhausted, but today was fun, don't you think?"

I gave him a similar smile, bright despite my tiredness. "Today was really fun. I haven't had that much fun in... I don't know how long, actually." I sighed, flopping onto the bed, maybe a bit more dramatically than necessary. I felt it to be necessary, anyways. "But hey, the kids liked their gifts! We did good!"

"I know! It took so long to decide what to get them, but it was worth it, I think." Haise beamed, but then his eyes widened a little and he said, "Oh! Speaking of gifts, I've got one for you."

Grinning, I sat up. "What a coincidence! I've got one for you, too. Great minds think alike, huh?"

Haise didn't respond, turning around and disappearing out into the now-dark hallway, reappearing a moment later with a hand behind his back, the gift firmly hidden behind his loose black shirt. And then, with a flourish, he presented it to me.

It was a bouquet of flowers, the kind that are grown out-of-season in professional shops, wrapped up in pretty paper that faded from yellow to orange, like a sunset. The flowers were arranged beautifully, red camellias and red carnations, red and pink and white roses, bound in a matching red-orange ribbon.

They were pretty, and I said so, my eyes a little wide as Haise placed the bouquet in my hands.

Haise smiled, an unrestrained smile that was blindingly bright. "I figured that it was only proper to return the favor, right?"

"Here, come on," I urged, tugging him up by the hand. "I want to get a vase for these, and they're all downstairs."

Haise followed me willingly, tugged along by conjoined hands as we attempted to step as quietly as possible down the stairs. The downside of having children with superhuman hearing: you can't sneak anywhere without superhuman stealth.

Which we had. Kind of.

"Here, the vases are under the sink," Haise said, reaching down to pull a vase out. He filled it with water and I placed the flowers in them, gently. And before he could say anything else, I winked and said in a mock-whisper,

"Alright! My turn now. Close your eyes, and hold out your hands!"

Looking like he was suppressing laughter at my antics, Haise complied, closing his eyes and holding out cupped hands. With a Cheshire grin, I slipped a hand into my pocket and pulled out the small, discreet-looking black box and pulled out the ring, grabbing his right hand and slipping the ring onto his finger. It fit just right, and I grinned, satisfied, as Haise blinked his eyes open and stared confusedly at his hand where it lay in mine, and at the new adornment.

"It's supposed to be for protection, and for luck," I elaborated, as Haise lifted his hand and examined
the kanji engraved on the surface of the silver band, one for protection and one for luck. "Not that I think you need to be protected, 'cause you're plenty strong, but--"

Haise cut me off with a kiss, and I was content.

*I hope you'll never need to rely on protection and luck.*

---

"I met Kaneki," Uta declared, in the empty coffee shop, with it's sign flipped to closed. "He hasn't changed one bit."

Yomo stood on the other side of the counter, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows neatly and his silvery white hair falling in his face.

"...Uta. What are the Clowns thinking?" He asked, solemnly, seriously. "What do they plan... to do with Ken?"

"I wonder..." Uta smiled. "I also don't know much about the boss's plans. In fact, I don't think he's too sure about them himself. At the moment, he's content with the way things are." Uta said, and he spoke fondly. "What do you people want to do? Wait for Kaneki? Or... do you want to get rid of Haise?"

There was a slight glint in Uta's dark eyes, and it wasn't too evident on the surface, but it was times like this when it became clear to Yomo that Itori wasn't the only one sufficient in collecting information.

"Uta... I..." Touka smiled, faintly, but it was sad. "I will just continue doing what I have decided to do."

Nishiki, a cup of Touka's coffee in his hand, smiled. Yomo's expression didn't appear to change any, but Uta just smiled as well, setting his empty cup down.

"Yep. That was great. Your coffee's definitely the best out there. Touka-chan?"

"Hmm?" Touka asked, meeting his always black-and-red eyes.

"To me, he is... even now, a special customer. So let me give you a bit of parting advice on my boss. Something big is brewing in the First Ward, no, everywhere. It's going to be a big, bloody thing, and though that's terribly entertaining," Uta's eyes narrowed, just a little. "It's going to be an all-out war between the CCG and the Aogiri Tree, but moreover, between my boss and his biological father."

"Thank you for the advice, Uta-san, but I already knew that." Her eyes were a little distant, and maybe a little worried. "The tension is building up so much, it's practically tangible. Oh, and Uta-san?"

"Yes, Touka-chan?"

"Why do you call Hide-kun your boss, if he's your son?"
Uta laughed, a merry thing. "Because, Touka-chan, the Clowns aren't lead by anybody at the moment. We never have been. But I believe that's going to change very, very soon, and when it does, Hide will be a very great person. It might be a good idea to start calling him boss now, and get used to it."

Nishiki snorted, but Uta wasn't finished. "But that's besides the point. That wasn't my advice, so if I may finish?"

Touka, looking mildly surprised, nodded for him to continue. And continue Uta did, with a grin like a Cheshire cat.

"When the war does break out between Hide and Kanou, I'd very much recommend being on Hide's side." He paused, and laughed a little.

"After all, we Clowns always get the last laugh."
Haise dreams of, for the first time since Hide began sleeping in the same bed, the past. And he supposed it was only a matter of time, but it was disappointing all the same.

Except this time, there was no warm and hazy memories of comfort, nor was it a nightmare.

Haise dreams of a little boy, with brown suspenders and a little brown bow-tie made of string, dressed in black trousers and a white button-up, looking far too solemn and far too sad for such a small boy.

Haise is standing, not in the checkerboard world as he had been, but in the strange world with the floor of water and white flowers, the sky unnaturally clear and close. The little boy is standing across from him, staring at him with steely grey eyes. There's a book in his hand, but Haise can't see the title.

"Why did you call me here?" The boy asked, in a dry, soft voice.

Haise blinked, surprised, and he protested, "I didn't! Why did you bring me here?"

The boy shook his head, serenely, not impatient in the slightest. "I didn't. You brought me here because you wanted to ask me something, and you have been since the Auction Raid. I'm tired of fighting it."

And Haise realized he had been wishing for answers to his questions. But he hadn't ever imagined something like this, a conversation with himself, which was probably a psychologist's worst nightmare. And it wasn't like it was the first conversation he'd ever had with himself (over the course of two years he'd had many) but it was the first he'd had with this child. It was the first to never involve the monster, and the first to be so... docile. There were no taunts, no jibes.

It was an actual conversation.

The wind in the strange dream-place was warm, and it blew gently when Haise asked, "Who are you?"

The boy looked confused. "I am me. But it's not that simple, I suppose. I am me, and you are you, but we are one and the same."

Haise couldn't bring himself to ask his next question, so instead he asked, "Who was the girl, that saved me? Did she... did she live?"

The little boy smiled, and it was sad. He seemed so sad in general, and it hurt. "She was... someone special. And she got away, I think. I only know as much as you do."

Haise had a feeling that the little boy wasn't giving him the full truth, but he didn't ask any further
about the matter. He didn't want to know. As long-- as long as the girl, who had been willing to to
give her life to save him was safe, it was alright. That was all he needed, and wanted, to know.

"What about..." No, that wasn't right. Haise had so many questions that needed answering, and he
had no idea where to even begin. "How... How can I save you?"

And again the boy gave him one of those sad, sad smiles. "You can't."

There was a sudden pain behind Haise's eyes, and for a moment he thought he saw a large cavern
that smelled of damp sewers and death, filled with flowers and towering pillars, and a white-haired
man that radiated an aura of death, and he was afraid.

And then he was back in the eerie world of blue and flowers, with the little boy clutching his book
and looking weary and fearful.

"I've stayed far too long," The boy declared. "I must leave."

"Wait!" Haise cried, a hand still clutched to his head as the pain behind his eyes grew. "Don't go!
Why-- Why do you need to leave? Why can't you stay? Why can't I save you?"

The boy blinked, like he was surprised Haise would even ask such a thing. He pointed, with a small
and deathly pale hand, to their feet, and Haise noted that the floor was no longer sporting
the delicate white flowers. Instead, excluding a small ring of the white flowers around his feet, the
floor was consumed with blood-red spider lilies. And as he watched, Haise saw a white flower
tremble and change to another one of the crimson flowers. There was another throbbing behind his
eyes, and he saw a charge of electricity, a flash of glasses and a white coat stained with blood, and
he was struck with another wave of fear and pain.

"Because the longer I stay, the more dangerous it is." The boy said simply. "So don't call me back
here again, lest the lines between us blur. Do not try to ask me more questions, because I will not
answer them. Be happy in your ignorance, and remain like that."

"Why? Why can't I save you?" Haise repeated, but the boy just shook his head as another crimson
flower bloomed.

"I thought I wanted to die," The boy said suddenly, a horrific thing for such a small child to say. Yet
he said it with ease, like one might comment on the weather. "But now, I don't think I do. So if you
want to save me, don't erase me, and just let me have my only salvation, to sleep and have happy
dreams. Let me rest, and live for me. Let me dream and be happy, won't you?"

Haise's vision was blurring now, with the throbbing pains in his head. It felt like someone was
stabbing him through his eyes, and odd memories that he didn't remember swam through his head
and made him dizzy. A four-leaf clover headband, a beard in the shape of a swirl, bright purple hair.
A phone with many text messages, all read but unanswered.

The boy's book was Monochrome Rainbow, Haise noted distantly, finally catching a glimpse of it as
the world around him began to blur and fade to black.

"Sweet dreams, Sasaki Haise." The boy whispered.

And Haise woke up, to a voice calling his name.
"Sassan! Hide-san!"

Rapid knocks at the door woke me up, and as I sat up groggily, blinking the sleep out of my eyes. Beside me, Haise rubbed his eyes and groaned.

"Whaaat? I wanna sleep..." Haise muttered, and I stood up, tossing the blanket over his head as I did so. Haise gave me a bleary glare, and I grinned, going to answer the door.

Shirazu and Mutsuki, looking bedraggled but somewhat awake, stood at the head of the group. Urie, looking especially irritated at being woken this early, stood behind them, and Saiko, barely awake but looking drowsily intrigued, stood beside him.

"Look!" Shirazu declared, as Haise trudged to the door, looking like he hadn't slept a wink even though I know he did-- and he didn't have a nightmare, because he thrashed around like a madman when those happened. Besides, he hadn't had a nightmare in a long time. His hair was sticking up at every possible angle, as doubtless mine was too, and I wondered how Mutsuki looked so put-together. "This was in the hallway!"

"Huh?"

Shirazu thrust a box in neat red wrapping and bound in a green ribbon forward. Haise took in, and I examined it as Haise asked, "...a bomb?"

I laughed. "It's a present, idiot. Last night was Christmas, after all." More seriously, I added, "But it was in the hallway, you said? How on earth did it get there?"

"It wasn't one of us," Mutsuki said worriedly. "But nothing's been taken, so it wasn't a robbery..."

I sniffed the package and shrugged. "It doesn't smell like gunpowder, or anything dangerous, like chemicals. It's probably safe to open. Why don't you do the honors, Haise?"

"Sure, I guess," Haise said, untying the green ribbon and taking off the red paper to reveal a small box, like a shoe-box, but nicer. I took the paper and ribbon from him, and once he removed the lid, I took that too. And beneath a layer of tissue paper lay something that made my blood run cold.

Shirazu looked horrified. "What's that?! Gums?!"

"It's... a bit creepy..." Mutsuki said, taking the box to hold as Haise lifted the item out and examined it. "What kind of impression does that have... a demon?"

It was a leather mask. Kaneki's leather mask.

"Eyepatch." I blurted, then froze for a millisecond, before pretending to look at the mask more intently. "It looks like an eye-patch, doesn't it?"

Haise had an odd look on his face as he examined the leather mask, holding it in his hands gently as he read off the note attached.

"'Merry Christmas, from HySy'... It says."

The hallway was silent and tense as Haise smiled softly, and I laughed, my brightest, best laugh,
accompanied by a blinding smile.

"Well then! I wonder who pulled this prank!"

"Um, Sasaki? Hide-san? There's one more... letter."

"Huh?" Haise said, passing on the mask to me. I held it just as gingerly as he had. "What's it this time? Lot's of Santa Clauses this year, isn't there?"

But he took the box back nonetheless, and he pulled out a book with a note taped to it. A book that was eerily familiar, because I had gotten it signed two years ago for my best friend and had left it in my apartment. The apartment that Kanou had provided, in the Twentieth Ward, and that I had long since left behind.

"That's a book... right?" Mutsuki asked.

Haise frowned as he studied the note. "...'Happy birthday'? Whose birthday?"

The notes weren't done in Uta's careful hand, nor in Itori's clear one. They were in the typewriter perfect script of Kanou Akihiro, my estranged father.

Haise flipped open the book, running his fingers along the pages gently, and his fingers froze on the inside cover, which was signed in the somewhat messy kanji of Eto, the One-Eyed Owl.

To Kaneki Ken,

Takatsuki Sen.

I gritted my teeth as I put on an adequately confused expression, my blood boiling. Kanou had gotten inside the house where my family lived, where the kids were defenseless and sleeping, just to let me know that he could. He was taunting me, telling me who was superior. The one who would be laughing last.

Well, I vowed. He was wrong. The real game, it's on now, and you won't be laughing much longer. I'll hunt you down to the ends of the earth if I need to, and I'll kill you. I'll slaughter you, Kanou, before you can lay a hand on my family.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Haise looked good, in the white dress uniform and it's gold epaulettes and black trim. His medals--the Single White Wing medal and the Golden Osmanthus Medal--were pinned to his right breast pocket, and the black belt and shoes used only for this occasion were shiny and pristine, and he looked perfectly the picture of the CCG Ghoul Investigator, sitting straight in his seat as we watched as each of the Quinx, in turn, were promoted and dismissed to be seated.

We were all promoted, in the end, as a result for our actions in the Auction Raid. Most surprising, I think, was Mutsuki and myself: we jumped not one, but two ranks. Mutsuki's was understandable; he had not only obtained intelligence on the Auction and infiltrated, but he also provided support in exterminating Big Madam, an SS Ranked ghoul, at only Rank 3. Mine I was still a bit confused about, because yes, I had infiltrated the Auction, and yes, I caused mass ghoul slaughter, but I hadn't gathered intelligence, not really. Most of it was all thanks to Mutsuki, and I had explicitly stated so in my report.

And the CCG didn't just go big on their award ceremony: the after-party was full of good-quality food and wine, with white tablecloths and china plates.

_Not that it does any good for Haise or I, considering we can't eat any of it_, I thought, but not bitterly. With amusement would be a more correct statement.

"It's really commendable to become a First Class Ghoul Investigator at your age, Haise," Akira was saying as I finally found them in the after-party crowd. I was only able to pick up on it thanks to my superhuman hearing, though, and I focused on making my way to them. It would have been so much easier if the seats in the auditorium weren't alphabetically ordered.

Haise looked genuinely surprised, but he smiled with a little bit of mischief. "Ah... Thank you, Associate Special Class Mado Akira."

Akira rolled her eyes. "Stop that, you're embarrassing me."

"Being an Associate Special Class at your age is also unbelievable," Haise argued, smiling.

Akira shrugged, wineglass halfway to her lips. "You can't really compare them. Right now we keep fighting fierce battles, so it's easier to get promoted." Then, as an afterthought to herself, she said, "I'm almost the same rank as Mom, now..."

She saw me before Haise did, and she smiled. "That's right, you're also a First Class Ghoul Investigator now, Nagachika. Congratulations on jumping two ranks. You and Mutsuki are all the talk, you know."

"He deserved it more than I did," I said stubbornly. "I didn't do as much as he did and I still jumped two ranks. It's not really fair to him-- it makes his achievements seem less exemplary."

"You fooled Nutcracker into giving you an invitation out of concern for your subordinate. You infiltrated the Auction and killed an extraordinary amount of ghouls, even for a ghoul investigator. You held off SS~Ranked Owl with Haise, nearly at the cost of you're lives, and in doing so made it so that the Quinx made it to the administrative tower in time to take control of it, and make it to the underground to help exterminate the Auction guests." Akira chided, taking a sip of her wine. "I don't
give out unnecessary praise, Nagachika. You've earned it."


Akira sighed, but set her wineglass on the table and actually hugged him, something that seemed to greatly surprise Haise, though he was the one who asked her.

"Am I... missing something?" I asked, as Akira released him and told us she would see us later, before disappearing into the crowd. Haise still seemed stunned.

"No... not really. I'm just surprised she actually hugged me," Haise said happily. "She declined one before."

I laughed. "So the Ice Queen's heart is finally melting? That's great!"

"Hide! Akira-san isn't an ice queen!" Haise protested, but he was still smiling. "But really, you did deserve to jump two ranks. You certainly earned it, so be proud, okay?"

"Okay," I repeated, then looked around. "But have you seen the kids around here somewhere? I wanted to congratulate them, but I couldn't find them."

"Actually, I was about to go look for them, too. I think they're around the banquet table somewhere," Haise said thoughtfully, gesturing to one of the long tables of food. "We can look together."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed, and we start off in the direction of the banquet table. I grin mischievously after a moment, and said, "Y'know, since we're the same rank now, it's not subordinate-superior fraternization anymore."

Haise looked scandalized, and he elbowed my in the ribs not-so-gently. "Hide! The CCG doesn't have fraternization laws and you know it!"

"I know, I know," I laughed, "The CCG can't afford to fire anybody for something like fraternization-- they don't have enough investigators as it is. But I knew the look on your face would be hilarious, so I couldn't resist."

Haise rolled his eyes and sighed. "Geez, Hide. What am I going to do with you?"

I just sniggered, and pointed. "Look, there they are."

Haise followed my gaze, and there they were indeed, bright spots among the dark-haired investigators. Saiko was loading a plate full of food, while Urie was standing against the wall, looking bored and irritated. Mutsuki and Shirazu stood side-by-side, holding plates and chatting while they ate.

"So Uriko and Tooru are Rank 1 now..." Shirazu muttered, biting into a piece of chicken he held with a fork. "That's the same Rank Sassan had 'till awhile ago. And Hide-san jumped right up to First Class. I wonder how much of a raise y'all got."

Mutsuki chuckled. "It... It really hasn't sunk in yet..."

But he looked worried, like he was thinking he wasn't worthy of the promotion, so I clapped my hands down firmly on his shoulder and Shirazu's, making them jump, the food on their plates jostling.

"You did great out there, both of you! You definitely deserved your promotions!"
"Ah... Thanks, Hide-san," Mutsuki smiled, and Shirazu grinned, his sharp teeth glinting.

"Yeah, thanks!" Shirazu said, but then his gaze was drawn to Saiko and the man who stood beside her. "Yo, Takeomi-kun!"

"Congratulations on you're promotion," Mutsuki said politely, and Takeomi nodded.

"Same to you." He turned to Urie, who had his arms folded over his chest and a dully irritated look in his eyes. "Urie. Congratulations."

Urie scowled, the most irritation and even anger I'd ever seen him display, and I furrowed my brow as I thought over what could cause Urie, who was irritated at everything, to be truly angry.

But before I could ponder on it, another voice broke in.

"Takeomi."

It was a stout man with broad shoulders and an empty sleeve where his arm should be. Kuroiwa Iwao, a Special Class Investigator and Kuroiwa Takeomi's father.

"Special Class Kuroiwa," Takeomi said, with an odd formally.

"Hmm." Kuroiwa said, then patted Takeomi on the shoulder and said no more to him. He turned to Urie, and he said, "Rank 1 Urie." Then he proceeded to pat Urie firmly on the shoulder, much to Urie's dismay, and walked away without another word. We bowed respectfully as he passed.

"That's Kuroiwa's father." Shirazu stated, surprised. "He's so charismatic..."

"He's still an Investigator despite losing an arm..." Mutsuki said, awed. "That's amazing..."

Haise smiled, as Akira reappears behind us, a fresh wineglass in her hand. "Shirazu. Let's go get your quinque on Monday."

Shirazu beamed. "Okay!"

"You did pretty well." Akira said, offering him a smile, and Shirazu looked paralyzed, his eyes wide. "I'm expecting a lot from you. You hit quite the jackpot with Nutcracker." Then she addressed us all, and Shirazu remained frozen, like he was an ice sculpture. "We finally have a day off today, so make it a great one. Oh, and Yonebayashi, you're eating too much."

Saiko, who's chopsticks were halfway to her mouth, paused, looking dismayed. "What? Maman, Papa, no way..."

I laughed, and Haise tried to suppress his at her horrified expression. Akira looked exasperated, but she just sighed, her lips inclined upwards.

"I'll let it slide for today, but you two," Akira said sternly, directed at Haise and myself. "You're too soft on them."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said innocently, and Haise did his best to imitate my irreproachable smile. He did well, too.

Akira just gave another long-suffering sigh. "I'm going to go around and say hello to some other co-workers. I just wanted to drop by and say congratulations to everyone."

"Me, as well." Takeomi announced. "Good work, First Class Sasaki, First Class Nagachika."
"You too, First Class Kuroiwa!" Haise said cheerily, and I echoed his call with a wave. Akira and Takeomi left in different directions, leaving just Haise, myself, and the Quinx.

Saiko made a pitiful noise, and looked towards Haise and I with large eyes. "Akira-san's so mean. Don't you think, Maman, Papa?"

"Ah... Saiko, that's not nice to say," Haise said gently, and I knew he didn't have the heart to reprimand Saiko for speaking ill of a superior-- even if she didn't really mean it-- and I didn't either. So he just patted her shoulder gently, and Saiko's eyes narrowed a little when the ring on his finger caught the light. None of the Quinx had ever spoken of it, seemingly because they had never noticed it, but she looked mischievous now and perhaps a little vengeful that we hadn't agreed with her statement about Akira, because she said,

"Maman, you're getting married and didn't tell us?"

_That_ snapped Shirazu out of his stupor, and Mutsuki did a double-take. Even Urie blinked and looked up at this, while Haise looked rather pale, and completely frozen in the shock of her comment.

I laughed. "That's the wrong hand and you know it, Saiko. And only legal in the United States, as far as I know."

"Is it really the wrong hand?" Saiko asked innocently. "Well, I always had a bit of trouble with my lefts and rights. Oops."

She didn't sound very sorry.

"A ghoul related to the Rosewald family? From Germany?" I asked, studying the two pictures in front of me. Haise sat on the other side of Akira, studying the same pictures. Across from us sat two investigators of equal rank, and on the side closest to me sat Urie and Mutsuki. At the head of the table was none other than Washuu Matsuri.

"Yeah," Matsuri said, his cold eyes focused intently on the same photos. "The traces of kagune resembles those of the Rosewald family that I faced before. Take a look on the right. We have the traces of kagune in the kidnappings, and on the left we have those of the Rosewald family."

"Both of them look the same," Urie said quietly.

"Not quite the same," I corrected. "They look the same, but there are lots of differences, too. I wouldn't say more than a thirty or thirty five percent match, which suggests it to be someone related by blood to the Rosewalds, but not closely related, since these traces are fairly inadequate."

Matsuri looked directly at me for a brief moment, and there was something like a sharp intrigue in them. "An excellent observation, First Class Nagachika. When the data of the two were compared, there were one hundred and nine matches, which is basically twenty seven percent. It's a questionable number, but your assumption that they're not closely related is correct."
"So basically, the ghoul responsible for the kidnappings is either a Rosewald survivor or a blood relative in Tokyo," I summed.

Matsuri's cold, sharp look remained on me for a longer moment this time, and I grinned. He wasn't as scary as Haise made him out to be, and this was almost enjoyable, like a debate. And I never lost debates.

"Correct again, Nagachika."

"Sasaki, Hide-san... would there be more matches if they were near relatives?" Mutsuki asked, once the meeting dismissed.

"Well, parents and siblings are about fifty percent identical, and twins ninety percent or more. But when there are inadequate traces, lower numbers show up." I said. "And the traces weren't very large, so it wouldn't be surprising if the ghoul committing the kidnappings and the Rosewalds were more closely related than twenty seven percent."

"I heard that the traces of kagune from the scene of Rabbit's Associate Special Class Investigator murder and those from the previous attacks match roughly sixty four percent." Haise said.

"Since it surpasses fifty percent, doesn't that mean that the Rabbit is actually twins?" Mutsuki asked.

I nodded. "Since it surpasses the fifty percent and the traces were also inadequate, it suggested that the Rabbit wasn't one ghoul, but a set of twins."

"The masks were different, too, according to survivors, which is why the Rabbit is now labeled accordingly as either Rabbit or Black Rabbit," Haise added.

"Of course, if there's no pattern to this, then that means it's probably a Rosewald ghoul that cannibalized," I said, observing Haise's expression discreetly. But his face never changed, and internally I sighed in relief.

"Geez," I said, putting the files on the desk in a neat stack. "It's looking like this is going to be another big operation, if the ghoul is a Rosewald survivor or relative."

Haise smiled, placing his own case notes beside them. "With great power comes great responsibility, as the saying goes."
"Yeah, yeah, I know." I said. "But we just wrapped up the Auction Raid not too long ago. Like, cut us a break! Can't we have another Torso?"

"No, because now other squads with lower-ranked members get the cases like Torso," Haise said, with another smile.

"Well, at least it's never dull," I said with a laugh. "I think I chose the right career."

Haise brightened, like he'd been wanting to ask something and just remembered, and as sat down idly on the bed, he did. "Oh, that's right! I never asked, but why did you chose to be an investigator, Hide?"

I hesitated for a brief second. I couldn't exactly tell him he was the reason I joined the CCG, now, could I? But I didn't want to lie to him, either. Finally, I said, "I grew up in the Twentieth Ward, y'know, where the coffee shop incident happened? My best friend since we were little kids, he got caught up in the raid. Some of his friends worked there, see, and he rushed over there to see if he could help them," I said, then realized the implications and added, "He didn't know they were ghouls. He just wanted to help his friends, and he got caught up in the raid. I don't know whether or not he was mistaken for a ghoul and exterminated, or maybe attacked by one of the ghouls, but he died."

Haise was silent for a long moment, then he dropped to sit next to me. "I'm sorry. You're friend, what was he like?"

"He was... He was a bookworm, always really quiet, with his nose in a book. He scared easy, too, but for some reason he had a fascination with horror novels. He read books like other people breathed-- his first date, he took the girl to a bookstore, of all places." I smiled, faintly.

"What's so wrong with a bookstore date?" Haise asked, genuinely confused.

I laughed, and it felt easy. I twined my fingers through his, and exhaled. "Well, there's nothing wrong with it, I guess. It's just, most people go out to a movie or something, y'know? And his ideal date was a bookstore."

"I think he sounded like a nice person, your friend," Haise said quietly. "I would have liked to meet him."

"He was," I said, and smiled. But my smile was a bit faint, even to me. "He was a lot like you."

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry that I haven't updated, and that my replies to comments were late. I had a stomach bug, so today was the first day I was able to get online.

Anyways, this is that last bit of calm before the storm-- the last interim chapter, if you will. Now we'll get into the Rosewald/Tsukiyama Family Extermination arc, and it's going to be a lot longer than the Auction arc was. And more detailed. And violent, and scheme-filled... well, you get the picture.

I hope you enjoyed it, although it's a bit shorter than the others!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I FORGOT TO PUBLISH 27!... so yeah, there's that. Go, uh, read that first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a warm afternoon, and a Sunday, when I walked into :re. Uta and Itori, and Hinami, because I'd asked Uta to pass along a message for her to come again this time, waited for me in the normal booth.

I strode in, all no-nonsense for once in a long time. Itori raised an eyebrow as I sat down next to Hinami. Nishiki, already having my order and time of arrival down, emerged from behind the counter with my cup and set it down without further ado.

Before he could leave, I said, "Wait, Nishio-san."

Nishiki looked annoyed, almost like Urie's perpetual expression. "What do you want, Nagachika-kun?"

"It's about him. Is there any way I could have Touka-chan involved in the conversation? Maybe somewhere with a bit more privacy."

Nishiki looked a little surprised, but he looked around and shrugged. "I don't know. Let me go and ask her."

"Thanks, Nishio-san," I said, as he walked away to find Touka.

"Well well, we're all straightforward today then, aren't we?" Itori said amusedly.

Uta feigned hurt. "What, no hello for your beloved parents, Hide? I'm hurt!"

"Hello, my beloved parents," I said, then, "Hello, Hinami-chan."

"Hello, Hide-nii," Hinami said with amusement. "Is something wrong with Oni-- Sasaki-san?"

We had decided that it was better to fall into a routine than to accidentally call me something else when we were around the CCG and Haise. But I would have never asked her to call me Oniichan, not even for our cover. Oniichan was Kaneki, and I would never take that away from him nor her.

"Yes and no," I said, and my eyes darkened. "Wait until Touka-chan gets here, then I'll explain."

As if brought forth by my words, Touka appeared from the set of steps and the door that lead to her apartment, and she looked worried. She was dressed in normal clothes, not on duty today.

"Nishiki said you wanted to see me? Has something happened to Sasaki-san?"

"Yes and no," I repeated. "Is there somewhere more private we can take this? It's an urgent matter, I promise, and I don't have too long. I've got a meeting this evening."

Touka gestured for us to stand up. "Yes, we can take this upstairs. You can bring your drinks, just
don't spill them. Yomo, Nishiki, watch the shop for me, okay?"

Yomo nodded silently, watching us pass intently.

Touka seated us in her living room after we removed our shoes, and we sat in a circle around her low table. Everyone looked to me intently, and I sat a little straighter and sighed heavily.

"My meeting is at five, and I need to be home by four to reorganize my notes, so I'll make this short. I tried to sever my ties with Kanou, and it didn't go well, to say the least. He threatened to kill the Quinx, and he recently attempted to make Haise's memories return by sending him a gift of his old mask, and a book addressed to 'Kaneki Ken.'" Uta and Itori had already known this, but Hinami and Touka looked shocked at the news. I let it sink in for a moment, then continued. "The attempt failed, but to make it worse, he left the package inside my home, in the hallway." My eyes blazed. "It was a show of dominance, a taunt, and Kanou will make good on his threat. He's going to try and rip Haise away from the life he has now, and he's going to try and kill the Quinx as reprimand for me not following his orders and defying him."

"That's horrible," Hinami whispered, eyes wide.

I curled my hand into a fist. "I am not going to let him kill our children, and I am not going to let him take away everything Haise has. I've made up my mind. I am going to kill him, before he can lay a finger on my kids, and before he can get anywhere near Haise." The reactions were solemn silence, and I took it as a go to continue. "Kanou's got the protection of Aogiri Tree, and even for me, it's not going to be easy. But I'm going to do it, and I'd like help for all of you. I... I want to form a group of sorts, and take down Kanou and all of his followers, so that he can't ever do something like create another half-ghoul-- so that he never makes another monster like me, and so that he can never create another tragedy."

The reactions were still silence, for a long moment, until Hinami's hand found mine under the table and she said, "You aren't a monster, Hide-nii."

"But I am, aren't I?" I said bitterly. "I'm half-Kanou, and I can't change my genes. I'm half of that monster, and I've accepted that. But I'm not going to let him make another one of me to be his puppet, and he will, mark my words. He's going to try and make another one of his 'ultimate creations' since I defected from him. The only reason he hadn't up until now was because raising children was too much a hassle."

"Most ghouls grow up in terrible ways," Touka said quietly. "You were lucky to have had Uta and Itori-san to raise you and give you some morals. But if a child was to be solely raised by Kanou, with no morals, nobody to guide them or show them any compassion... the child would be a monster, and it would be another One-Eyed Owl, but at Kanou's beck and call."

"I'm going to stop him, whatever the cost." I said firmly. "I need to know whether your with me or against me, all of you, right here and now. But know that when this war ends, I'll be the one with the last laugh, and anyone opposing me will fall."

The room was once again filled with silence, and suddenly Uta's laughter and Itori's barely-suppressed chuckles broke it.

"Oh dear, that was one powerful speech there, Hide. You could be a dictator, with charismatic speeches like that," Uta said cheerily with a lazy smile, ignoring the serious atmosphere of the room. Itori, just as cheerful as Uta and with a beaming grin, chimed, "Kiddo, you don't even have to ask. Of course we're behind you."
Uta's smile was serious, but his tone remained mischievous. "What kind of grandparents would let the man who made their son's life hell and threatened their grandchildren walk scot-free? Not us, that's for sure."

"I'll protect Sasaki-san," Hinami said gravely, face set in determination. "I won't let Kanou take away the people he loves, either."

Touka was the last to answer, but her smile was gentle and reassuring. "Hide-kun, we will always be here, as a home for you and Sasaki-san should he ever regain his memories. But I don't want him to be unhappy, and I'll help you protect him, and his happiness. I won't let his home be taken away without a fight."

"Thank you-- all of you." I exhaled, relived, and my shoulders slumped just a little. But I didn't pause, didn't hesitate.

"Okay. Since we're all in agreement, my next step is to gather the remains of Kaneki's group." When Touka and Hinami looked surprised, I smiled, a little ruefully. "I kept tabs on him, even when he pulled away from me. I think the first on the list should probably be Banjou Kazuichi. He might not have had much fighting prowess two years ago, but I hear he's greatly improved now and leads the Sixth Ward. He's also immensely loyal to Kaneki, as the rumors go."

"You're info is spot-on, Kiddo," Itori said proudly. "It should be, since it came from me."

"I know. Thank you again, I-chan," I said, and Itori beamed.

"Banjou-san is very loyal. He's very kind, and he's a good choice," Hinami said, but added thoughtfully, "Why not Tsukiyama-san first, though? He was a good fighter."

"I originally wanted to go for Tsukiyama Shuu, because of his connections," I admitted. "But he's fallen into a depressed, almost comatose state after Kaneki's assumed death. Besides, Banjou-san has his own group of followers, and I still don't trust Tsukiyama-san after he tried to eat Kaneki. He'll be next, after Banjou-san, and hopefully we can gain Hori Chie with him."

Hinami pursed her lips, but didn't argue. I wonder if she had some distrust of Tsukiyama as well, but then, when she knew him he was merely one of Kaneki's friends and she was a naive child.

"When are you going to approach Banjou-san?" Touka asked, looking at her full cup of coffee, untouched and cold.

"I'm on patrol duty tomorrow, and the night shift at that. All of this week, in fact, the Quinx, Haise and I drew the short straws, and we've got the night shifts on-call for ghoul attacks, while still investigating our latest case," I said, with a tired smile. "But next Sunday, I'm going to tell Haise that Hinami-chan wanted to go see a movie and I offered to take her, and that I'm treating her out to dinner while Uta and I-chan are out, so I won't be back until very late. I was thinking maybe I could approach Banjou-san then?"

Touka's eyes narrowed. "...Sasaki-san knows Hinami-chan?"

"I'm his sort-of little sister," Hinami said with a weak smile. "I wanted to see Oniichan again, Oneechan, so don't be mad at Hide-nii. Sasaki-san knows about Uta and Iori, too. We even went to the Christmas party Sasaki-san and Hide-nii threw."

Touka closed her eyes and sighed. "...I'll want to hear about this later, Hinami-chan, Hide-kun. But it's almost three-thirty, and you should get going, or you won't make it back in time. And yes, it's alright if you bring Banjou-san here."
Blinking in surprise, I glance to the clock to find that it is time for me to go, and I drank down the rest of my cold coffee and stood.

"You're right. I do need to get going," I said, hurrying to put my shoes on. I hesitated at the door, and called, "Thank you, again, all of you. I'll see you the Sunday after next, with news on Banjou-san. And Hinami, can we meet at Uta's? I want you to come with me-- you, someone he knows and trusts."

At Hinami's confirmation, they called their goodbyes and I left, saying my own farewells to Yomo and Nishiki, who answered in a nod and a shrug, respectively. But when I was outside, I couldn't suppress my grin, as big and wide as the Cheshire cat's.

*Just you wait, Kanou. I'm coming for you.*

---

On the next Saturday, I've left the Chateau long behind and stand in the Sixth Ward, Taito. The sky is dark but the wind is warm, even at night, and I stride forward confidently. I'm wearing a long, black overcoat over my Clown get-up, and Hinami walks quietly beside me, dressed in a similarly long coat that brushes her ankles, but hers is colored a dark red, although without the Aogiri Tree symbol. Our hoods are pulled up to hide our faces, not an uncommon sight in the drizzling night, although most of the streets are quiet.

But our hoods are drawn to hide our masks, Hinami's repaired by Uta. I had left the Chateau a long time ago and changed at Uta's place into my Pierrot clothes, and then Hinami and I had departed. Now we stood in front of a low warehouse, not new but not in bad condition. The smell of ghouls is strong, and Hinami said quietly, "Be careful. Someone is approaching us. Two of them."

I nod, and we stop when two people descend from the shadows of the roof to stand in front of us, blocking the door.

"Who are you?"

The voice is short and curt but not impolite, and it comes from behind a gas mask wearing man clothed in a red hoodie. A number one is stitched on his hood. His companion is dressed similarly in a gas mask, but clothed in a purple hoodie with a number three stitched on the hood.

"I am Pierrot. My companion is Yotsume."

I tilt my head back a little so my mask be seen. They tense, and I can sense their confusion. The Clowns are notorious, after all, and I am even more so. 'Yotsume' has quite the reputation of her own, as well.

"What business do you have here, Pierrot of the Clowns and Yotsume of Aogiri Tree?" Three said wearily, tensed and ready to fight.

"We are not here to fight. We are here to discuss an important matter with the leader of the Sixth Ward, Banjou Kazuichi." I said calmly. "Tell him it's urgent."
They exchange glances, but relent, and One opens the door. The warehouse is fitted like a large loft, with furniture and sectioned off by paper screens. The floor is tatami mat, and we remove our wet shoes courteously at the door.

One and Three lead us to a man with a beard in the shape of a cross and a book in his hands. He looked up as we approached, and he frowned.

"We have guests, Banjou-san," One announced. "Pierrot of the Clowns and Yotsume of Aogiri Tree."

Banjou tensed, just as his subordinates had.

"What business do the Clowns and Aogiri have with me? The Sixth Ward is rather peaceful right now, and I'd like to keep it that way. But sit down, I guess."

I reached up and drew off my hood completely, taking off my coat and setting it beside me in a neatly folded bunch. Hinami doesn't remove her coat or hood as she sits, waiting for me to give her the order. Banjou seems unsettled by this, but I continue regardless.

"You were close with Kaneki Ken, weren't you? How do you feel about his death?"

Instantly Banjou's eyes harden, and he said shortly, "Why must you bring up his death?"

"Because it's vital in this conversation. Tell me, Banjou, if Kaneki were to still be alive, would you be as loyal to him as before? Would you remain his shield?"

"Of course I would," Banjou snapped. "But that doesn't matter, because Kaneki Ken died two years ago. What business to the Clowns and Aogiri Tree have with him and me now?"

"It does matter, actually," I said, lacing my fingers. "Because Kaneki Ken is alive, and he is once again in need of your assistance."

"What did you just say?" Banjou asked, quietly, incredulously. Like he's afraid to hope. "Why should I believe anything you, Pierrot, say?"

"You don't need to trust me. I've brought an eyewitness that you can trust. Go on, Yotsume," I urged, and Hinami reached up to draw her hood away, and she reached up and removed the shining metal mask covering the lower portion of her face. "Or rather, Hinami-chan."

Banjou's book, which had still been in his hands, dropped to the table with a sharp thunk as he froze.

"H-Hina-chan?"

Hinami smiled, reminiscent of her bright smile from when she was younger. "Hello, Banjou-san. I'm sorry, it's been awhile."

"Hina-chan!" Banjou said happily, and suddenly he wasn't on the opposite side of the table but beside her, and Hinami was swept up into a bone-crunching hug. "Hina-chan! How has Aogiri been treating you? Are you okay?" Then he stiffened, for a moment, and his eyes widened as he drew her away, hands firmly on her shoulders. "You're Yotsume? You're an executive? And wait-- Kaneki-san is alive?!"

Hinami placed a hand on Banjou's shoulder gently. "One question at a time, Banjou-san. Pierrot will answer them all."
Immediately Banjou's gaze turned from warm to cold and suspicious, and he shifted back so that he was sitting immediately across from me.

"What--What would one of the Clowns know about Kaneki-san? Especially someone like you, Pierrot."

I sighed. "My reputation's coming back to bite me, huh? Well, this conversation won't go far if you're talking to Pierrot. I suppose I've got no other choice."

"What are you talking about?" Banjou asked, eyes narrowing.

I didn't respond, reaching up to take off my mask. I set it gently on my folded coat and ran a hand through my slightly damp orange-blonde hair, which stuck up at all angles like Haise's bedhead. It flattened down a bit, looking more normal, when I drew my hand away.

"I'm Pierrot, sure, that's true. But I'm also Kaneki Ken's best friend, and at the moment, I'm his boyfriend." I sat perfectly straight, the picture of composure. Banjou, by comparison, appeared to be in shock, with his eyes wide and his mouth slightly agape. "It's a bit complicated, and I'd like to explain it from the beginning, if you'd let me."

"Y-Yeah. I think that'd be good."

"It's a rather long story, but I'll try to keep it as short as possible." I paused, then began, "I am half-human and half-ghoul, the biological son of Doctor Kanou Akihiro, born through a test tube and an incubator. The Clowns, Uta and Itori, raised me like their son..."

"Kaneki-san's new name is... Sasaki Haise." Banjou said slowly, to clarify. "He is a ghoul investigator, with no memory of his previous life. You are also a ghoul investigator, but you are also Pierrot of the Clowns, and Kanou Nagachika, the scientist and son of Kanou Akihiro. You have severed your ties with Doctor Kanou, and are living as Nagachika Hideyoshi. You are planning to kill Kanou and all his followers..."

"Because Kanou threatened to take Haise away from the happy life he always wanted as Kaneki, and because he's going to kill our children as retaliation for me disobeying him." I said calmly, although internally just his name made me furious. "Also, before he can create another me, another monster, an immensely powerful child that would simply be his puppet, at his beck and call. Basically, I'm forming a group to take Kanou and his followers down before he can lay a finger on my children and Haise."

Banjou put his head in his hands. "...I think I need a minute."

"Take your time. It's a lot to take in," I assured, and Hinami's worried look in my direction at my statement another monster didn't go unnoticed. "I won't be able to come back for a long time, though. Trips to the Sixth Ward are a four-and-a-half-hour train ride away, and in order to get away tonight, I had to lie to Haise and tell him that I was taking Hinami-chan to a dinner and movie while Uta and Itori were out." I grimaced. "And I admit, I lie to Haise a lot. But that doesn't mean that I like
lying to him."

Banjou didn't say anything for a long while, and Hinami shifted nervously, eyes going from me to Banjou. She seemed like she wanted to speak up, say something that would break the silence, but she didn't.

Finally Banjou said, "...Hina-chan. You've met Sasaki Haise before. Is Kaneki-san... Is he happy?"

I wasn't offended that he didn't believe me. This was the entire reason I had brought Hinami along, someone he trusted and cared for. I wouldn't trust me, either.

"Onii-chan is very happy." Hinami said quietly. "He... He smiles, and they aren't fake, like they used to be. He loves his subordinates like foster children, and he loves Hide-nii very much." Hinami sighed. "I was... confused, at first. I wondered if Sasaki Haise was just the vessel of Oniichan's soul, an empty container. But he's still the same person that taught me kanji and found words pretty. He's still himself, but he's much happier than he used to be. I want to protect him, and his happiness."

Banjou nodded slowly. "I... I think I understand now. Thank you, Hina-chan." He turned to me, and he was grave, but his eyes shone. "Kaneki-san was kind to me and saved me, and I won't just forget that. I... I don't trust you, not yet, Pierrot. But for Kaneki-san's sake, I'll try."

"That's all I would ask of you." I said, and I smiled. "I'm not planning on launching an assault on Kanou, not anytime soon. I don't have the manpower for it, quite yet."

Banjou laughed, a short, hearty thing. "I don't believe that. You're Pierrot, the ghoul who single-handedly took down the ghoul faction of the yakuza."

"I was more temperamental back then," I said vaguely, which was a complete lie, since I had never been temperamental. I was remembering said incident with distaste; I had done it because Kanou asked me to, to test just how strong I was and because they were hunting him down after learning of his experiments. I should have let them hunt him down and been done with him, but I had only been a child back then. "Besides, it was my debut appearance as Pierrot, my first big operation. I had to go big and make a name for myself."

"But you still did it!" Banjou argued, then he froze. "Wait a minute, you're Kaneki-san's age. So when you took on the yakuza, you were a kid?"

"I wasn't a kid, I was twelve. And they weren't all that strong," I said, growing a bit impatiently. "Back to the matter at hand, please? As for manpower, besides you and Hinami-chan, the Rabbit has agreed to assist me, and hopefully Serpent as well. If I'm really lucky, Raven might even come along. But besides them, No-Face and Itori of Helter Skelter have also agreed to join my group. I'm planning on approaching Tsukiyama Shuu next, and through him, Hori Chie."

"That's still not very much manpower to take on Kanou with," Banjou said worriedly.

I smile warmly. "Oh, I know. I don't plan on stopping there. The Clowns are a vast an expansive group, you know, and we've never really had a leader. Just a goal: to cause as much chaos and gain as much entertainment from said chaos as possible. But I plan on becoming the leader of the Clowns, and I have a feeling that everyone is going to like my plan very much. It's going to throw Aogiri Tree into absolute chaos, to have Kanou and all of his followers assassinated, a nice chunk of their own members dead, and we thrive on chaos and destruction. And the ones who don't like my plan, well... they won't be around to speak of it."

I paused, and my smile grew sharp.
"Don't worry, Banjou-san, you've chosen the right side. I've always won, and I'll win this time too. I will be the one with the last laugh."

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of Hide's dark side is beginning to show through, and a little bit of Pierrot's notorious reputation is becoming apparent. He's a big thing in the ghoul world, and I plan on getting into that a little bit later. There's a good reason many are afraid of him, and it's not just because he's a Clown.
Chapter Notes

Sorry I didn't post this sooner. I meant to, but my wireless went out, and I had to get down and dirty with some wire-cutters and electrical tape to re-wire it. My redneck roots are showing, I guess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Standing in the S1 conference room, next to Mutsuki and on the other side of him, Haise, I watched Haise frown in confusion as Saiko read off the message her online friend had sent her.

"Why... did your online friend say... 'Hey Saiko! Why are you carrying my ak?!'" Haise asked curiously.

Saiko looked smug. "That's because I kicked that American bastard's ass with it!"

Urie, who was leaning against a pillar beside her, sighed. "I don't understand your game-talk. Don't talk to me."

Shirazu just looked confused. "Online friend...? Whatever," He shrugged, then made a displeased face. "Hey, Sassan. Today's the joint meeting for the new mission right?"

"Yeah," Haise answered, "It's an investigation related to the Rosewald family."

"The code-name," Urie informed, "is 'Rose'."

"It's also the name of the ghoul group that was involved in the recent mass kidnappings," Mutsuki said, and Shirazu's displeased expression grew.

"By the way... why weren't we invited to any of the previous meetings? I'm even the Squad Leader!"

I suppressed a chuckle as Saiko imitated his expression and said gruffly, "And I'm even the Yonebayashi."

Urie didn't look amused at all. "That's because Special Class Washuu Matsuri said that it's 'not worth telling those who are Rank 2 and below'."

Shirazu scowled. "That four-eyed goatee bastard..."

"First Class Sasaki, First Class Nagachika." I turned around as the new voice broke into our conversation, and I did a bit of a double-take. The voice belonged to a short man with scars stretching across his face and his right eye and cheek sectioned off by stitches that looked like they belonged to the Hollywood version of Frankenstein's monster. The skin inside the stitches was taut, discolored, and green-tinted, and his nose and ears were mere holes in his head. His right foot was a peg leg, and his eyes were differently sized.

The man smiled, and it was chilling. "Why do I know your names, you ask? You're both quite famous, very famous."
I tried my best to seem unfazed, although I did wonder what we were famous for. Being half-ghouls seemed like the most logical conclusion, even though my operation's failure and Haise's true nature were supposed to be confidential.

"Well, that's good to hear!" I beamed. "I can cross 'being famous' off my bucket list now! Might as ask, though, who you are? I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you before."

The man smiled, the same chilling, toothy smile. "Associate Special Class Kijima Shiki. A pleasure to meet you both."

His subordinate-- a man with black hair and a mole under his right eye-- gave us a cheery smile as he walked past, following Kijima dutifully to the desk Kijima chose and having a seat beside him, as Kijima chuckled.

Shirazu looked rather frightened. "What's that... that dude's scary," He whispered.

"His ears and nose are..." Mutsuki trailed, looking equally as shaken.

I didn't have the time to ponder Kijima must longer, however, because Kuramoto strode in with the same cheery smile and near-closed eyes. The rest of the Hirako squad stood behind him, and I wondered why their leader was absent, being lead by their deputy.

"Yo! Haise! Nagachika!"


I noticed the laugh Kuramoto gave was nervous. "Uhh... He had some stuff to take care of... anyways! There's just no time today. Let's go drinking next time, all of us!"

"...Wha--?" Haise began to ask, and I was almost equally puzzled by Kuramoto's abrupt change of topic and tone, but he cut us off.

"Just tag along already! C'mon!"

Haise laughed, and I gave Kuramoto a mile and a thumbs-up as Haise answered, "Ah, okay."

I nudged him as Kuramoto sat down, and whispered, "Designated drivers forever."

Haise smiled, but it faded for a moment as two members of Hirako's squad stop next to Mutsuki, who stands just a little behind us now. They tower over him by a foot easily, both wearing scowls, and Mutsuki looks petrified as the tallest one said, "Hello, Eye-Patch."

"H-Hello." Mutsuki said nervously, and Haise looks like he's debating on stepping forward. But I brush a hand over his in warning-- it's the same thing as when kids get bullied on the playground. You can't intervene; it's hard, but better for them to learn to stick up for themselves.

That didn't mean that I couldn't threaten them when nobody was around, though. Blackmail was a wonderful thing.

But it seemed like I wouldn't need it, because the tallest one, who had greeted Mutsuki, simply patted his shoulder as he passed. Mutsuki looked surprised, and his shock deepened when the tallest said, "Rank 1 is crazy impressive. I didn't think much of you before, to be honest, but that's all changed now. I'm counting on you next time."
Mutsuki smiled, and our thoughts in perfect synchrony not for the first time, in near perfect unison. Haise and I dropped hands onto his shoulders, smiling as he jumped.

"You did good, Mutsuki," I said quietly, and his smile broadened.

We sat down as more footsteps approached the conference room, and we had just settled into our respective desks-- briefly, I wondered why it wasn't set up with a large table like the other conference rooms. Although, it was rather convenient, considering we were all facing the whiteboard-- when three people emerged into the room through the large double doors, which shut with an almost ominous thud behind them.

A short young man clothed in a dark-colored vest and pale-colored slacks, with a matching tie and undershirt, and a bob of black hair offered a polite smile and announced, "I am S1 Squad's leader, Ui Koori. I'm in charge of the operation. I'm counting on everyone."

"Special Class Ui..." Kuramoto said quietly, and I was just able to pick up on it. "So it's not Special Class Matsuri..."

"He's the hope of the Arima squad," Kijima's subordinate said, looking nervous.

Mutsuki looked quizzical, and he whispered to Shirazu, "I wonder who the girl behind him is."

I shifted in my seat, straightening my notes in front of me as Ui placed copies of the pictures and other note sheets on the whiteboard with magnets. Then, picking up a whiteboard marker to use as a pointer, he began.

"Rose are ghouls that were fairly symmetrically trained. There's not many of them, but each of them are pretty strong. Even teams lead by First Class Investigators from several squads were no match. They could be a significant threat in the future." Ui paused, his tone short and clipped, efficient but still barely polite. "Squads S2 and S3 are assigned to deal with Aogiri Tree. Several First Class Investigators and the S1 will work together on Rose. They don't leave many traces, so we'll have to conduct an investigation to find a lead first. To make progress, we must urgently plan an effective method of investigation."

*An opponent that doesn't leave many traces... symmetrically trained... hmm...*

"Even if you ask for an effective strategy..." Shirazu sighed.

"We really don't have any intel..." Mutsuki finished, looking slightly down as well.

"Well, that's not necessary true," I said thoughtfully. Haise looked my way quizzically, grey eyes soft, and I elaborated. "Rose has been symmetrically trained, and they operate in a systematic manner. They're careful not to leave many traces, and they're strong enough, but not too strong. They're responsible for massive amounts of kidnappings, but very rarely is any blood-- and when there is, it's in very little amounts-- found on the scene. Meaning that they're kidnapping the people for ghouls other than themselves, which may mean that the ghouls they're kidnapping for are too
young or too old to hunt, but more likely they're powerful enough they aren't concerned with things like hunting for food."

"So... we're looking for a ghoul that's immensely strong, like a Ward leader?" Haise asked.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. More like the ghouls the people get brought to are higher class, aristocrats, and the ghouls doing the hunting are servants. We should probably be looking for wealthy families."

The Quinx and Haise are all staring at me blankly. Then Haise grabbed my hands excitedly and said, "Hide! You're a genius!"

I laughed. "Well, I don't know about genius. But thank you."

"Really though, Hide-san," Mutsuki said, awed. "You did this with the Torso and Nutcracker cases too! How do you figure it out?"

For a minute, I puzzled over it myself, and I answered honestly. "I... I don't know, actually. It's been like this since I was a kid. I think differently, I guess. Things just seem to click, y'know, like puzzle pieces."

Haise held onto my hands for a brief second longer, then he released him. "It's still amazing. You could be in Division II, with intelligence like that."

"Nah, I like where I am just fine. Division II is full of scary big-wigs," I said, grinning.

Then the clack of heels became apparent, and I turned to find the woman Ui stood beside behind us. She smiled, looking almost sleepy or air-headed.

"Umm... you all are the Qs, right?"

Shirazu blinked, and I thought he blushed. "O-Oh, yes! What about it?"

Mutsuki smiled, and he said, just a tad teasingly, "Shirazu! Aren't you a little too tense?"

Saiko giggled. "Yo, Squad Perv Leader!"

Shirazu seemed appalled, and he said, "A-As if! Idiot!"

The woman looked like she was suppressing laughter. "Umm... I'm Koo... No, I'm Special Class Ui's partner, Ihei Hairu." She paused. "You're all twenty, right?"

"Yes. I'll turn twenty-one this year," Saiko said, smiling.

I waved. "Actually, I'm not a Quinx. And I'm twenty-two."

"Same goes for me," Haise said, offering a smile as well.

"Oh, really?" Ihei said, blinking. "You all look so young... I'm also twenty, though..."

"Wow..." Mutsuki said, wide-eyed.

"You're that young, and you're already partnered with a Special Class?!" Shirazu said incredulously.

"First Class Ihei!" Ui called from where he had appeared down the hall, in the same clipped tone. "Let's get moving."
"Ah, okaaay!" Ihei called back, smiling.

"Ihei joined in the seventy fourth semester at sixteen years old, so she's three semesters ahead of all of you. She even participated in Operation Owl with Arima's squad." The man paused, then smiled. "As an old man just passing by, I figured I could explain."

"Oh, thank you for the explanation," Haise said, but the man waved him off.

"It's no problem."

Ihei grinned, the same air-headed, drowsy smile. "That's right. That's why I'm surrounded by old m-- I mean, seniors all the time... I was hoping we could get along like we're classmates, though!"

"O-Okay," Shirazu agreed eagerly. "But aren't you our senior...?"

"It's fine!" Ihei assured him, then gave him another smile and waved. "I'll see you all around, then!"

I smiled and waved her off with everyone else, but internally, I was skeptical.

An air-headed, sluggish girl like this was at the front-lines of the Owl battle? She's hiding something, that one... I'll ask Itori about her, later.

After much pleading on my part-- "Oh come on, Shirazu, I've never seen the place where they make quinques before! Take pity on me, won't you? Pleeeease? Pretty please?"-- Shirazu agreed I could come with himself and Haise to pick up his quinque.

I wanted to scout out the factories. The way Father had manufactured quinque steel was supposedly the same way, but I wanted to see it for myself. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to ask many questions, and had to content myself with observing.

"Hmm, it was great that Hayashimura handed us the rights to this baby," Chigyou said happily. "It's not every day you get to see a natural chimera quinque! I'm fired up, too!"

But Shirazu merely stared at the quinque case, with horrified, wide eyes. He looked pale, and I frowned as Doctor Chigyou continued.

"What's wrong, Shirazu? Take a look!"

Shirazu reached out a shaking, trembling hand towards the case.

"O... O--!"

Shirazu lurched forward, dropping to his knees on the cold floor as he puked. He brought a shaking hand to his mouth, looking like he might be sick again, or like he might faint.

"Shirazu!"
I caught his arm before he could fall forward, Haise doing the same to his other side, and we pulled him upright, steadying him. Chigyou looked unsure of what to do, his hands fluttering nervously.

"A-Are you alright?"

Shirazu's only response was a moan, and I looked over him to Haise.

"I'll take him out for some fresh air, if you want to sort this out?" I said, forcing a light tone.

Haise nodded grimly, and I pulled Shirazu upright again as he teetered, leading him to a bathroom first. When he came back out, his face was damp, but he looked a little less pale, although he still swayed. I didn't say anything, slinging one of his arms around my shoulders and guiding him outside one of the exits.

Shirazu inhaled sharply when the cool spring breeze hit him, and I sat him down outside the door, on the well-maintained grass. He slumped against the building, looking downcast. I helped him take off his coat, and for a time we sat there in silence. I was unsure what to say to comfort him, and I ended up ruffling his hair.

"It's okay to feel bad, you know."

"There's lots of people like you," Haise said, appearing from the exit holding a bottle of soda, which he offered to Shirazu. "People who feel bad when they see a quinque. Especially if it's the first time you're seeing the quinque of a ghoul you exterminated. Next time you see it..."

"That's not it. I'm fine." Shirazu said dully, but I didn't think he was telling the truth. It bothered him, the fact that he killed a ghoul. I couldn't remember the first time I killed, with my own two hands. I couldn't have been older than five or six, and I don't remember feeling the slightest bit of remorse.

"Hey, Hide-san, Sassan... the reward for Nutcracker's extermination was one-point-seven-million. Is that... Is that a lot?"

Haise frowned. "Honestly... I'm not sure myself."

I frowned. Shirazu's question wasn't directed at the monetary amount, if I was hearing and interpreting it right.

How much is a life worth, ghoul or human?

That night, after the Quinx had gone to sleep, I told Haise quietly, "I'm going to go talk to Shirazu."

Haise nodded, solemnly, and I walked quietly down the stairs and rapped on his door. As I expected, he wasn't asleep, and after a short moment he answered the door, in his pajamas but clearly awake.

"...Hide-san?"

"Shirazu. Can we talk a little?"
Shirazu hesitated, but he opened the door. "Yeah. Sure." I stepped inside and he gestured to the spinning desk chair. "You can sit there, if ya want. Or on the bed, or whatever. I don't really care."

He sounded so glum and un-Shirazu like it was almost frightening. But I pulled up the chair as he sat on the edge of his bed, looking exhausted.

"What'd ya wanna talk about?"

I hesitated, then sighed. "Alright. I'm not going to sugarcoat it, or beat around the bush. I'm just going to get straight down to it: Shirazu, it's okay to feel remorse for a ghoul."

Shirazu paled for a moment, but then he shook his head. "What are you talkin' about, it's not like I feel sorry for killin' Nutcracker. Ghouls ain't people, after all. They're just monsters, plain and simple."

I bit the inside of my cheek, but continued. "Shirazu. Am I a monster? Is Haise a monster?"

His eyes widened fractionally. "N-No! Of course not! I didn't mean it like that!"

"I know you didn't." I assured him calmly. "But there's no getting around the facts. Haise and I, we're half-ghouls. We can't eat anything except coffee and water, and we have to get by on liquefied RC Cells. It's scary, sometimes, not knowing whether you're more monster or human."

"You're a human!" Shirazu protested. "You--You think, and you care 'bout people! You're human, Hide-san!"

I smiled ruefully. "If thinking and feeling are what makes humans human, then ghouls are human too, Shirazu."

"That ain't true! Ghouls just act human!" Shirazu was adamant.

I sighed. "Hey, Shirazu? Can I tell you a little story about why I decided to become a ghoul investigator, and you just listen 'till I finish?"

He nodded, looking slightly nervous.

"Okay then. Ever since I was a little kid, my best friend was this real quiet kid. A bookworm that always had his nose stuck in a book, always reading. He was timid and shy and scared of everything, but he liked horror novels, for some reason. Because of that, he never had any friends besides me, and his home life wasn't great, to say the least." I paused. "Anyways, when we were in college, he got a job at this coffee shop he liked. And it was good for him-- the people were all really nice, and he started to come out of his shell because of it. He made more friends, got happier, had a real family for the first time. There was even a little girl there that looked up to him like a big brother, after her parents died and the owner of the coffee shop took her in."

"That coffee shop sounds like a great place," Shirazu muttered quietly. "It's... it's real nice that you're friend found 'em. But what...?"

I held up a hand. "I'm getting there. Be patient. So, one night, this message came across the TV, from the CCG. It was an evacuation notice, because there was a raid going on. A raid to exterminate an organization of ghouls operating out of the Twentieth Ward, out of a coffee shop."

Shirazu nodded slowly. "Yeah... Yeah, I've heard about that. The Antiekus Raid is famous, since the Twentieth Ward is so quiet normally."
"That coffee shop, Antieku? It was the place my best friend worked." I said, and Shirazu's eyes widened. "He thought that there had to be some mistake, no way that these people that had given him a home, a family, who had opened their arms to him, were ghouls. So he rushed over, despite the warnings, to try and save his family. And you know what happened to him, Shirazu?"

His voice was barely more than a whisper. "What happened to him?"

"He died." I said bluntly. "I'm still not sure whether or not he was caught in the cross-fire of the raid or mistaken for a ghoul and slaughtered, but it's all the same in the end. He died, one more tragedy to tack on to his list. He never did anything wrong besides want to save the people he loved and the people that loved him, and yet he got killed for it."

"That's terrible," Shirazu said quietly, his eyes wide. "Why did he try to save the ghouls? If he hadn't, he would still be alive!"

"Because his family was there," I said simply. "And it didn't matter to him, ghoul or human, because it was his family. Was he wrong to try and save the people he loved, Shirazu?"

Shirazu didn't answer me. He stared in silence at his hands, eyes glassy and distant.

"I should say yes, 'cause they were ghouls." Shirazu said eventually. "But I can't, after that."

"Exactly. So ghouls are humans, and just like there are bad humans, there are bad ghouls. But my point isn't that we shouldn't kill ghouls: we kill ghouls because it's our job and because it saves the lives of civilians. But Shirazu, it's okay to feel remorse for taking a life, be it human or ghoul. Because somewhere, that person had someone who cared about them, who loved them. Even someone like Nutcracker."

Shirazu put his head in his hands, and what he said next was so muffled, I barely heard it.

"I... I've got a little sister, in the hospital. She's got ROC, RC Cell Over Secretion Disease. I've got to pay her medical bills so she gets her treatment, so I... I don't regret killing Nutcracker." His voice broke. "But I dreamed about killin' her, and she sounded just like my little sister..."

I sat down next to him on the edge of his bed, and Shirazu started to cry. "She sounded so human."

I patted his back and drew him a little closer, and unknowing what else to say, I said,

"It's okay."

Chapter End Notes

The angst is back in full force. It's only going to get worse from here, really.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was Saturday night when I told Haise that I was going out to watch over Itori's bar while she went out with Uta. I told him I wouldn't be back till the next day, even though I hated leaving on a Saturday, which were normally spent domestically in coffee shops or bookstores or even just around the house with the kids. Saturdays were the days we only worked half-days, most of the time spent on paperwork, and the other half was always spent, without fail, together.

Haise aid that it was fine, he understood, and he assured me that it was okay. What was one Saturday, when we had an infinite number of other Saturdays?

It's for the sake of Haise and the kids, I consoled myself as I stood outside the large, wrought-iron gates of the Tsukiyama Manor, staring at the towering stone fence. I rang the electronic doorbell, and a moment later a servant dressed in geometrically patterned slacks and a dress shirt and tie, all in various shades of purple, appeared to greet me. His hair was also a shade of purple, as was his eye color, and he frowned distastefully when he saw me.

I was dressed in my Pierrot clothes, and I wore my mask. A long overcoat with the hood pulled up effectively concealed it, but I let my hood drop away and my coat open when the servant approached. The servant glanced around, eyes narrowed, and he muttered something in what sounded like German.

"What business do you, Pierrot, have with the Tsukiyama family?"

"I wish to speak with your master, the head of this household, Tsukiyama Mirumo. It concerns the young master of this household, Tsukiyama Shuu."

Immediately the servant grew suspicious, but he couldn't outright decline me. So reluctantly he lead me through the large manor, and I waited for a short period of time in an entryway while the servant left. Another one took my coat and offered me a glass of wine-- which was actually blood, to my delight-- and I accepted it. It was nearing the end of the month, and I was getting hungry, but it wasn't anywhere near unbearable. Still, the blood was quenching and tasty, like a rich wine might taste to a human.

I still held the glass when the same servant that had greeted me reappeared and lead me into a warmly lit study, full of books. He stopped in front of a man with graying hair and mustache, small-rimmed glasses, and finely-tailored clothes. The man sat in a plush armchair, and he gestured to the armchair across from him.

"Please sit," He said to me, then to the servant, "Thank you, Kanae. You're dismissed."

The servant looked displeased, but he exited with a bow and left us alone.

Mirumo sipped his own glass of blood wine before setting it on the table, and turning his attention to me. He had an air of aristocracy in every move, like he radiated wealth.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you before, but I'm well-aware of who you are. What, pray tell, does Pierrot of the Clowns want with me and my son?"

I sat perfectly straight in the armchair, thankful for once of Itori's lessons of etiquette and manners.
"I wish to recruit you and your son into a group, one created with the goal of exterminating Doctor Kanou Akihiro and all of his followers."

Mirumo, to give him credit, only raised an eyebrow. "Why would I wish to do something so vulgar?"

What's in it for me, he was asking, in a polite manner.

"I believe I have a way I can bring your son back to how he used to be," I said simply. "He fell into his state because Kaneki Ken died, did he not?"

"Perhaps he did. What is it to you, Pierrot? And why do you wish to exterminate Doctor Kanou?"

"Here's where things get a bit more complicated," I sighed. "Firstly, you're son's condition and it's cause-- Kaneki Ken's death-- is easily solved. But I'll get into that later. As to you're second question, well, that's also complicated. I wish to kill Doctor Kanou because he threatened to rip my lover away from where he is finally happy, and because he threatened to kill our children."

Mirumo frowned. "I have never met Doctor Kanou, nor do I wish to. But why on earth would Doctor Kanou do that? And what relevance does this have to myself and my son?"

I reached up and removed my mask, setting it on my lap. With a steady, slow blink, my kakugan became apparent, the black veins creeping into my skin.

"Because I am formerly Kanou Hideyoshi, Doctor Kanou's biological son. I refused to be his puppet and tear my boyfriend away from his happy life, and his retaliation of that is going to be the slaughter of our children. It's relevance to you and your son is the fact that my significant other is Kaneki Ken, who despite losing his memories, is alive and well."

"And Shuu? How would you fix Shuu? Kaneki Ken does not remember him, as Sasaki Haise, and you've made it abundantly clear that you don't want his memories to return."

"His scent may work, although I suspect that your son's nose will be dulled and won't be able to detect the smell. And I will not offer any of Haise's blood, or anything of the sort. That's too risky, even for me," I said firmly. "But I can offer the next best thing: my blood."

"You're blood?" Mirumo asked, confused. "What effect will that have on Shuu?"

"I'm a One-Eyed Ghoul too, don't forget," I said, my tone almost cheeky. "May I see an empty glass?"

Mirumo, looking confused, called out to one of the servants and requested a wineglass. A young woman, dressed in the clothes of a maid, brought one forward not much later. With the glass in one
hand, I reached into my pocket and drew out a scalpel that I had left at Uta's sometime or another, from Kanou's laboratories. Balancing the wineglass on my knee, next to my mask, I drew the scalpel across the palm of my hand in a short, quick stroke.

Blood dripped from the cut, not a large amount, and without the slightest expression of discomfort I pressed the scalpel into my hand harder, urging more blood to seep into the glass. The room began to reek of the intoxicating smell, not unlike Haise's blood, sweet and soft like a human but at the same time sharp and spicy like a ghoul.

Mirumo raised an eyebrow as I finally drew the scalpel away, wrapping it in a neon-colored handkerchief and slipping it back into my pocket. I offered the glass-- which was now a quarter full-- to him with a flourish and a smile worthy of the devil.

"If you please, have a taste."

He took the glass in a smooth gesture, lifting it to his lips and tasting it hesitantly, like a human might hesitantly taste a rare vintage wine. Mirumo's eyes widened, and I chuckled darkly.

"I taste enough like Haise that my blood should suffice. Once your son is recovered enough to be rational, I can explain the situation to him in full. I will, of course, provide my blood in enough quantity to allow him to have his fill until that time." I watch him intently as Mirumo set his wineglass down on the table beside him, with perhaps a little less flourish and elegance. "What do you say, Tsukiyama Mirumo? Will you accept my deal?"

Mirumo didn't hesitate long enough for more than three heartbeats length to pass.

"I will indeed, Nagachika Hideyoshi."

We shook hands like gentlemen, the cut on my hand long healed.

"A piece of information, as a show of my goodwill. The case I am currently assigned to with Haise and the children is going by the code-name 'Rose', because the kagune traces revealed that one of the ghouls involved in the recent spree of kidnappings is related to the Rosewald family. We've already gotten our suspicions that it's a high-class family of ghouls, and I suspect that the ghouls are none other than your servants, out hunting for your son. Do not tell me if I am correct; I do not want to know," I advised. "But do not send your servants out hunting any longer. If you do, they will be killed or captured, and neither option is pretty. Trust my blood to sustain him, and if need be, hunt in other wards besides the first."

"What will you do, if you identify the family of ghouls?" Mirumo asked, his face betraying nothing.

"I'll feign ignorance, and I'll do my best to not contribute to the investigation, as if I've hit a block. It won't be hard to do, and it certainly isn't uncommon. But I warn you: Haise and the children are very bright. It won't be long before they identify what family is behind Rose, and when they do, the ghouls will be exterminated. When that time comes, I will do my job as a dutiful Dove and cut down any ghouls I face, regardless of ties. I'd advise Rose to get a new identity ready."

Mirumo said nothing for a brief period of time, then he said courteously, "Thank you for your advice, and if I ever meet Rose, I'll pass it along."

"Of course. I would ask nothing more. But moving past that," I said, my tone still unchanged, as if we had been discussing something as simple as the weather or politics. "The first supply of blood, a gallon, will arrive tomorrow, delivered by an associate of mine. I would offer to supply the blood now, but my supplies for draining blood are obviously not with me."
Mirumo nodded. "Of course. Hang on a moment, I'll call someone to escort you out."

He did exactly that, and the servant that greeted me, with his unusually colored hair and eyes, came to show me out. I was halfway out the door when Mirumo, seated in his armchair, called out,

"If I had not agreed to the deal, would you have still passed on the warning, Pierrot?"

I turned back to Mirumo, and my grin was sharp and eerie in the warm but dim lighting.

"Maybe, maybe not. There's no way of knowing now, is there?"

---

When I arrived at Itori's bar, it's well past midnight and I'm dragging. Inside, Uta is casually sipping his wine-that-is-not-wine, legs crossed and a sketchpad opened in front of him. Itori is saying something animatedly and using her hands as accentuation, and Yomo is sitting beside Uta, stony-faced as ever. A glass of blood wine sits in front of him, barely touched.

Itori beamed when I unlocked the door to Helter Skelter and she threw her arms wide.

"Kiddo! How'd the meeting with the fancy-pants go? Got any good info on 'em?"

I rolled my eyes, dropping onto one of the bar stools. "Of course I got information. Not a whole lot, but for being in their manor all of an hour and restricted to a study with Tsukiyama-san, I did a pretty damned good job."

Itori's eyes gleamed excitedly, but took the time to slide a glass full of blood wine in front of me, and Uta tossed me a small object, which I found to be a disembodied hand. He grinned cheekily, and I smiled tiredly as Itori said, "Ooh, fill me in. C'mon, what's up with the heir, Tsukiyama Shuu? Are the rumors true?"

I nibbled on the proffered snack, wondering idly when Uta had found the time to hunt. "Most of the rumors are true. Tsukiyama Shuu is bedridden and psychotic, unable to even use his kagune. The servants are keeping him drugged up with RC Cell Suppressants-- of course, they didn't tell me that, but I was drugged up on the stuff for most of my life, and it's pretty damned easy to smell them on a person as sickly as he was. He pretty much reeked of death, and his mental state apparently varies anywhere from calm and sane to batshit crazy and out of control."

"Interesting!" Itori said delightedly. "So, what about Tsukiyama Mirumo?"

"Mm. Not much on that one, but he's pretty worried about his son. He's pretty composed over all, and he's got a rational mind, so I'll give him kudos for that. But the strain of worrying for his son is obviously taking it's toll-- I don't know what he looked like before, but he's pretty thin, and it was sort of difficult to gauge the effect it's having on his mental state. He looked like he was holding up pretty well, though," I added.

"How soon do you think Tsukiyama-kun will recover?" Yomo said, in that quiet yet somehow loud way of his. How he did so had baffled me since I was a child, and I still hadn't been able to figure
"Hard to say. My estimation is a month, tops, if he's got enough of my blood. The main issue right now is that he's depressed and starving himself, and because he's starving himself, he's insane. So once we knock out the starving issue, his sanity should come back, and his strength soon after. We're resilient creatures, after all," I added with a mirth-filled smile.

Uta twirled a squishy-looking eyeball in his hand, and idly popped it into his mouth. It made a noise like a balloon popping when he chewed. After he swallowed, he said, "Well then, Hide, it's about time we get you hooked up to donate some blood then, eh?"

I sighed. "Unfortunately. We've got to do this unethically fast, since it's a four-hour trip home on the train-- scratch that, actually, the trains don't start running until six, so I'll have to just run, if I want to make it home before then."

Uta grinned wickedly. "Which means we've got two hours to strain a gallon of blood and get you moving. Shall we begin?"

I grimaced.

Four hours later-- running, even while slightly light-headed while my body produced blood to replace what I had lost, was still much faster than taking the train. In fact, I probably would have been home sooner, if I hadn't tripped on the roof of a building and taken a thirty foot tumble to the ground-- and the clothes that I had left the Chateau in earlier a little bit dusty from my fall, I unlocked the door of the Chateau and trudged inside. The house was still dark and quiet, which was no surprise, considering that it was just after four in the morning.

Silently I removed my shoes and left them in the entryway, walking up the stairs with slightly lagging footsteps and finally reaching the bedroom, to my immense relief.

What I didn't expect was Haise, awake and wearing his reading glasses, sitting at the desk and reading the notes that had been attached to the mask and book at Christmas time. He jolted when I walked in and put the notes aside, smiling.

"You look like you had fun."

"I hope that was sarcasm," I muttered. "I don't know how I-chan does it, every night. I feel like I got thrown off a building."

Haise laughed, but it was quiet and tired. "If it makes you feel any better, I couldn't sleep."

"Why would that make me feel any better?"

"Because it means we'll both be just as tired tomorrow? I don't know."

I draped my arms around his shoulders to lean over and read the notes, feigning a false, innocent curiosity. Every word of those notes were burned into my mind, and the mere thought of them made...

Haise's smile fell. "Well... no, not really. I was just reading those notes that were attached to that mysterious Christmas gift, and the birthday gift."

"What about 'em? Notice something odd?" I asked innocently.

"Kind of. It's the name, Kaneki Ken. I think... that might've been my name from, you know, before," Haise sighed. "I... I don't know. I kind of want to figure out who sent it, but I don't want to, at the same time." He paused. "Is it wrong that I'm afraid to figure out who I was in the past? That I don't want to find out?"

I tightened my grip around his shoulders from where I was draped around the back of the desk chair, just fractionally.

"Haise. I've told you this before, and I'll keep telling you this until you start believing it. It's okay. It's okay that you don't want to figure out who you used to be. It's okay to not be ready to face that. Hell, it'll be okay if you're never ready to face that, because sometimes the past can be a scary thing, especially if you aren't sure what lies in the past. But it's okay, because you're you, and you exist right here and now, and that's all that matters," I said sternly. "Got it?"

Haise smiled, and it was still tired, but less troubled. "Got it. Thank you, Hide."

"Don't mention it," I said, and ruffled his hair, making it stick up at all angles.

Haise still looked a little troubled, and he said, "I think that I'm going to just leave the book alone. I... I'm not ready for that. But I am going to look into the mask, the one from HySy."

Damn you, Kanou.

I pretended to be taken aback. "Hey, whoa, wait a second. Did you say HySy?"

"I did. Why, do you know the place?" Haise asked curiously, intrigued.

"Hell yeah I do! It's the mask shop Uta owns-- HySy ArtMask Studio! That's the place where I grew up!" I said, my excitement completely and unnoticeably fake.

Haise blinked, genuinely taken aback. "Oh, really? So, do you think it would be okay if we stopped by and asked why he mailed me a mask?" His voice had no suspicious undertones, nothing of the sort. Just a true curiosity, and something like delighted surprise.

"Of course it would be okay! Heck, Uta's been bugging me to show up one of these days, and business is always slow on Sundays! We can stop by right after the meeting lets out!" Internally, I prayed Uta would be able to come up with a clever story about the mask, and to play along with whatever scheme I pulled.

Haise looked relieved for a brief moment, then he froze. "Oh, the meeting. What time is it now?"

I glanced at the clock, then groaned. "It's five. The meeting with starts at eight. If we're lucky, we can get two hours of sleep. Max."

Haise's only response was a sigh.

Chapter End Notes
The next chapter is already half-written, and should be up tomorrow. It was supposed to all be one chapter, but then it got too long, so... yeah.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ui called early to inform us that the meeting was cancelled. I wondered briefly why, then realized that if Mirumo had taken my advice, then Rose would have suddenly dropped off the map and sent them spiraling into confusion, the confrontation they'd had meticulously planned never having a chance to come into play.

So later into the day than we had initially planned-- I sure as hell wasn't going to miss out on a few more hours of sleep-- Haise and I found ourselves outside HySy, it's spray-painted sign stark against the off-white cement walls. The cobblestones were worn and scuffed with time and wear, and the custom-made entryway mat was strikingly bright. There was a sign with a phone number to call next to the door, and the large wooden door with it's intricate and old-fashioned knocker-like doorknob made me smile. This was the place where I had grown up, and the loft above it was where I had spent most of my life. Itori's bar was another fond childhood home of mine, of course, but Haise didn't know about that, and I didn't feel the need to mention it.

Hesitantly, looking almost apprehensive, Haise reached out and opened the door, but he was smiling as he paused in the entryway and asked, despite the open sign, "Good evening... Are you open?"

Uta, wearing a low-cut and loose black t-shirt with legging-like white pants that showed off an extensive amount of tattoos, reached up to pull the headphones off his ears. He was seated at his messy and cluttered desk, his easel propped in front of him and a charcoal pencil in his hands. He smiled, and said, "Yes, we're open... Welcome, Haise-kun, Hide."

Haise took in the wide array of masks that were scattered around the shop, some in display cases and others hung on the walls. Unlike most of Uta's first-time customers (although technically he wasn't a first-time customer) Haise didn't seem horrified or revolted by the masks. His eyes were wide and glittering with something akin to awe, and I smiled wider.

Uta smiled too. "Are you looking for something, Mister Ghoul Investigators?" He asked playfully.

"Ah... No..." Haise said, finally snapping out of his awe. He reached down to pull the mask out of a paper bag, showing it to Uta. "Umm... About this... This was delivered to me. It was sent from this store, right?"

"Oh, I did send this... That's odd. Did I make a mistake in the address...?" Uta wondered out loud, perfectly playing along. He held the mask like it was a treasure made of china, breakable and delicate. "This was a present for a regular customer. I'm sorry about that."

Haise smiled. "Oh, no, don't apologize. I was just a bit confused, that's all."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Honestly, Uta. You're handwriting is so clear normally, but how many times has this happened now?"

Uta feigned hurt. "I'm bad with addresses, you know that. And it's only happened a few times, I'll have you know."

I snorted, and Haise looked faintly amused. Then his eyes widened, and he said, "Ah, by the way, did you also send this book with that?" He showed Uta the signed copy of the The Hanged Man's MacGuffin.
Uta frowned puzzledly. "Hmm... No, I didn't. I'm not one for books, really. Especially not those odd, gory ones of hers."

Haise sighed, and his shoulder's slumped a little, but it wasn't in disappointment. "Sorry, in that case. Oh, and here's your mask back."

"No, it's fine. You can have it," Uta assured him, and I froze a little, but Uta continued on despite Haise's look of shock. "It must've been fate that we met like this, after all. What are the chances that I mess up the address on a package and it goes right to my son-in-law? It's fate, I tell you!"

Haise still looked a bit uncomfortable, but he laughed a little and relaxed a bit at Uta's comment. "Then I suppose I'll take you up on that offer." He grew quiet, staring at Uta's easel and the half-finished sketch that it lay on. "Umm..."

"Yes?" Uta asked, with the same jovial amusement.

"Do you... make custom masks?"

I tilted my head quizzically to the side, and Uta mimicked the gesture.

"I do, as a matter of fact. Interested in commissioning one?"

"Actually, it's about a case we're working on..." Haise began to smile. "Hide, I think I've figured out how we can get intel on Rose."

I dreaded this already.

"I don't like that look in your eyes, Haise," I said nervously, half a mind to take a step backwards and drag Haise out of HySy. "I don't think this is going to go well."

As if sensing my thoughts, Haise's hand shot out to grasp mine and hold me firmly in place. He smiled and said cheerfully, "Nonsense! Listen, this is a great idea!"

Uta beamed. "I can't wait to hear this. It sounds... entertaining."

Cool.

The reconciling meeting for the Auction wrapping-up consisted of myself, Mutsuki, Juuzou, and Juuzou's squad. Haise was teaching a lecture, Urie was at the gym (no shocker there), and Saiko and Shirazu were out with Kuroiwa, subtly gathering intel on how far the other squads were progressing.

There were multiple papers tacked onto the whiteboard with markers, and Juuzou held a marker, pointing at one of them vaguely while Hanbee said, "The relationship between the Clowns, who were in charge of the stadium, and Aogiri is a concern."

"A concern," Juuzou said cheerily. "For another day. Let's wrap it up for now."
The sound of closing binders and file folders filled the room, with a symphony of rustling papers, as Juuzou's squad began packing up their many notes. Mutsuki, who stood beside me, spoke up under the noise.

"Suzuya-san, sir. I have something that's bothering me. I... I wasn't able to recall it until a few nights ago, but it was something No-Face said to me, when I was being sold."

"He spoke to you?" Juuzou asked curiously, tilting his head and making the red bobby pins in his hair clink together. "That's odd! Tell us what he said, then, Mutsuki-kun!"

Mutsuki swallowed, like his throat was dry. "He... He said, *The operation failed. Help won't come.*"

"Hmm..." Juuzou said, hopping onto one of the desks and swinging his legs. His subordinate took no notice and continued to make note of Mutsuki's words, regardless. "Does this mean that they knew our plans?"

"It could also mean that they simply suspected of a raid," I said, internally cursing Uta's very existence. He had probably said more than that, too. "Especially when Mutsuki showed up on stage."

"And why do you say that, Hide-kun?" Juuzou looked a little curious, but it was hard to tell if he was suspicious.

"Well, because Mutsuki and the Quinx, they smell different," I revealed, weighing the gamble in my mind and finding it the best option. At the very least, not wanting.

Hanbee looked taken aback. "They smell... different? How?"

I wanted to snicker at the look on his face, but I didn't. "It's like this: humans smell, to ghouls, like food. No shocker there. But the hook is, there's a clear distinction between what ghouls smell like and what humans smell like. Half-ghouls, from my own experience, tend to smell really good, a little bit like a ghoul and a little bit like a human." I made a gesture to Mutsuki, who had paled considerably. "Mutsuki and the other Quinx, they smell a little bit like me and Haise. But they smell more human than we do, of course."

"Does every human smell different, too?" Juuzou asked curiously, eyes wide in a brightly inquisitive way.

"They do," I answered honestly.

"Ooh, what do I smell like, then?" Juuzou asked eagerly, grinning. He held out an arm, and insisted, "Smell me!"

I laughed. Hanbee and the majority of his subordinates, and Mutsuki too, seemed a bit rattled by my ghoulish admittance of smell.

"I don't need to sniff you that close, y'know. I can smell you from across the room, but that's not normally how it is," I remarked. "You smell like candy used too, really sweet. I guess it's true, you are what you eat!"

Juuzou looked surprisingly pleased with my answer, as he retracted his hand and smiled. I sighed, and said, "But you know, I think most people would be unnerved that they smell like candy to me. Just saying."
"Why would I be un-nerved~?" Juuzou said, in a sing-song way, as he swung his legs. "You don't want to actually eat me, do you, Hide-kun~?"

"'Course not. I may be half-ghoul, but that doesn't mean I'm going to just lose control and try to eat people," I said, smiling innocently. "Besides, you'd take me down if I did, wouldn't you, Suzuya-san?"

Juuzou cackled. "Of course! It'd be my job to." Juuzou paused, then added as an afterthought, "I think you'd make a good quinque!"

Mutsuki looked a little bit ill that Juuzou was talking about killing me and making me into a weapon, but I didn't do anything besides beam a bright, sunny smile. Juuzou may have seemed childishly naive sometimes, but I knew better. He was gauging my reaction, watching me.

"Well, I'd hope so," I sniffed, but my smile was still bright. "I'd make the best quinque, like, ever! It goes without saying that I'd be awesome!"

When Juuzou smiled again, sniggering a laugh and throwing his head back, I laughed with him, confident in the knowledge that I had passed his evaluation.

I arrived at the academy too late to see Haise teach, because the class had let out and the only students were two boys sitting on the bleachers. One of them, a boy with wavy hair that was oddly a shade of light pink, with two moles under his eyes akin to Urie's, was standing up and balancing precariously on the bleachers of the outside court.

"Well, dang," I muttered, sighing. The pink-haired boy's head jerked upwards, as if he hadn't noticed me. But his companion simply silently took me in with wide, dark eyes that were mostly covered by his long bangs.

"What's a full-fledged Ghoul Investigator doing at the Second Academy?" The pink-haired boy asked, curious but with no ill intent. I almost praised him for his observation skills, but decided against it.

"I was looking for Haise-- er, Sasaki Haise, the First Class Ghoul Investigator. He was teaching a class today, right?"

The pink-haired boy nodded. "Oh yeah, you just missed him. But, who are you again? Is Sasaki-sensei in trouble?"

"Nah, Haise is fine," I said, plopping my quinque case down and sitting next to the dark-haired boy. "I just wanted to see him teach. I'm First Class Nagachika Hideyoshi, a squad-mate of his."

"Oh," The pink-haired boy said, deflating for a moment before regaining his spunk. "Anyways, we can show you where he went off, can't we, Aura-kun?"

"Sure," The dark-haired boy said nervously, standing up at the pink-haired boy's ushering.
"By the way, Nagachika-sensei, I'm Higemaru Touma! This is Aura Shinsanpei. He doesn't talk much," Higemaru said, with a smile, striding briskly off in the direction opposite that I had come. But I wasn't paying much attention-- he had called me sensei, and nobody had ever done that before. It was gratifying, in an odd way.

I remained silent and beaming as Higemaru filled the air with meaningless chatter about exams and their terrible Professor, leading me and Aura, who had remained completely silent and seemed content with staying that way, down the concrete sidewalk that wound through the Second Academy's many buildings.

"And get this, then he said-- oh, look, there he is!" Higemaru broke off, pointing to Haise's gradually retreating figure. He was dressed informally, lucky him, in what looked like black tights and a black shirt, with white shorts.

Okay, maybe not so lucky him.

I held a finger to my lips and motioned for them to stay, handing my quinque case to Higemaru. He looked confused, but obeyed, and I grinned. Then I silently crept forward until I stood behind him and threw my arms around his neck, swinging him around until I stood facing him, clapping my hands down on his shoulders with a smile so large it hurt. "Haise!"

He jumped, grey eyes wide until he processed who I was. I laughed so hard I bent over, just a little, and Haise sighed.

"Hide! What are you doing here? I thought you were at a meeting with Juuzou-kun and Mutsuki!"

I brushed off his shirt where I had grabbed it and it wrinkled, swallowing my laughter with a little bit of difficulty. "I was. Suzuya-san decided to let it out for today. And as for what I'm doing here, isn't it obvious?" I held my arms out, twirling the car keys around my finger. "I'm here to drive you home! Plus, I brought coffee. And I didn't spill a drop of it! Aren't I just awesome?" I held the foam cup, with :re's logo on it, in front of his face. Haise brightened as he took the coffee cup, his smile widening as steam curled from the top when he opened the flap to drink from.

"Okay, you're pretty awesome," He said, after taking a drink. "But where's Mutsuki? Is he here, too?"

"Nah," I waved a hand, "I dropped him off with Shirazu, Saiko, and Kuroiwa-kun. He needed a break, and they were eating at a bakery near :re. It worked out pretty well! And guess what? The girl who works there went to school with a friend of mine! She knew Kuroiwa, too, apparently. Small world, huh?"

"Small world," Haise agreed, then added, "but how did you find your way around? The Second Academy is a big place."

I did my best to look wounded, and I think I pulled it off pretty well. "Haise! Do you doubt my navigation abilities? I'm hurt!" I paused, then gestured behind me, towards where Higemaru and Aura had watched our meeting with slightly confused looks. "But I did have help."

"Oh, Higemaru-kun, Aura-kun!" Haise smiled in their direction, and they walked closer hesitantly. "Thanks for showing Hide around, then!"

"It wasn't a problem," Higemaru said, smiling despite looking a little confused still, as he handed me my quinque case. "We'd better head back now, though."

I gave them a cheery wave and a large, toothy smile. "Sure! Thanks again, though! I owe you a
favor, so gimme a call sometime!"

Higemaru genuinely laughed, then, and Aura's lips twitched upwards in a smile. They started to walk away, and only turned back once they were a short distance away to call their goodbyes. Well, Higemaru, anyways.

"Yeah, sure! Take care, Nagachika-sensei!" Higemaru called, and beside him Aura waved. "You too, Sasaki-sensei! Get a girlfriend soon!"

Haise laughed weakly. "My love life is none of your business!"

"More like lack of one!" Higemaru called, with a cheeky grin.

I snorted, and muttered, "If only they knew, huh?"

Haise looked betrayed at my snort. But he just sighed flatly, and said, "The Second Academy is full of lively students again this year..."

"It's certainly livelier than my Academy was."

"Every Academy has it's own unique flavor. The First has lots of star students, while the Fifth and Sixth are more social," Haise paused, and like an afterthought, he added, "Juuzou-kun went to the Second Academy, actually."

"Rank 1 Sasaki..." A voice broke into our conversation, and Haise stopped, turning around. The person who had spoken was a mostly bald man with scars covering most of the right side of his face. "Oh, guess now it's First Class..."

I didn't like him. Right away, there was something screaming it's head off inside me, a voice of reason that said this man is not right. I had learned to trust that instinct a long time ago, and that voice of reason had probably saved my life a dozen times over.

But Haise just did his best to smile politely.

"How's our Second student's doing?" The man-- and he had to be Goumasa Tokage, one of the Second Academy's professors, who used to be a Cochlea interrogator. There was nobody else he could be. "Are they being a bunch of fools?"

He practically sneered it, and Haise's smile faltered for such a brief moment I was sure only I had noticed. "No, they're bright and fun to teach!"

Goumasa snorted. "The Second Academy tends to gather children who had issues in the past. Some even have criminal records." Goumasa shook his head, like it was a personal offense. "How's Mutsuki, by the way?"

I bristled at Mutsuki's name. How did this man know Mutsuki? My anger only grew as he continued, and Haise's smile slipped away.

"Mutsuki Tooru. Isn't he your subordinate? That kid's trouble as well..."

"Mutsuki isn't trouble at all!" I said, with false cheeriness and a fake smile as I resisted the urge to strangle Goumasa by his tie. "In fact, he's very dedicated and passionate! He's even been receiving guidance from Special Class Suzuya and was a key element in a large scale operation!"

Goumasa managed a look that seemed faintly surprised, even with his deformed face. "Who are
"I'm First Class Nagachika Hideyoshi, of the Mado Squad," I said, with the same false cheer. "Mutsuki's my subordinate, too! It's a pleasure to meet you!"

I didn't try very hard to keep the threat out of my eyes. Goumasa seemed to understand it well, and he gave a deformed, twisted smile.

"I see. Suzuya-kun, hmm..."

"Yes," Haise said, trying his best to smile. "Nowadays he has the face of a fully fledged investigator."

Goumasa didn't even give us a proper farewell; he simply nodded his head to us and walked away, cracking his fingers in a way that made a dark realization spring up in my mind as the dots connected.

Jason. Goumasa Tokage was the one who tortured Jason and screwed him up in the head.

My eye twitched as his finger cracked again, and I subtly observed Haise's reaction. But the only change was his smile faded as Goumasa walked away and he sighed.

"There's something... dark, about him. I... I don't like it," Haise admitted, and I didn't think I was imagining the faint shudder that went down his spine, though it was almost unnoticeable.

I twined my fingers through his and held fast, watching Goumasa's fading back.

"I don't like him either, Haise." I sighed, shaking my head. "But it's about time we headed home, don't you think?"

Haise smiled a little and nodded, and we walked off in the other direction despite the fact it took longer to get to the car, fingers still twined, and I tried to put thoughts of Goumasa out of my mind.

I supposed it would be too suspicious to hunt him down and kill him as Pierrot, now?

Chapter End Notes

I imagine that Ui would be that boss, the one that calls ungodly early to inform them of the cancelled meeting.

Anyways. This is going to start focusing to the politics and Clown/Kanou portion very quickly now. And more focus on Pierrot, too. But that doesn't mean that it won't still have a focus on the CCG portion-- Haise and the Quinx aren't going to have any less of a role, even if the chapters begin to diverge from them, just a little. In the end, any character plays just about as much of a role as anybody else, just maybe a bit more... subconsciously.

I hope you liked it! The next chapter, Tsukiyama (Shuu, that is) makes his appearance, and more of Uta, too! Drop a comment and tell me what you thought of this chapter!
We were emerging from a meeting on Monday, and everything was going well with the world. The sun was shining, the day was still relatively new, and best of all, the meeting at the last night had gone wonderfully. Tsukiyama's recovery was supposedly going well, according to Kanae, who was sent to our Sunday night meeting as a representative of the Tsukiyama family. They would break the news of Kaneki's survival to him today, and my terms with it, if everything went well. Banjou and his three subordinates were doing some digging on one of Kanou's laboratories in the Sixth Ward, with assistance from Itori, and Uta was currently doing some digging on all of the members of the Clowns. Subtly, of course.

Until the day suddenly took an abrupt turn for the worse when we were walking out of the building and Tsukiyama, of all people, came running down the street like a madman. Kanae, wearing a beanie and dark sunglasses, was chasing after him, pushing a wheelchair. "Master Shuu! Y-You can't! You can't go!" Kanae shouted, looking panicked as Tsukiyama dashed towards us. "Rest assured, Kanae, everything will go well!" Tsukiyama shouted, grinning almost manically as he stagger-charged us. The closer he got, the more I tensed "There's no way that Kaneki-kun would forget about me! Let's spend time together again, Kaneki-kun! Little Hinami, Banjou, and those other three can also join! Let's fill this void of time!"

Just as I thought he would barrel right into Haise, who was wide-eyed and looked a little like a deer in the headlights-- and really, who wouldn't, if some skin-and-bones man in a flashy suit charged you?-- Tsukiyama tripped and fell face first onto the sidewalk. Haise dropped down to his knees and I reluctantly followed, a little angered at Tsukiyama's audacity. He had the guts, the stupidity, to come to the doorstep of the CCG? But I concealed my bubbling anger with a concerned expression, not unlike Haise or Mutsuki's, who had also dropped to his knees to sit before Tsukiyama. Saiko stretched out on the pavement next to me, looking amused, and she muttered, "What a crazy suit..."

Haise looked unsure whether or not he should reach out and offer a hand up or perhaps call an ambulance. After a moment, he asked simply, "Umm... Is everything alright?"

Tsukiyama didn't say anything, staring at Haise's face, searching. Searching for recognition, for memories, for Kaneki Ken. And he found the concerned and confused, but blank, stare of Sasaki Haise. "Here, I'll lend you a hand. Haise, will you help me?" I said, false concern seeping into my voice and saturating it with the false kindness. "Of course," Haise said, and a moment later we were hoisting Tsukiyama up. Saiko was still on the ground and she held her hands out, palms up, declaring, "I, Saiko, will lend you power!"

Before Haise could ask anything and before I could tighten my grip from gentle concern to bruising in anger, Tsukiyama's weight-- which wasn't much-- disappeared from our hands. Kanae, in his beanie and sunglasses and fine clothes, had swept Tsukiyama away like he was horrified by our
mere touch on his master. Knowing Kanae, he probably was.

"Please, excuse us..." Kanae said quietly, shepherding Tsukiyama into the wheelchair and walking away briskly. Quietly, to Tsukiyama, he added, "Master Shuu! Just what are you..."

Tsukiyama looked like a lost child, and he let himself be wheeled away, eyes wide. "That's odd... even though it's me..."

Shirazu stared, like he couldn't believe the encounter had actually happened. "What's up with him? He's all skin and bones..."

Haise stared after them for a long time, and there was a foggy distance in his eyes that concerned me greatly.

"Haise?"

Haise didn't answer me, and it was like he didn't hear me.

"Haise." I whispered, more sharply, and I twined my fingers through his with a firm force. "Is something wrong?"

Haise finally blinked, the foggy haze clearing from his eyes, and he smiled, saying, "I just hope everything’s okay."

But there was a distance in his eyes still, and regardless of anything or anyone that could see, I tightened my grip on his hand and gave him my best, brightest smile. I laughed and pulled him forward, and Saiko beamed as Haise's eyes widened a little and he stumbled after me.

"C'mon Haise! We're gonna be late for our appointment with Uta, and you know he'll wanna hear all about what happened!"

"H-Hide!" Haise protested, but he was smiling and the distance in his eyes was gone. I didn't release his hand, much to his chagrin, but dragged him along the entire way to the train station, twirling and dancing between individuals and groups of people, who gave us amused glances as we passed. The Quinx managed to keep pace with us, trailing along behind us like a small parade of white-coated young adults. Saiko laughed, a bright, clear sound, while she tugged at Mutsuki and Shirazu's hands, pulling them along. Mutsuki smiled at Shirazu, who looked fondly exasperated, and Urie looked normally irritated, but with a hint of something I thought might have been amusement.

I smiled genuinely, forgetting my anger, and for a moment, I didn't have a care in the world.

"Uta~!" I called, throwing the door open and skipping inside, Haise following more slowly behind me. And behind him came the kids, inspecting Uta's shop with a mix of awe and apprehension. I hadn't informed them of Haise's latest scheme, and neither had he, so they had no idea why we were here. "I'm back!"

Uta sighed, setting his pencil down. "Well, shoot. And I thought I had finally gotten rid of you, too."
Haise snickered, and I hit him on the back of the head lightly, muttering, "Traitor."

"Er, Sassan, Hide-san," Shirazu said, almost nervously, while he inspected a demon-motified mask mounted on the wall. "What are we doing here?"

Uta spread his arms, beaming, his piercings glittering in the lighting. "Isn't it obvious, my dear grandchildren? You're here to get scleral tattoos!"

Mutsuki paled considerably, and I patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, he's joking," I said firmly, and sent a glare at Uta. "You're joking, right?"

"Right, right," Uta waved a hand dismissively and not at all convincingly.

Haise smiled exasperatedly, and he finally decided to elaborate. "We're getting our masks made today, so we'll need to be measured."

"...Masks?" Urie asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Why masks?" Shirazu echoed. "We ain't ghouls, you know..."

"We're becoming ghouls." Haise said, oddly serious for once, turning around to face us with a mask in his hand.

Saiko was the only one who was unfazed, and she was leaning to look at Uta's sketchpad with wide blue eyes. Urie, Mutsuki, and Shirazu all held similar looks of absolute astonishment.

"First girls, now ghouls...?" Shirazu sighed, leaning against a display case. "I'm not sure where you come up with these ideas sometimes, Sassan."

"We all have the eye and the kagune," Haise said, tapping just beneath his eye for emphasis. "We... could pretend to be ghouls."

There was almost a hesitance on his pretend, and I knew what he was thinking. We don't need to pretend, me and Haise. The kids are part ghoul, too.

Before he could jump into his pit of broodingly dark thoughts, I interrupted, filling them in on the plan more fully.

"Rosewald is a family with connections everywhere. Rose are ghouls, or at least, serve ghouls, with status. Meaning they're well-known in the ghoul community, so gathering intel, by ghouls from ghouls, shouldn't be an issue."

Uta stood up, walking towards Shirazu and holding a ruler up against his head, deciding that now was apparently an excellent time to get to work.

"So, Shirazu-kun, your jagged teeth are pretty cool. Do you have a girlfriend?" Uta asked, reading the ruler and deciding on a measurement, humming as he scribbled it down.

"Uh... I don't..."

"Since when?" Uta asked, still smiling.

"Ummm... about two years, I guess..."

"Do you like girls?"
"I do," Shirazu responded, looking confused.

"Is anything on your mind right now?"

Shirazu paused for a brief moment, then he said, "...Not really...?"

Uta scribbled down another note, then nodded and beamed. "Okay, you're turn, Saiko-chan!"

Saiko sat down in front of him and Uta leaned down, inspecting her with his permanently black-and-red eyes. "You're almost like a small koro-pok-guru!"

Saiko giggled. "Some call me the fairy of the Chateau."

Uta smiled. "Do you have anything you like?"

"Hmm..." Saiko paused. "Food, games, sleep, candies, manga, anime, sleep, yakinku, cake, games, sleeping, eating, and siesta."

With a little chuckle, Uta wrapped the measuring tape around Saiko's head like mummy bandages. "That's a lot of things."

"Yeah."

As Uta dismissed Saiko and moved on to Urie, I turned to Haise and nudged him. "So Haise, have you actually gotten this cleared with Ui-san yet?"

Haise laughed, but it was nervous now. "Ah, actually I'm headed back to Headquarters now to ask him. Wish me luck?"

I glanced towards the Quinx, who are all occupied. Urie is being measured, Mutsuki is waiting for his turn, and Saiko and Shirazu are inspecting masks. I grinned, a cheeky smile, and Haise must have seen my mischievous intent like an aura around me, because he tilted his head a little and looked like he was going to ask a question, but I never gave him the chance.

I kissed him, a quick, almost insubstantial thing, a peck that was over as soon as it happened. I smiled again, the same cheeky grin, and said, "Good luck!"

Later that night, I was away again, standing in Touka's apartment above :re and slightly furious as Tsukiyama, out of his wheelchair-- which had been left downstairs-- sat before me. My hand was clenched into a fist, my nails digging into the skin so hard that blood beaded. I took a deep breath and tried to collect my temper before I began, but it didn't work well.

"You are an absolute idiot," I said, and my eye twitched. "You are an idiot. You do realize that Haise and the kids have seen your face now? What were you thinking?"

Tsukiyama looked like he was trying to keep a firm grasp on his own temper. "I am not the fool here, Pierrot. You are, if you believe that I will allow Kaneki-kun to be used by the Doves!"
"He is not being used," I hissed. "He works for the CCG, and in turn, he is able to live without prosecution for what he is. Haise is happy there, and if you try to interfere, I will kill you. You are recovering so fast right now because of my blood, which I am only giving to you because of the terms your father agreed upon, which was to lend me support as I protect Haise's happiness, which is his life right now. If you cannot accept those terms, then I will show you no mercy." My anger ran through my veins, making my blood boil, and I yearned for nothing more than to kill him. I would kill him, right here and now, if he did not understand.

Touka sat a cup of coffee down in front of either of us, and she gave me a flat look.

"Hide-kun, let's be civil here and stop with the death threats. And put away your kakugan. I won't have you fighting in my apartment."

Surprised, I realized that my kakugan was indeed active, and I wondered when it had done so. I took another deep breath, and when I blinked my eyes, slowly, my kakugan disappeared. But it threatened to resurface, and I had to restrain it with considerable mental force.

"Of course. Sorry, Touka-chan. It won't happen again," I said, but there was a threat in my voice when I added, "But those weren't threats. They were promises. Do you understand what I'm saying, Tsukiyama-kun?"

Tsukiyama's eye twitched at the diminutive mocking in my voice. "I understand you perfectly, Pierrot."

He didn't understand anything, and I put a hand to my temple. After a long minute, I sat down at the table and slipped a hand into my pocket, drawing out a manila envelope. I threw it onto the table, and it slid to a stop in front of Tsukiyama. He didn't pick it up.

"Do you know how to tell his fake smiles from his true ones, Tsukiyama-kun?" I asked, my voice dangerously quiet.

Tsukiyama frowned. "Kaneki-kun's smiles are always true!"

"No. They aren't, and that proves just how much about him you still need to learn." I said, tapping the envelope. "Tell me, Tsukiyama-kun, where did he grow up? What was his mother like, and what happened to her? What kind of childhood did he have?"

"Kaneki-kun's mother was a wonderful woman, he told me himself!" Tsukiyama declared, looking smug. "She was a kind person, and she died when he was young!"

"Wrong," I hissed, with so much venom that Tsukiyama actually flinched back. "His mother wasn't a good person at all! She beat him, did you know that? Beat him so that have bruises in the shape of her hands! He lied, to you and to everyone, but to himself most of all. His mother overworked herself and died, and after that, his aunt took him in. His aunt beat him, too, and pretended like he didn't exist! My kakugan gleamed again, and I let it remain, regardless of Touka's reprimand. "Who bandaged his cuts, huh? I did. Who sat in the park with him, late into the night, making him forget about his terrible childhood and made sure he ate? I did. I know when his smiles are fake, so don't you think I know when he's really happy and when he's being used?"

Tsukiyama faltered, but he still said resolutely, "The Doves are just using him!"

"That may be so," I said, still deathly quiet. "But even if he's being used, it's with his consent. He really is happy. He's got a family, you know that? Haise is living the life Kaneki always wanted, and the only way he can do that is by remaining ignorant, and I am going to do everything in my power
to ensure he remains ignorant and happy! Open up that envelope and see for yourself-- see the happiness you want to take away from him!"

A hand descended on my shoulder, and Touka, her expression carefully blank but her eyes betraying her worry. "Hide-kun," she said, and her voice was as carefully blank as her expression. "Calm down. You've got to leave soon, or you won't make it home before dark, and you should work this out rationally before you go."

I took her words to heart, and gritted my teeth to breath slowly through them. After a moment, the sharp edge of my anger had faded into something blunter, and I sighed.

"Thank you, Touka-chan."

"Don't mention it." Was all she said, but her hand remained firmly on my shoulder, a welcome weight. Her eyes remained on Tsukiyama, who had picked up the manila envelope and opened it, slowly. Inside it, the first photo he removed was a copy of the one that hung in the Chateau. It was a portrait of all of us in our dress uniforms, from the awards and promotion ceremony. Haise was seated, with his hands folded neatly in his lap, uniform pristine and awards gleaming where they were pinned on his breast pocket. Saiko stood just behind him, her hands resting on his shoulder, and a little behind her and to the right was Shirazu, his uniform belt missing from around his torso. I stood, between him and Urie, who was to my left, and Mutsuki stood in front of Urie. My hands were hidden, resting on the back of the chair Haise sat in.

Wordlessly, he sat it down and pulled out the next one, a picture of Haise at the Christmas party, Akira and Arima beside him. Haise was talking animatedly, his hands still moving when the picture was taken, and his eyes were alight. The picture was sat next to the portrait, and Tsukiyama pulled the next one out.

This was one I had taken, my arm slung around Haise's shoulders, and there was a fond smile on his lips. We held to-go cups of coffee, fresh from :re. Tsukiyama set the picture down, and he didn't pick another out of the envelope. He stared at the pictures for a long time, until finally he spoke again.

"Pierrot, is it true that you warned my father to not send out ghouls to do harvesting, to save them from capture?"

"It is. It was a show of goodwill. If I hadn't, an investigator would have killed all of them except one, and tortured the single ghoul left until they gave up information. The investigator I mentioned is actively still trying to do so. Technically it's against our Countermeasures Laws, but he won't get anything harsher than a reprimand. The person in charge of our case is very... set in his ways, and those ways are firmly against ghouls."

Tsukiyama kept his expression carefully neutral, but at the mention of his servants being tortured and killed, his eyes flashed with something that disappeared so quickly even I was unable to see what it was. "I see. Well then, Pierrot... no, Nagachika-kun... I will... assist you in keeping K-- Sasaki-san, mon cher, understand that I will shatter that ignorance and bring Kaneki-kun's memories back without hesitation."

"I would expect nothing less. Thank you, Tsukiyama-kun." I said, and the -kun wasn't diminutive this time. "In turn, I cannot warn you against the CCG any further, as I am an investigator as well. But I will do one thing, and that is give you the same advice I did your father: be ready to disappear. Haise and the kids are on the right path, though I've been contributing no more than I must, and they will discover that Rose belongs to your family one of these days. And when the CCG raids, I will be on the front-lines, and I will protect my family with everything I have, and I will do my job as a dutiful Dove. Do you understand what that means?"
Tsukiyama was solemn, and for once, I thought that he looked a little like Mirumo.

"I understand."

"One more thing," I warned, and my kakugan flickered, just briefly. "If you should ever threaten Haise's life as it stands now again, I will not hesitate to kill you and to cease my protection of your family. The CCG would be on you before you could flinch, and all of your bloodline, all of your servants, would be killed."

Tsukiyama's smile was predatory, and his eyes were cold and sharp. "Of course, mon cher. But I do hope that you know that it wouldn't be that easy to take down a family as magnifique as mine. Your dear... children, would be at great risk. Some may even perish."

"I wouldn't let that happen." I said firmly, and Tsukiyama merely shrugged, in a manner that was extraordinarily arrogant for someone who was still barely more than a bag of skin and bones.

I stretched a hand across the table, and we shook hands, with a bruising grip.

Before I left and after Tsukiyama had, Touka stopped me.

"Hide-kun. Ichimi-san was here earlier, and he asked me to pass on a message to you. It's about Banjou-san's investigation in the Sixth Ward."

I paused, my white coat halfway on. I tugged it on the rest of the way and pulled the belt around the middle so that it hung professionally again before I turned back to her, fighting an odd feeling, like there was something thick in my throat that made it difficult to swallow.

"What did the message say?" I asked, and I wondered if my voice sounded as horse as I thought it did.

"They've uncovered a laboratory there, and Banjou-san has confirmed it, the building definitely belongs to Kanou. Personally, he hasn't been spotted there, but Aogiri guards have been." Touka paused, and she scanned my face. But I was excellent at this game, and my expression was blank as a slate, perfectly empty. "What do you want to do?"

"Send a message out to everyone. We'll attack next week. I trust that will be enough time for Banjou and the ghouls in the Sixth Ward to do some recon?"

"It will be," Touka said confidently. "But Hide-kun, they can't get inside the building, you know."

"I know. I'll get the blueprints. It won't be too difficult to hack into the Ward's database, and I cover my tracks better than most professional hackers do. I don't leave any traces," I said firmly. "I'll get a copy of them to you the day after tomorrow."

"Alright," Touka said eventually, sighing. She met my eyes, and she looked worried. "Be careful, Hide-kun."
I grinned, and gave her a thumbs-up, absolutely radiating confidence. "Don't worry, Touka-chan! In this game, I'm the best player!"

Chapter End Notes

Before the Raid on Kanou's Lab can happen, Hide has one more thing to do. Any guesses on what it is?

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

I'M REALLY, REALLY SORRY THAT I HAVEN'T UPDATED SOONER! I've got finals (ugh) and so much engineering it isn't even funny. But I've got a double-update now to make up for it! Second part of the double-update will be up soon after this!

The next day, I hacked into the Sixth Ward's record-keeping database at a computer in a library and copied the blueprints onto a flash-drive. After dropping that off with Touka, when I returned home, I found that Haise was already there, despite it being only afternoon. His face was ashen, and I sincerely doubted it was from his plan being rejected yesterday.

"Haise?" I asked, sliding my shoes off in the entryway and sitting down on the couch next to him. "What's wrong, Haise?"

The laptop that we shared at the Chateau was running in front of him, and it illuminated his face in the electronic glow. Haise didn't respond at first, his eyes on the computer screen, which was black. It looked like a video that had been paused or perhaps had reached the end. Finally, he turned to me, and he looked ill, eyes wide and dark.

"Hide," He rasped quietly. "I think I might be sick."

"Like, you think your going to puke?" I asked, taken aback. Ghouls weren't immune to disease, but we tended to have stronger immune systems than humans. "Hang on a minute, I'll go get some water."

When I returned, toting the glass of tap water, Haise's head was in his hands. Wordlessly, I sat the glass on the table and rubbed his back, wondering who he could've gotten sick from. Nobody at the office was sick, as far as I knew, and it wasn't flu season.

"Hide, it's not a bug. It's that," Haise pointed a finger at the computer's black screen, and I frowned, but Haise elaborated. "Kijima-san, he... uploaded a video to the net. It's gone viral. And it's..."

"Let me see what's got you so worked up," I said, lifting the laptop and setting it on my lap. I moved the mouse, and hit the replay button.

The image of Kijima, his foot planted on a kneeling ghoul in a blood-splattered Cochlea prisoner's uniform, with Kijima grinning wickedly, appeared immediately. My lips curled when he began speaking.

"Hey Rose. For convenience, that's what we'll be calling you lot. I was thinking of letting you in on how we're going to deal with one of your guys we caught the other day." Kijima laughed. "At least, we're pretty sure he's one of yours. We interrogated him over and over again, but it seems like he'll never talk. He just kept screaming about how he didn't know anything, but he's lying, of course. And so, I thought... he didn't need his tongue."

The camera was turned to a metal cart, and on the top of it lay many blood-splattered tools like empty
syringes and scissors. Lying in a smeared pool of blood lay a roughly severed appendage that was unmistakably a tongue. The camera turned back to the kneeling ghoul, with his head bowed. "Well, from my point of view, he has too many things he doesn't need."

The ghoul tilted his head up for just a brief moment, and he was young, not even as old as Mutsuki. His lips were blood-smeared, and his eyes were as darkly colored as his hair, which fell around his ears in bloodstained clumps. He was, without doubt, a ghoul. But he wasn't one of the Tsukiyama family. They hadn't sent anyone out; he probably was just a young kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was a look in his eyes that screamed to end it, end it all. To kill him already, and end this torture.

The camera turned again, to Kijima's discolored and scarred face, and his twisted grin. "I'm the only one who knows where this place is. You could maybe save him if you kill me. I am Kijima Shiki. You won't forget my face once you've seen it. You can kill me anytime, day, night, whatever. I'll be waiting for you, Rose."

The screen went dark, and I slammed the lid of the laptop shut, the image of the young ghouls face hovering in my mind alongside the twisted smile of Kijima. Haise looked like the second round of the video might have pushed him over the edge, and he might genuinely be sick. He almost swayed where he was sitting, and I reached a hand out to mechanically but gently pull him down so that he was laying down, his head in my lap. My hands ran through his hair, with the same absentminded and mechanical movements, and he let out a shuddering breath.

"It's not right, Hide," Haise whispered. "It's too cruel."

My hands never ceased in their gentle combing, and I said, "Haise, for... people like us, compassion for ghouls is dangerous. We're walking a tightrope, a fine line between human and ghoul, and the CCG just barely tolerates us. Compassion for the things we hunt, ghouls, is dangerous," I repeated, and the words tasted bitter. Haise tensed beneath me, looking astonished that I would ever say something so cruel, but I wasn't finished, and my hands tightened just a little in his hair. "It's dangerous. But that doesn't mean it's wrong. This world is a very cruel place, and if you don't have compassion, then it doesn't matter if you're a human or a ghoul. Because you'd be a monster."

Like I was. Am.

"I... I don't think I understand," Haise said softly. "What you're saying."

"I'm saying that it's a good thing to have compassion, for ghouls and for humans." I met his eyes, and mine were dark. "But it'd be a bad idea to ever show that in front of some of our colleges."

Haise nodded slowly. I sighed, and leaned my head back against the couch.

"After that video... the public will retaliate against the CCG, probably. There's going to be hostility towards us, anyways. And ghouls in general will be angry, wanting for vengeance. We should make sure none of the kids leave the house alone. In pairs of two, at least."

"I agree," Haise said, still quiet, almost subdued. "We should call them, and warn them. Tell them to come home."

"No," I said softly, my hands stilling in his hair. I smiled at him, but it wasn't as bright as I tried for. The face of the young ghoul flashed across my mind again. "Even angry, ghouls won't attack in broad daylight, and the public will take a while to get really angry. So long as they're home before sundown, they'll be okay. And we've got to give them some space, some freedom."
Haise didn't say anything at first, merely exhaling. Then he said, "I know. They'll be okay. I trust them."

I smiled, and it was a little bit brighter. "I know you do. I trust them too."

When Mutsuki and Urie got home, they confirmed my suspicions. The public wasn't happy, and even if the video had been restricted now, just about everyone had seen it by then. Mutsuki looked upset, despite Urie-- in one of those rare moments of kindness-- saying, "Don't mind what those morons say." Saiko and Shirazu looked just as upset, and dinner had been a solemn affair. Even breakfast this morning was solemn and subdued.

"We'll end up killin' ghouls anyways," Shirazu said quietly, pushing at his food, unusually lacking an appetite. "But that doesn't mean things like torture are okay."

"Kijima-san is scary," Saiko muttered. "I don't like him. Maman, Papa, do we have to work with him?"

"Sorry, Saiko," Haise answered, looking perfectly normal. "We do have to work with him, or at least cooperate with him. But we're doing more field investigation today, doing some digging in the archives of the libraries, so we won't have to meet with him today."

"Libraries?" Mutsuki asked.

"Yep," I answer over my newspaper. "There are four in Chiyoda, so we should be able to tackle them in groups of two. Mutsuki, Saiko, you two will take the Kanda Library, and Shirazu and Urie, you guys take Shohei Library. Haise and I will look in the Yonbancho Library, and afterwards we'll tackle the Chiyoda Library together, as a big group."

"Why libraries, though?" Urie asked. "What are we looking for?"

"Anything odd with the big families," I informed. "Anything that might indicate their ghouls. Digital files are easy to fake, but paper records are less so. And lucky us, the libraries all keep records over the big families. Most of them, anyways, since they have so much power over the economy."

"But be careful out there," Haise cautioned. "The public hasn't taken well to the... video."

"That's an understatement," I muttered as I folded the newspaper I was reading, setting it down on the table with a sigh. The headline, in large, bolded print, read 'CCG Gone Too Far? Exclusive Insight From Ghoul Expert Ogura Hisashi.' Haise pursed his lips at the title, but he merely tightened his grip on his coffee mug.

"That Ogura, he's nothing but a nutjob looking for media attention," I said, drinking from my own mug. "He's just a media hound, but he's got the public all riled up on how the 'CCG's gone too far, releasing videos like that' and that 'it's a grave injustice to the fascinating creatures that are ghouls, who should be dissected in humane ways.'"
"Is there a humane way to dissect something?" Mutsuki asked, voice faint.

"There isn't," Shirazu said, eyes flashing, the only one of us to speak. I wondered if he was recalling the story I had told that wasn't completely untrue, that was Kaneki's tale, but with a few twists. I hoped I hadn't made a mistake in telling it to him.

I prayed, to any god that would listen, that I hadn't done the wrong thing by making him see ghouls as people too.

After a long and uneventful morning of searching through library records, I left Haise waiting in the park when I went to get much-earned coffee while we waited for Mutsuki and Saiko, who were supposed to meet us here to head to the Chiyoda Library.

It was warm enough, and I grinned as I arrived at the park, although it slipped away when I arrived at the park. Tsukiyama Shuu sat next to Haise, chatting with him in the extravagantly annoying manner than he seemed to radiate.

"I... am sick as you can see," He said, touching a hand to his chest. He looked normal again, healthy, and out of his wheelchair, though I noted Kanae hovering a yard or so away. My eye twitched. Sick in the head, maybe. "I don't really have many friends who are my age. If you'd like to talk about books again sometime--"

"Haise!" I called, skipping to a stop in front of him and presenting him his coffee. I gave Tsukiyama a purposely blank look. "Oh, excuse me. I'm Nagachika Hideyoshi, and it looks like you've already met my partner, Sasaki Haise. Mister...?"

Tsukiyama smiled, completely at ease and apparently unable to feel my wrath, which I did my utmost best to convey through my eyes. "I'm Tsukiyama Shuu! It's a pleasure to make you're acquaintance, Nagachika-san. I was just having a chat with Sasaki-san about literature, and he's made some points that I would have never thought of myself."

I beamed. "Wow! What are the chances of meeting someone who's as much of a literature fanatic as you, huh, Haise?"

Haise smiled, opening the lid of the coffee cup to take a sip, regardless of the steam that billowed out. "I know. Small world, huh? Thanks for the coffee, Hide."

"Nah, don't even mention it. This coffee pales in comparison to :re's," I said with another beaming smile.

"It's better than the office coffee," Haise said with a chuckle.

"That's not even coffee," I said offendedly. "That is a cheap impression of coffee! It's like, coffee-flavored water!"

Haise laughed a little at that, and a sudden call of, "Mamaaaaan! Papaaa! We're here!" brought our
attention to where Saiko and Mutsuki were approaching.

"Mutsuki, Saiko. Making your bosses wait for you, you've gotten pretty full of yourselves," Haise teased.

Mutsuki smiled nervously. "Ah... no... Saiko was..."

Saiko just grinned, taking a bite out of a crepe. "Naaah... Mucchan was being a little too occupied at the game center. Just a little~!"

Mutsuki made a noise of dissent, but I winked at him over Saiko and her crepe, and he smiled, relieved.

Haise turned to Tsukiyama and said, "I'm sorry. I gotta go back to work. Please take care of yourself."

Tsukiyama looked disappointed, but he offered a light upturn of his lips that bore the semblance of a smile. "I understand. Thank you for the company, Sasaki-san."

"You as well," Haise said, as Saiko gripped his hands and tugged him to his feet. We left, and I saw Kanae approach Tsukiyama from the corner of my eye. At his downhearted expression, my anger faded, the reason behind his expression all too familiar.

As Tsukiyama watched the group leave, the short blue-haired girl tugging Haise along by his wrist like a child and the green-haired eye-patch wearing boy watching them with fondness, Nagachika beside him with a similar expression, he sighed, his expression longing.

"I understand Nagachika-kun's reasons, really, I do. But I wish that I could just talk to K-- Sasaki-san, for just a bit longer, without the children or Nagachika. I wouldn't even try to intervene and bring back his memories of his time as Kaneki." Tsukiyama sighed. "I miss talking to him, Kanae. He's always got such a strange perspective on things. Like focusing on Takatsuki Sen rather than her works, putting so much thought into why she wrote the way she did."

Kanae stood, a silent and constant presence beside Tsukiyama, his eyes concealed with sunglasses and his hair covered by a hat.

"I... wish to talk to Sasaki-san awhile longer," Tsukiyama said again, but it was more to himself. Then he sighed. "But alas, there is no time for me in mon cher's life now, is there?"

Kanae's hand twitched, as if it longed to curl into a fist. His eyes were dark and set, determined.

_If Master Shuu wishes to talk with Heisse, without Pierrot and the children, then I will make it happen. Kanae's lips curled. Heisse and Pierrot... what foolish names. But they are fitting names for the one who can't recall his own name and the fool who thinks he can make Master Shuu unhappy._
Late, late at night, underneath a damp and rather unpleasant-smelling bridge, two middle-ranking members of Aogiri Tree stood, dressed in cloaks and customized masks. They weren't very good fighters, but were above-average negotiators, and had been sent to meet a supposed business partner offering a large sum of money for a job.

The shorter male shifted. "So... will he really come? Our business partner..."

The taller of the pair shrugged. "Well... not like we have any other option. After Madam was annihilated, we lost our sponsors."

The shorter one sighed, a sound that was muffled by his mask. But before he could speak, a third man emerged from the shadows.

It was a purple-haired man with fine features and a nice suit, with a black overcoat. A set of dark sunglasses hid his eyes from view.

"Are you the ones... from the Aogiri Tree?"

The ghouls hesitated, but when the man waved a stack of bills, easily three inches thick, they nodded their assent.

"I have a job for you."

The man smiled, his eyes dark behind his sunglasses.

*Master Shuu... I will get you the time you need.*

It was an easy job, supposedly, the leader of the party of Aogiri Tree ghouls sent for the job mused. It was an extermination of people who were barely more than teenagers. Doves that were equipped with the CCG's version of kagune, a cheap knock-off that barely had a fraction of the power. Only one of the Doves would be a real nuisance, one with a real kagune, and supposedly even he wasn't very strong. The only real concern was that Pierrot was rumored to be with them-- but that was crazy. What would Pierrot, the legend who took down the local all-ghoul yakuza as a kid-- be doing with a bunch of Doves? The only explanation that the man who had given them the job offered was that one of the Doves was Pierrot's lover, but the leader didn't believe a word of it. He rolled on the balls of his feet and watched as the group approached from a distance, waiting.

Finally, their employer made his move, and the leader rolled his eyes. Finally.

"The boy made his move. We should get going too."
The White Suits behind him were eager, ready for blood and violence. The leader sighed, thinking that it sucked to be the only rational one in the group. Why couldn't Aogiri send someone besides him for this?

At least it would be over soon.
It was a trap, I realized, as I watched the direction Shirazu and Urie be blocked by ghouls in masks and white suits. A big tip-off on who they were: the White Suits, the ghoul gang led by Naki. A single ghoul stood in regular Aogiri Tree attire, probably an operative sent to oversee the White Suits.

"Sasaki, Hide-san, if I'm not mistaken... the ghoul Shirazu and Urie chased after was the ghoul that fought us at the Auction, and the ghoul that came and rescued him was a Rose, so he's probably one of them..."

I cursed. "And these guys are the White Suits. On the upside, it doesn't look like their leader, S-ranked Naki, is here. On the downside, all of the white suits are at least A-Ranked, so. This might get a little bloody." Their strength didn't concern me, but for the Quinx... especially Saiko...

"So these guys, heh?" The thinner White Suit commented. "Look, Shosei. It's a bunch of kids!" He shook his head. "Geez. Did we really need to bring this many along? You even called Toru-Toru and Kobin."

"Hoguro." The broad one scolded. "This job's very important to us. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Haise threw an arm out, as a barrier to keep Mutsuki and Saiko back. I moved up, around Mutsuki, to stand beside Haise. Together we blocked their view and path of the two, and Haise frowned tensely when the two leading White Suits cracked their fingers in a Yamori-like manner.

"We'll finish this properly... in Naki-aniki's place!" The thinner White Suit from behind them said, and suddenly they were moving.

Haise dashed downwards, ducking and twisting and throwing open his quinque case, slashing as he rolled and sending a spray of blood from wounds across the ghouls legs. One of the White Suits would have landed a kick across Haise's ribs, but I struck out with my quinque like a lance, stabbing him with such force that he was sent flying across the parking garage with a circle of red blooming across his chest, spurting. I'd hit an artery, and if my aim was correct, probably punctured his heart. Deep enough to kill him, that was debatable. Deep enough to keep him down, hopefully.

"Kobin!" The broader White Suit bellowed. "You'll pay for that, Dove!"

Haise rolled to his feet in a fighting stance, and I stood on the opposite side of the White Suits, still standing in front of Mutsuki and Saiko.

"I-I'll back you up!" Mutsuki said, starting forward, but Haise shouted, "Don't! Back Shirazu and Urie up! It was a trap!"

"Maman..." Saiko began to protest, but Mutsuki tugged at her hand and pulled her away from where we were fighting in the parking garage and towards the ramp for the third floor, looking for a way to Urie and Shirazu.

"He'll be fine! He's got Hide-san to help him! We have to hurry to help the others, though...!"

"Tooru." A voice called from the dark, and I spared a glance in his direction as I kicked out with
bone-shattering force and heard the satisfying breaking of his fibula and tibia. Haise slashed downward in a sweeping arc and cut a long red wound down the White Suit's back. He hit a wall and collapsed as I focused on Mutsuki and Saiko.

Torso, of all the damned ghouls, was standing there, striding towards Mutsuki like it was his right.

Don't you dare touch my children with those filthy hands of yours.

"So you came. It's been a while. Oh? You've changed your hairstyle? It's cute. It really fits you. Don't you want to go on a drive with me? It's fun."

Saiko, her eyes wide, was standing behind Mutsuki as a determined but slightly fearful expression fluttered across his face. "Saiko," He said calmly, and she looked up towards him. Then, as fast as Shirazu, Mutsuki's knives were in his hands and slashing across Torso's body in a deep, x-shaped cut. "Hide somewhere!"

"Huh?" Torso shrieked. "This again, Tooru?!"

I grinned wickedly as Mutsuki moved, slashing without hesitation or pause. His movements were controlled, swift, powerful. So much of a difference from his fighting during the Auction Raid that the contrast was stark and striking.

Haise met my eyes over the bleeding body of the ghoul who was probably deceased, but for good measure, I stabbed my quinque down and punctured his heart through-and-through. His body convulsed then grew still, and over his body Haise and I had the same thought as our eyes met, a faint smile playing on my lips.

Mutsuki will be okay for now. He can take care of himself. Against Torso, Mutsuki will win.

He disappeared from view, entering the third floor, and Saiko was gone as well, off hiding somewhere-- at least, I hoped she was. But wherever they were, we were alone now with the White Suits, who seemed absolutely furious that we had just killed two of their comrades.

"You'll pay for that!" Another nameless White Suit, eerily reminiscent of the one I had just killed, shouted. He was faster than the others, probably an ukaku, and in an instant he was in front of Haise and landing a painful-sounding kick against Haise's sternum, sending him skidding a few feet back with a wince. But Haise retaliated immediately, not fazed, and I left him to face the Ukaku while I ran forward and charged the next White Suit. I drove my quinque downwards, and with a foul-smelling spray of blood his wrist was severed. I didn't give him the chance to scream, slashing out again, this time cutting a long but unfortunately thin laceration across the ghoul's shoulder.

Then there was the sound of metal, grating against each other and breaking, snapping, and I looked up. Kanae was flying through the air and struck the building across from the parking garage. Kanae's rinkaku gripped the side of the building, and he disappeared the next moment. Good, that was good. That means Urie and Shirazu were fine. But Mutsuki's fight with Torso shouldn't have taken this long, and I could hear metallic clanging-- quinque against quinque, which made absolutely no sense-- so hopefully Shirazu and Urie would start heading down and find him.

Another slash downward, and the ghoul let out a howling shriek. The ukaku Haise had been fighting was beside me, and I swung my quinque, hoping to land a killing blow, but they were fast enough to evade me, just barely.

"They're too good!" One of them panted, and maybe my smile was a little bit sharper, more predatory.
Haise was just behind them, and they made the mistake of focusing on me as he slashed outward, and his quinque cut a long, bloody lash across the taller of the two remaining White Suits' back. I grinned ferally, but managed to wipe it away as I stabbed downward. My quinque just barely caught the shorter one’s legs, and they skittered back, towards the mesh metal fence that stood from ceiling to floor on the very edge of the parking garage, to prevent people from falling.

"This is hopeless!" The shorter one bellowed. "We'll be eaten!"

"Mortifying!" The taller one, bleeding, agreed.

They were gone in the next second, tearing through the wire that acted as a safety rail like it was paper and leaping down two floors, running away inhumanly fast.

I almost smiled. *We'll be eaten,* the shorter one had said? With a glance towards where Haise was standing, gripping the torn metal fencing and peering after the ghouls, breathing hard, I had to agree. It was almost predatory, the way he fought.

Or... had they been talking about me?

I turned around at the sound of footsteps, and behind us stood Shirazu, Urie, and Mutsuki. Just the three of them.

"Where's Saiko?" I demanded.

Haise’s eyes widened fractionally, and he looked around the parking garage. Mutsuki and Shirazu did the same, and Urie frowned.

"I told her to hide... I think she went behind the building...?" Mutsuki said nervously.

A scream split the air, and without thinking, I ran to the other end of the parking garage and tugged at the metal fencing, pressing my face to it. There was someone beneath it, I believed, and the screaming-- undoubtedly Saiko's-- was coming from there. It took a moment, but I made out a ghoul with long black hair, taking a bite out of Saiko’s arm and staining her white coat with blood.

"Saiko!" I screamed, but the ghoul paid me no mind and didn't even flinch as he went to take another bite. I tore at the metal fencing, but I wouldn't make it down in time and I knew it.

And then a man in a long, white cloak was standing next to them. I had no idea where he had come from or who he was, but he slammed a long, iron staff into the ghoul on top of Saiko, and the ghoul went flying. He rolled to a stop and ukaku shards, as big as my fist, tore gaping holes in his abdomen.

"You got... my arm," The ghoul shrieked, his eyes blown wide and blood streaming down his torso in rivulets. "That... hurts!"

The cloaked ghoul who had saved Saiko walked towards the fallen ghoul, and I saw that the hand that held his staff had only three fingers. The metal fencing finally tore enough that I leapt through and landed hard enough to send the concrete beneath me cracking. I stood between Saiko and the cloaked ghoul, unsure. The cloaked ghoul could just as easily turn on her as he had saved her, but I wasn't ungrateful. I wouldn't attack him unless he provoked me.

"Thank you for saving her," I said, but the ghoul merely turned his head away so that I was unable to see his face. I did catch sight of black hair, but that was it, because he ran away with speed that was unusual even for an ukaku. Shaking off thoughts of the ghoul, I turned around and crouched down next to Saiko, reaching down and helping her to her feet.
"I saw that ghoul bite you," I said, taking her hand and examining her bloody coat sleeve. With my other hand, I rolled her sleeve up gingerly, inspecting her arm. The skin was still a pink, raw color, but it had healed over nonetheless. I sighed, a wave of relief crashing over me. "But it looks like you've healed alright."

Footsteps are audible, rapid and loud against the concrete, and Haise rounds the corner with Mutsuki at his heels, Shirazu and Urie following behind them.

"Saiko! Are you alright...?" Haise asked, coming to a stop beside me. He saw her bloody sleeve, and his eyes were wide. "Saiko, your arm...!"

She smiled, and I thought it looked shaky and a little forced, but it was an attempt at one, and I was unbelievably proud. I gave her hand a squeeze before I released it, smiling.

"I'm okay, Maman. A big man saved me..." She looked in the direction that he had gone, and Haise looked understandably concerned, as there was nobody else in sight.

I confirmed her statement. "I saw him. He was a ghoul, an ukaku, and he fought the one that was attacking Saiko." After a moment, I added, "Well, it wasn't even really a fight. It was too one-sided for that. He just beat up the other ghoul a little and then vanished." I sighed. "But anyways, now's not the time. We should head back home and clean up. We can report this in to Headquarters the day after tomorrow, at the meeting."

Haise nodded. "Now that we know that Rose is connected to Aogiri Tree, I think I have a shot at making Ui-san reconsider my plan."

"The mask one...?" Saiko asked, pulling her sleeve back down to conceal the healed skin, which had faded to a normal color. Her coat sleeve was still a blood-stained mess of torn fabric.

"Yep, that's the one," Haise smiled. "We've still got to go pick those up, actually. What's say we go back and get them on Sunday, if all goes well at the meeting?"

"Sounds great!" I said, and I smiled. "I won't even need to go see Uta at :re! But in the meantime," I added, tugging at Saiko's coat-sleeve gently, "we should go and get you a new coat, huh, Saiko?"

Haise smiled ruefully. "We go through a lot of those, don't we?"

I laughed. "I don't think that's a good thing, Haise."

Shirazu caught me that night, when I was headed up the stairs to go to bed. His eyes were worryingly dark.

"Hide-san. Can I... talk to you?"

"Of course you can, Shirazu," I said, worried. I glanced towards the hallway, where the others had departed not too long ago to head to sleep themselves, and then upstairs, where Saiko was sleeping and where Haise was waiting. "Do you want to talk on the balcony?"
His thoughts seemed to lead along the same line, and he nodded, relieved. "Yeah. Yeah, that'd be
great."

Silently I led him up the stairs and out the sliding glass door to stand on the upper-floor terrace. The
night air was pleasantly cool, but that was the last thing on my mind when I sat down on one of the
chairs, Shirazu moving to occupy the one next to me.

"So, shoot. What's wrong?"

Shirazu bit the inside of his cheek, and it was a long moment before he finally said, "It happened
again today, Hide-san. I couldn't use Nutcracker when I needed to."

"Not that I want to encourage this, 'cause I don't, but why were you even trying to use your
quinque?" I asked. "Normally you just use your kagune."

Shirazu sighed. "I didn't want to. They targeted my kakuhou, so once it got hit, I couldn't use my
kagune anymore."

I hesitated. "Shirazu... can you tell me what happens when you try to use Nutcracker?"

"I... I see her face." His voice broke. "And I can hear her, what she said when she... when I..."

"Killed her," I finished, gently. "Shirazu, there's no getting around it. You killed her, and took a life. It's not easy to accept, but it's the reality of the situation."

Shirazu put his head in his hands, and he said, "She wasn't human. She wasn't human, but she
sounded so much like one, and I can't think about her the same way any more, after what you told
me. I killed someone, Hide-san, and I can't stop feeling guilty."

"Shirazu," I said, my voice still gentle. "I wonder if telling you that was a good idea. Sometimes, I
think maybe I should have told you that ghouls weren't people. Sympathy, compassion-- those are
dangerous things in our line of work. But then, if I hadn't, if I had told you that we were doing the
righteous thing and killing mindless monsters, wouldn't that make us the mindless monsters?"

"Just tell me, how do I get her outta my head?" Shirazu's hands tightened in his hair, and when he
looked up, there was desperation in his eyes. "How do I make the guilt go away? How can I stop
being such a worthless squad leader?"

I got up and moved to sit next to him, sighing. "Guilt is a normal thing to feel, Shirazu. There's no
easy fix for it. It's just something that you come to terms with, eventually, and everybody's got to do it
in their own way. As much as I want to, I can't do that for you, not can I tell you how to do it.
You've got to come to terms with your guilt in the way that works for you, and figure out how to do
it, yourself."

His eyes were dark, despairing, and he buried his head in his hands. I put a hand on his shoulder,
gentle but firm. "But you aren't a worthless squad leader, Shirazu, and you never have been. But if
you really feel like that, then I'll do everything I can to make you stronger. Urie, he trains with Haise,
you know that? So I figure I'll start training you, one on one."

*I'll make you strong enough to carry the guilt.*

I thought that he looked a little bit less despairing, and maybe a little more hopeful. "Would you
really...?"

I smiled. "Of course I will! I'll make you the best squad leader, I guarantee it! And I'll make you even
stronger than Urie is, what do you think about that?"

Shirazu smiled, just a little bit, barely a hopeful upturn of his lips. "I'd like that."

I stood up, pulling Shirazu up with me. "Alright then! What do you say, staring tomorrow? Meet me in the training room about five, okay?"

"Okay."

"Go get some sleep, then!" I gave him a little push towards the door, and Shirazu started that way obediently. "You'll need it!"

"I will," Shirazu promised, and his smile was a little brighter. "And... thank you, Hide-san."

"It's not a problem!" I declared. "Anytime, Shirazu!"

He just smiled again, and as he walked away, I thought perhaps he looked a little bit lighter already.

Once he left, I sat back down with a sigh and buried my head in my hands.

_Did I make a mistake, giving him a conscience...?_

I stayed like that for a long time, so long that Haise eventually found me there. He didn't say a word, simply disappearing and reappearing a short while later, a blanket in hand. Haise sat next to me and draped the blanket around our shoulders, and he sat with me under the stars until the sky started to lighten, when I stood up and we went to bed.

_Thank you_, I wanted to say, but for once I didn't know how to weave the words I wanted.

_I understand_, his look said.

The next morning, after getting Saiko her new coat, bringing her home, and making a quick call from a payphone, I went back to the parking garage. I was angry, definitely _very_ angry, at Kanae. But I had a feeling that Tsukiyama wouldn't interfere in a way like ambushing us-- not when Haise could have been killed, too. He wouldn't have wanted Haise injured. And he had seemed quite willing to go along with my plan before; even at the park, he wasn't angry when Haise had to leave. Disappointed and sad, yes, but not angry.

Which meant that the annoying purple-haired servant had acted on his own.

I stood beneath the part where Kanae had been chucked through the metal fencing and had struck the building, replaying it in my mind. He had been heavily wounded, and the Tsukiyama Family owned another estate in the Eighth Ward, which was near here, but I doubted that he would have returned, in that state, if he had gone against his master's wishes. Meaning I could track his smell, hopefully.

_I wished Hinami was here. She had a nose like a bloodhound_, I thought, drawing my coat closer around me and breathing in deeply. The smell of blood was everywhere, essentially dousing the
parking lot, but there was a blood trail that lead away from here, towards the Eighth Ward, although whose it was I couldn't say. But it was my best bet, and I started walking in the direction.

The smell of blood was almost sickeningly thick around the parking garage, but as I went further and further from it, it gradually thinned and disappeared altogether, leaving only the single scent trail. I lost it a few times, and had to retrace my steps, a frustratingly time-consuming process. But I kept my temper in check; getting angrier and losing my head would only make tracking Kanae harder.

And then, after walking through a grassy clearing, all of my tracking paid off.

Sitting against a graffiti-covered concrete support beam for the trains, bleeding from a wound in his side that wouldn't heal, and multiple cuts, was Kanae.

I stopped in front of him, and Kanae's pain-filled expression twisted into something sharper, with more bite, his twin kakugans gleaming.

"What is it, Taube?" He snapped. "Here to finish me off?"

(*Taube is German for Dove)

"I was a major in International Studies, so yes, I do understand what you're saying." I said flatly. "Excuse me if my German is a little rusty, but es ist nicht nett zu der Person unhöflich zu sein, die gerade dabei ist dich zu retten."

(*Hide said "It's not nice to be rude to the person who is about to save you.")

Kanae frowned. "Save...?"

"Yes, indeed. Hide's got a big heart, don'cha know," Itori said cheerfully, striding towards us, a large purse in hand. "Here ya go, kiddo. I brought it, just like you asked."

I sighed, taking the purse from her and kneeling down. "Thanks, I-chan. Sorry I had to call so suddenly, and made you track my smell like that just to find me."

"It's alright. You gave me a little scare, though, calling from a payphone and asking me to bring the medical kit," Itori said, sitting down next to me and inspecting the hole in Kanae's side. She whistled. "That's a pretty nasty wound. Did one of my grandkids do that?"

Kanae just grit his teeth and his hand tightened against his side. I answered for him.

"Shirazu and Urie did a number on him, it seems."

"Ah. That explains it," Itori said, leaning her head against her hand, watching Kanae amusedly. I dug out the curved needle, which gleamed in the dim lighting.

"What are you going to do to me, Pierrot?" Kanae spat. "Needles won't work on me, Dummkopf. And even if they did, you said it yourself, you majored in International Studies, not anything that would give you suturing knowledge."

"I am mildly offended that you think so lowly of my intelligence," I said, setting the needle and thread aside. "But if you must know, this is my personal medical kit, and my needles, which do work on ghouls. And I did grow up with Doctor Kanou Akihiro, who made sure to thoroughly train me in the basics of the medical field, suturing included."

"I'm not letting someone without real training touch me with those!" Kanae hissed, jerking away and
probably inducing more bleeding from his side.

"I may not have had real training, but I've sewed myself up a few times, and I lived," I said calmly. "And if I don't, then you're going to die here, far, far away from your beloved master. Who I haven't told about your schemes, by the way," I added sternly. "So, Kanae-kun, do you want to live and see your master again, or die here, alone?"

Kanae's hand-- the one not covering his wound-- curled into a fist. But his voice was determined. "I want to live."

"Then take off your damned shirt and let me stitch you up," I chided.

Kanae froze, for just a second, and he seemed nervous. "Do I have to take it off, for you to stitch the wound?"

I sighed, and decided to be brunt. I was still angry enough about Kanae trying to kill the kids, and I wasn't in the best mood, after a morning of trying to keep my temper in check. "Yes, you must. Don't get so riled up about it, either, because I'm completely faithful to Haise. I won't look anywhere besides where I'm stitching."

"I don't care about that," Kanae snapped. "But I don't think you understand--"

"Oh, I understand," I said irritably. "You're a girl. Biologically, anyways. I don't care what you identify as, because that's your choice, and I won't go blabbing to your precious master about it, so just take the shirt off. You can cover up with it, or whatever, but I need you to take it off so I can stitch you up before you bleed out."

Kanae's face paled, to the point where it looked bloodless. "How-- How do you know?"

"You smell like blood," I paused to find the bottle of rubbing alcohol, setting it aside. "And not the wound kind."

"I-- Oh." Kanae didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, silently, he moved to take his shirt off. In honestly, it wasn't much of a shirt, considering most of it was in tatters, and I sighed, moving to take off my coat and throwing it at him.

"Cover up with it. I'm going to sterilize the wound to the best of my extend with rubbing alcohol, and then I'm going to start. Since you seem to doubt my medical knowledge, I'll tell you what I'm doing," I said, uncapping the bottle and grimacing. The smell of the chemical was terrible, but it was the best antiseptic I had at the moment. "I'd like to say that it'll only sting a little, but I can't. It's going to burn, a lot."

"I can handle it," Kanae said, and Itori smirked, her eyes cold.

"My, my. You're a brave one, aren't you? Well, let's see if you've got some bite behind your bark."

"Dumme Clown," Kanae hissed at her-- and maybe me, too-- through gritted teeth as I poured a generous amount of rubbing alcohol on the wound and my hands to sterilize them. The wound was a ghastly tear, the edges of the torn skin now.

"I'm wiping away the rubbing alcohol with a sterile gauze pad and cutting away the edges of the torn skin now," I announced, dabbing at the wound with white gauze that came away bathed in red. Itori passed me the small scissors, which I used to snip away at the edges of the wounded skin. When it was satisfactory, I announced, "I'm stitching you up. Try to relax."
I don't think Kanae did, but I began the tedious process anyways, moving the needle in a swift, efficient rhythm. A few times, I thought I heard a muffled hiss of pain, but I continued regardless. When I finally tied the thread into a firm knot and cut the string, I sat back, careful not to touch my hands to the pavement.

"Alright. I'm going to put a big gauze pad over that and wrap you up, then that's about all I can do until you eat."

Kanae was still silent, even as I covered the wound and wrapped the gauze around his torso firmly, something that no doubt stung. I pulled a bottle of water out of Itori's large purse, pouring it over my hands to rise off the blood, then stood and stretched.

"Okay, I-chan! He's all yours."

Itori beamed. "I've got him covered, Kiddo!"

Kanae paled again, and finally spoke.

"You're leaving me with her?"

"Of course. She'll get you food and bring you back to your dear master after you've healed up." I rubbed the back of my neck, where an unfortunate crick had formed. "The stitches are biodegradable, so they'll go away with your regeneration. But remember, Kanae," I said, smiling coldly. "You tried to kill my kids, and I didn't do this out of kindness. You owe me one now, and I will collect on that. Oh, and keep the coat. As a reminder."

A reminder that you owe me your life.

Kanae remained expressionless, and he said nothing. But as I was walking away, leaving Itori to help Kanae stand, he called,

"Danke, Pierrot."

Chapter End Notes

So, Hide's done something else vital in the path this story is headed down (rather than following the manga faithfully) and he's got one more ally in his hand.

Drop a comment and tell me what you think! Thanks for reading!

EDIT: Thank you to accord (http://archiveofourown.org/users/accord/pseuds/accord) for correcting my German!
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Finals will be the death of me, I swear it. It doesn't matter how much I love school.
Finals will kill me.

It was Saturday night, and earlier that day I had been to :re for a nice cup of coffee and a quiet afternoon with Haise. My mood was considerably bright as I arrived at Uta's mask shop-- I had gone with the excuse of Hinami falling ill, and Haise had made her soup, which I held in a container-- at almost exactly seven. The meeting was due to begin at seven thirty, and Uta looked up, amused, as I shut the door behind me and practically skipped into the shop.

"You seem happy, Hide. Whose the soup for?"

"Hinami-chan," I said, setting it down on one of the many glass display cases. "I told Haise she was sick, and that's why I was coming over so late. He cooked her homemade soup!"

"Really now?" Itori smiled, plucking the eyeball from Uta's fingers and popping it into her mouth, to his dismay. "He's quite domestic, isn't he?"

"Very," I agreed cheerily. "But he still packs a punch in a fight. By the way, I-chan, did you get me a new coat?"

"I did indeed. I don't think even I could have scrubbed those bloodstains out," Itori said, presenting me a brand-new white coat with a flourish. "Ta-da! Look at this, isn't it exactly like the one you had before?"

I took the coat from her, inspecting it as I headed towards the stairs, which lead to to upper-floor loft of HySy, where Uta lived. "It's perfect! Thanks, I-chan!"

"Don't mention it, Kiddo!" Itori chimed, tipping her wineglass in my direction. "Just get changed and make a splash at the meeting!"

I took the steps two at a time, whistling, as I emerged into the plain-looking loft. My room was immediately to the left, and as I walked into the neon-yellow painted room, with green lining, I sighed, nostalgic for a brief moment. Then I shut the door and changed into my Pierrot costume, as familiar as a second skin, and donned my mask. I studied my reflection briefly in the mirror, smiling underneath my mask. It was easy, being Pierrot.

It was fun, and the familiar urge, to cause destruction and chaos, began to thrum underneath my skin like blood. The need, as real as hunger, to be entertained by suffering rose, and I was half-tempted to grasp it by the hand.

But I locked the urge inside a little box and threw away the key, because tonight was not the night. Tonight's purpose was very specific: to become the leader of the Clowns, in a sense, and to set them on the path of Kanou's destruction.

I twirled in front of the mirror once more, running a hand through my wild hair to make it lay in a more presentable but equally wild way. Then I walked back downstairs, and HySy was full of
people.

Hinami, dressed in full Aogiri gear, her red cloak and mask gleaming crimson, stood in the back of the room, a silent presence. In the opposite back corner stood the :re group: Touka, wearing her Rabbit mask and dressed in a dark hoodie and pants; Nishiki, wearing his Serpent mask, dressed in a baggie and pale hoodie with black pants; Yomo, dressed exactly like he normally was, but wearing a Raven-motifed mask. Standing near the door was Tsukiyama himself, though Mirumo was absent, and a healthy Kanae was beside him, both in masks and bizarrely purple clothes. Itori and Uta stood together, with matching glasses of partially full blood-wine, masks hiding their faces. And most importantly, standing in various locations about the mask shop, stood the Clowns.

There was Souta, inspecting a mask and drinking some of Itori's offered wine. I had never seen his face, and I was definitely suspicious about him. Sitting cross-legged on one of the display cases, snacking on an entire hand (where she got it, I'll never know) was Roma, her mask barely concealing half her face. She would be an issue, I knew it, but if another tragedy baited her interests, hopefully she would move on to it. Finally, there was Nico, in his gaudily pink and blue clothes, his mask white and fitted to his face like a second skin, adorned with black patterns and crimson lips, the clown nose comically red and large.

I strode to the front of the room with a bounce in my steps, tilting my head and lacing my fingers behind my back. As soon as I emerged, Roma threw her hands wide, almost toppling off the glass case she sat on.

"Pierrot! It's been forever!"

"It hasn't been forever, Roma," I said amusedly, my voice adopting the same lighthearted, jovial tone as hers. "But if you decide to bring finger food next time, bring enough to share."

"It has been a rather long time, Pierrot," Nico said, chuckling at my pun and twirling his wineglass on the tip of a finger, a feat that was fairly impressive. "So, care to tell us why you called us here? I don't suppose that you've succeeded in bringing Kaneki back, no?"

"Oh yes, about that," I said, pouring myself a glass of the blood that Itori had proffered. "I'm not. Bringing Kaneki back, that is."

The room was dead silent, but I ignored it, hopping up onto the display case nearest to me and lifting my mask up, just enough to be able to drink.

"Pierrot." Souta said, tilting his head quizzically to the side. "Did you say that you're not going to bring Kaneki back?"

"I did indeed," I chirped happily. "Should I explain?"

"If you'd please," Nico said, stopping his twirling and catching the wineglass just as it fell off his finger.

"Well, because you asked so nicely," I said, swinging my feet childishly. "I guess I can. I'm not going to bring Kaneki's memories back. I like Sasaki Haise, and I don't particularly want to ruin my current set-up. Who would I be to take the mother of my children away from them, after all?"

"Your... children?" Nico said, blinking. "Mother? I hadn't thought you swung that way."

"I don't," I laughed. "I'm talking about Haise, silly. We've got four kids, don't you know?"

"I don't believe that's biologically possible, Pierrot," Souta said, resting his head against his hand.
"But I think I get the picture. You've fallen for Sasaki-kun, and those little subordinates of his have won your blackened heart, am I correct?"

"Spot on, Souta!" I said, beaming behind my mask. "So basically, I'm done with Kaneki's tragedy. I'm in the mood for a happy ending this time."

"That's crazy!" Roma shrieked, suddenly standing upright and dangerously balanced on the edge of the glass case. "What kind of Clown are you, not wanting to bring back that beautiful, suffering, white-haired Kaneki-sama!"

"He does look good with white hair," I admitted, making sure to keep my voice as cheerful and easygoing as ever. But behind my mask, my eyes narrowed, my kakugan making an appearance. "But I think he's prettier with his hair growing back black. And I like him not drowning in tragedy and suffering, surprisingly!" I put a hand to my chest in exaggerated surprise. "I know, it shocked me too!"

Roma wasn't amused. "I will bring my Kaneki-sama back, with or without you, Pierrot!"

My smile was feral. "Go ahead and try. As a matter of fact, anybody here can try. But if you lay one finger on Haise, my Haise, I can guarantee that you won't live long enough to regret that decision. So, does anybody want to try and take me on?"

"My, my, that's such a vulgar suggestion," Nico said, laughing. "Why on earth would I want to throw my life away for something as fickle as one boy's tragedy. Although, might I say," Nico's eyes narrowed behind his mask. "This is a very un-Clown like thing to do, throwing away a perfectly good tragedy. And your Father surely isn't happy about losing his precious experiments, is he?"

"That's a mean thing to say, Nico!" I said, feigning hurt. "I only threw away one tragedy for a better one. Haven't you heard? I'm planning on making Kanou into a tragedy instead! And I'm going to cause enough mayhem and chaos to last a lifetime, while I'm at it."

Roma's eyes gleamed, like she was torn, and I smirked. I knew she was torn-- torn between a new, fresh tragedy and the old one, which was already so exciting it almost hurt to let it go.

"What do you say, Roma? Wait a moment to fight me and hear my newest scheme?"

Roma gritted her teeth, and with a childish stomp, she sat down in a swirl of brightly colored, poofy pants.

"I'd better like it!" She declared. "And I'm still going to go after Kaneki-sama! I just wanna hear you out first!"

"Mmm-hmm," I said, waving a hand vaguely. "Okay. Anyways, I've got a personal vendetta against Kanou now. Like, I wanna string him up by his toes and bleed him to death by a thousand cuts kind of vendetta. I want to make him miserable, and to cause mass chaos and destruction while I'm at it." I paused. "Of course, I don't want to outright kill him. That'd be silly and boring. I want to take down his laboratories, one~by~one~" I ticked off my fingers as I spoke. "I want to make him panic as I close in on him, and I want to see the expression on his face when I slaughter him."

Souta laughed. "I see that your sense of humor is in tact, at least! That's quite a plan, Pierrot. And you've proven that you're not all bark and no bite already-- you're reputation proves that much-- but what does that have to do with us? So, we stay away from your dear lover and your little adopted spawnlings, yes, but why share your plan with us?"

I sipped on my drink, draining the wineglass dry. "Isn't it obvious? I want to offer you a place in it.
Assist me, and cause Kanou and his associates all the tragedy you want! It's an endless possibility for mayhem and chaos, what we thrive off of! It's like a buffet of entertainment!” I declared, spreading my arms wide.

Nico shrugged nonchalantly, but there was a fire gleaming behind his mask at the tempting, mouthwatering offer of tragic entertainment. "I suppose I don't have anything better to do. Okay, I'm in. But I am rather busy with the Fifth Ward, you know."

"Great!" I proclaimed, leaping up and twirling around on the display case, the wineglass wobbling in my hand unsteadily. "So, what about you, Souta?"

"Hmm, I don't know yet," Souta sighed, his tone indecisively childish but his eyes shifting. "It's so hard to decide!"

I sat my wineglass down on the display case and danced over to him, feet never touching the ground, my feet firm against the slick glass of the display cases. I landed on the one just next to Souta and leaned down so that my lips were inches from his ear, balancing precariously on a single foot.

"Why don't I give you some incentive then, Furuta Nimura?" I whispered. "The poor little Washuu who couldn't even call his father 'father', the agent of the shady organization of delirious idiots striving for 'balance', and the CCG Investigator who's a Clown, of all things! And you're pretty close to Kanou, hmm? First Class Nagachika is a rising star in the CCG at the moment, and wouldn't it just boost his career if he discovered that one of the CCG's own was aligned with Kanou? I bet not even your V buddies know that, hmm?"

I couldn't see his expression, but I could see the skin around his mask, which became abruptly pale. "How do you know about that, Nagachika-kun?" Furuta hissed.

I cackled, whispering, "Oh, dear Souta, never underestimate my resources! Aogiri Tree is always willing to barter some information, for the right price, after their sponsor was unfortunately killed and they're hard for cash. And Eto and I may not be close-- in fact, we're friendly enemies at the moment- but we aren't stupid enough to start a fight that would level Chiyoda and gravely injure us both. Information, at the right price, travels freely between us. Plus, who in their right mind is more afraid of Kanou than me?" I grinned wickedly. "So what do you say, Furuta-kun? Willing to let me sell your secrets to the whole wide world, or will you lend me a hand?"

The sound of grinding and gritted teeth became audible, and I smiled coldly. "Don't worry, though. It's not completely bad for you. I won't betray you, if you help me do this. I'll owe you one, and my favors are desirable things, Furuta-kun. If it's taking down V you want, I'll help you. If it's rising in the ranks at the CCG, I'll help you. If it's a high place in Aogiri, I'll pull my ties with their executives and get you there, although they won't be too happy about me killing off their scientist and the people they have guarding him. Name it, and I'll make it happen, if it's within my power." I laughed again, but this time it's distinctly colder, sharper. "And there aren't many things I can't do. I always get the last laugh, Furuta-kun, so really I'm giving you a boost in the world."

His hands are clenched into fists, and where his nails press into his skin, it's bleeding. But Furuta just took a few short breaths to calm down, uncurling his hands and forcing his body to relax.

"Fine. I'm in on your plan, Pierrot," He practically spat my name, the venom striking. "But I'll save that favor for later, when I need it."

I beamed, twirling up and away from him, laughing gleefully despite the obvious near-threat in his voice. "Good choice, Souta!" I skipped my way across the glass cases to stand before Roma, who
was still sitting on the glass case sulkily. "And you, Roma~?"

She frowned poutily. "I still want my Kaneki-sama back. But if this new tragedy is as good as you'll make it out to be, then I guess I'll go along with it. For now."

I heard the meaning behind her words. If I began to bore her, she would turn against me, just as Furuta would always be my enemy after this-- or at least, never be my friend, which I was one-hundred percent okay with. He didn't need to be my friend to be my ally, and Furuta would be a powerful ally to have. Especially when I had blackmail as valuable as this hanging over his head.

"We~ll, that's good enough!" I declared jovially, jumping from the glass case where I stood to the one I had originally stood on, at the front of the room. Itori poured herself another glass, seemingly ignorant to the war of wills and words that had just broken out in a surprisingly calm, quiet manner, and Uta stole her glass swiftly, swapping it for his empty one, to her dismay.

"U-chan, that's mean!"

Uta just laughed, discarding his mask and tipping the glass to his lips. When he finished his extravagantly long drink-- done just to make Itori mad-- he rested his hand against his hand and grinned, his teeth stained red.

"So then, Pierrot, what's our first plan of action?"

"Ah, that's where my good friend will take over. Banjou-san, you're up!" I declared.

Banjou shifted on the balls of his feet when all eyes turned to him, but otherwise he remained calm and collected, the image of a good Ward leader.

"We of the Sixth Ward have located one of Kanou's lab, guarded by Aogiri Tree members," Banjou said, strangely formal in his manner of speaking, and I wondered if that was how he unconsciously conveyed his nervousness. He had good right to be nervous-- almost all of the ghouls in the room could kill him with a well-aimed strike of their kagune. "It is without doubt Kanou's lab, and we've gathered some photos to prove our intelligence. Jiro, if you will?"

The woman in the purple hoodie and the gas mask strode forward, her hands full of photos. She passed them to Nico, who was the closest to her, and after examining them with a raised eyebrow, he passed them to Furuta, and the cycle went on until they reached me last, passed to me by Itori. I examined them carefully, the photos slightly blurred but clear enough for the range they must have been taken at. They displayed figures in red cloaks bearing Aogiri Tree's symbol, donned in masks common of lower ranked members. But, most alarmingly, was a tall man in a white suit-- not Naki, whom I knew by sight, but one of his direct subordinates.

I sighed and handed the photos back to Jiro, who returned them to a small bag.

"So it's confirmed that Aogiri has a lab. Big whoop," Nishiki said, waving a hand dismissively. "What do you want with it, Pierrot? And more importantly, where do we come in?"

"Patience, my dear Serpent," I said, ignoring the slight headache beginning to grow behind my temples by grinning and sipping at my glass. "I'm getting to that. In essence, I simply want to demolish all of his laboratory and kill everybody inside, while also obtaining his data, to see how far he is in creating a new me." My eyes narrowed behind my mask, just a little. "And that's where you come in. I want all of your help in attacking this place next Saturday."

"Absurdly simple, yet wondrously destructive," Uta said, chuckling. "I'm in favor of it. And everybody else?"
Hands gradually rose, one by one: The Clowns, then Hinami, then :re's group, and finally, Tsukiyama and Kanae. I smiled victoriously.

I'm coming for you, Kanou. Just you wait.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Aaand the raid on Kanou's lab finally begins. Are you ready for the character development? I hope so, because here's 4,281 words of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning, at a painfully early time, I sat in a meeting room with Haise and the Quinx. I wasn't at the main table, since I wasn't a squad leader, but instead sat next to Mutsuki, Saiko, and Uri, at a smaller rectangular table. Haise, and Shirazu, looking terribly nervous, with his new haircut, did sit at the main table. Shirazu had gotten it cut to symbolize his change, to symbolize his new determination as a Squad Leader. A tonsure.

It made me proud.

"There's a new Rose report," Haise said seriously, beginning the meeting. "Evidence shows Rose and Aogiri Tree have some sort of alliance."

"Rose and Aogiri Tree," Shirazu piped. "They ambushed our Qs Squad during our investigation. We counterattacked, and forced a retreat."

"This is speculation, but they might be targeting Associate Special Class Kijima because of the video..." Haise added, and I was impressed that he kept the ill look from his face, and the disgust from his tone.

Kijima laughed, and his twisted face looked satisfied. "My, my. The video seems to be bringing unexpected results."

"Results?!!" Ui exclaimed, and for once, I was in total agreement. Although a dark part of me, the part that I attributed to Kanou, gleefully agreed that it did bring results. "This is giving us unnecessary trouble! Associate Special Class, that's not a result..."

"That so?" Kijima asked, like he was amusing the thoughts of a child. "If Rose and Aogiri got together for revenge... then all we need to do is prepare for battle, and we can find a trail to both of those groups. If this isn't a result, then what is?"

"That depends on whether they took your invite," Ui said the word with distaste. "Or not, right? From S1's standpoint, the scale of battle is too unclear! How can you carelessly escalate the size of the investigation?!"

"Special Class Ui," Ihei said, and once again I found myself studying her. She seemed... air-headed, but there was something darker lurking beneath her stupid acts. "I also agree with Kijima-san. As long as we beat them, it's no problem, right? In the end, if we can't beat them, we won't catch Rose."

A stupidly simple yet absolutely true mindset, I though, but didn't make a comment as Ui's expression twisted.

"Hairu-chan. Why would anyone throw a fish net after seeing just a shadow? The problem is that we still don't have a full picture of our foe." In a mutter that should have been inaudible-- and would
have been, if not for the fact that I had uncanny hearing, even for a ghoul-- he added, "I hate people from the bottom. I wish the Academy would add general education to the program, geez..."

With an amused expression, Ihei sighed and sat her head against the table, like she was all too used to Ui's know-it-all ways. "Yes, I'm sorry."

"Is our enemy Rose and a few Aogiri, or is it Rose and all of Aogiri? The situational difference is too large!" Ui said, like he felt the need to state the obvious facts. "If their forces are too strong, even S1 can't handle them..."

"If we can grasp the full situation... If we know their forces, it should be enough, right?" Haise finally broke in, pausing Ui's rant-like monologue.

Ui looked like he was absolutely done with Haise, something that irritated me.

"Special Class Ui... please reconsider my proposed battle plan..." Haise continued, but the dark shadows in Ui's eyes weren't that of thoughtfulness. They were that of jealousy, and it wasn't hard to put two and two together.

Recently, the Quinx Squad and the Mado Squad as a whole had been getting many achievements, and Haise was Arima's undeniable favorite. Ui was jealous, of Haise especially, and he was letting it cloud his judgement. Haise's plan was perfectly sound, if a little... eccentric.

"...First Class Sasaki, please clarify."

Haise looked like he was surprised that Ui was even giving him the opportunity. But he didn't waste that chance.

"Y-Yes! My plan is to use the ghoul habits and our Qs properties..."

I didn't listen to the rest of his plan, instead going over the ward knowledge we would most likely obtain. The Sixth Ward was lead by Banjou and his group, and was rather peaceful. The Second Ward was full of CCG, and not many ghouls were there. The Eighth Ward were a cautious and close-knit bunch, but were good-natured on whole, if a little untrusting. Cochlea made the Twenty-Third Ward dangerous, and nobody lived there if otherwise possible. The Seventh Ward ghouls were on edge and had just gone through a revolt against the CCG, but was otherwise safe. The Twenty-First and -Second Wards were battling over leadership, and were unsteady and full of fighting. The Eighteenth Ward was Aogiri territory, controlled by Triple-Blades Miza-- or just Triple-Blades, as the CCG knew her.

And the Fifth Ward was... well, I wanted to avoid going there.

"Let's have a vote then," Ui said, clearly unhappy. "First Class Sasaki's 'Operation Mask'. Those who are Rank One and above and not part of the Qs Squad, please raise your hand if you approve-- and not you, either," Ui said, pointing at me. "You're too emotionally attached to First Class Sasaki for your vote to count."

I huffed. "I am offended that you think my work opinion would be swayed by personal attachments, but fine. I've got more than enough confidence in the plan that I don't need to vote."

Ui gave me a flat look, but my confidence was well-placed. In the end, Kijima, Furuta, Kuramoto, Shinji, Ihei, and Fura all voted in favor, with only Shimoguchi, his squad, and Ui voting against.

"The results are in," Ui said, dark irritation in his expression. "First Class Sasaki's 'Operation Mask' is approved."
"The operation was approved? That's great, Haise," Akira said, meeting us outside the conference room, sounding genuinely pleased.

"Akira..." Haise began, smiling. "Ah, but what comes next will be rough... Just how do we act like ghouls... Who knows?"

I do, and so do you, I thought, but didn't say.

"Oh right... Haise, Nagachika," Akira started, "can I borrow Yonebayashi for a bit?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, while Saiko looked startled. She mouthed to me, did I do something wrong? and I shook my head, just as confused.

"Did Saiko do something?" Shirazu echoed, as Akira led Saiko away. "Can't be that 'Robed Hero' thing again, right...?"

Haise frowned, and once again, the look in his eyes grew distant. I didn't like the encounter much either, to be honest. A ghoul in a robe that defeated the ghoul that ambushed Saiko, before mysteriously vanishing? It gave rise to an unpleasantly familiar sense that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I didn't like it, nor the fact that Akira seemed so emotionally invested in it.

I didn't like at all.

We went to pick up the masks from Uta that night, and he was delighted to see us.

"Here, come here, I've got one for each of you," He said, handing each of us a paper-wrapped parcel, excluding Haise, who had voted to wear the Eyepatch mask. "Go on, open them. And try them on, I want to see them on you!"

I unwrapped mine, surprised to see that a white mask, patterned with spades and a single, black letter, the letter A. It's motif was clear: the Ace of Spades. Curious, I glanced to the Quinx, and found their masks had similar motifs: Mutsuki's was the Three of Spades; Saiko's was the Three of Hearts, and red-and-white; Urie's the Three of Diamonds; Shirazu's the Three of Clubs. All in simple, black-and-white patterns, excluding Saiko's.

"Here, I've got one for you too," Uta said, handing a paper-wrapped parcel to Haise, who accepted
it. "I know you said you didn't need one, but I took the liberty anyways. And I improvised on the measurements, but I think that it'll fit pretty well."

Haise unwrapped it, and underneath the paper lay a white-and-red mask, patterned in the manner so the motif was clear: the Ace of Hearts.

"It's... beautiful," Haise said, and I was inclined to agree, although less about the mask than himself. "Thank you, Uta-san."

Uta smiled, and it was genuinely cheerful. "It was my pleasure. Think of it as a welcome-to-the-family gift."

The next Saturday, a week before the Mask Operation was set to begin, I was beginning a completely different operation.

I stood on the doorstep of Kanou's Sixth Ward laboratory, with everybody behind me, literally and figuratively: Hinami, Touka, Nishiki, Yomo, Banjou, his group, Uta, Itori, Furuta, Roma, Nico, Tsukiyama, and Kanae. A small group, in appearance, but in strength more than formidable.

I smiled coldly as I reached out and opened the door, picking the lock with a key one of Banjou's followers had pick-pocketed from one of Kanou's employees. It slid open, and immediately one of Aogiri's goons looked towards me, with an expression adequately described as bored.

"Who are-- ack!"

I didn't give him the opportunity to finish. My kagune emerged from my tailbone with the sound of tearing skin, and his head flew in a different direction than his body, sending a curtain of blood spraying everywhere. His companion was killed in a similar fashion, an unsightly hole torn through his head by my bikaku.

"Shut the door behind you," I commanded, tossing the keys to Kanae. "I don't want civilians getting tangled up in this. But if you're spotted, kill the witnesses. Go cover the other exits, and infiltrate from there. I want no survivors."

"Understood, mon cher," Tsukiyama said softly, and he departed with Kanae and Hinami, to cover the West exit. Touka, Nishiki, and Yomo left to cover the east, and with me the majority stayed to continue the main infiltration and attack.

I started my path of utter destruction, slicing through the next set of doors, shattering the glass and terrifying the lab workers. I payed their screams no heed, smiling as the thought crossed my mind that Kanou had made a mistake, sound-proofing his walls. If he hadn't, perhaps his workers could have brought help, by their agonized screams.

But their screams would bring no help, not tonight.

I crushed one man's torso, sending him crashing into a cart full of glass beakers and lab equipment.
His white coat was painted crimson, and I stepped over him without a second thought, crushing his hand underneath my shoe. He screamed, and with a bit of absentminded surprise that he was still alive I brought my foot down on his throat, twisting it savagely. I continued forward, shouting, "Go on, clear the remaining rooms! I'll clean up here, and gather the data!"

"Yes, boss," Uta said, with something like a mischievous smile as he slipped his mask on and led the group of Clowns onward, his hands covered in blood that wasn't his.

A rinkaku tentacle shot towards me, and I cut it off with a fell strike to the limb, severing the rinkaku from its owner, a ghoul in Aogiri garb. I dashed forward, close enough to see the fear in his red-and-black eyes, and I sliced a long cut trough his torso, cutting him in half. His scream was cut short as his body fell away in two pieces. I kicked it away with distaste, moving on to the next ghoul, who died in a similarly beheaded fashion-- my signature kill.

With a glance around the room, which was now littered in broken beakers and other strewn lab equipment, I found that the other lab assistants were already dead, along with the Aogiri guards. There had been less than expected, but most had probably fled inwards when we entered. There was a door marked Management to my left, and I reached for it, tugging on it. It was locked, and I frowned, jiggling on the doorknob harder.

No luck.

I could kick the door down, but that might damage the computers that were inside, which held the data I wanted. Lock-picking it was, then.

After finding a handful of paperclips from a nearby desk, I unbent them and set to work. It was a tedious process, finding the stiff pins and pressing them upwards, having to listen for the clicks of the lock over the screaming, but I did it, and when the last pin clicked into place I tossed the paperclips aside and twisted the doorknob.

Inside was a woman with a gun, of all things. Her hands shook, but her eyes had a strangely steely determination, and in a voice as cold as ice she said, "Stop right there, Pierrot."

I did as she asked, pausing.

"So you know my name, do you?"

"I do know your name, and a lot more than that," She said, in the same deadpan voice. She had a strange accent... French? "You're Experiment Number 49, and you're probably here for the data, since you didn't break down the door."

I smiled. "Well, well, you're a smart one. How about you make this easier on all of us and give me your security clearance password before I kill you?"

"I will," the woman said, which took me aback. "And then you're going to kill me, I know. I don't care. That's what I want. I'm not going to plead for my life or anything of the sort-- I'd rather die than live spend the rest of my life in a CCG Prison for human experimentation."

I laughed, incredulous. "If only more humans were as accepting and analytical as you are! Fine, then. Log onto the computer and transfer everything about my experiment number and everything about any current experiments like mine onto this flash-drive. And everything about his synthetic meat experiment onto this flash-drive," I added, tossing said items to her.

"I'll do it," She repeated, catching the flash-drives in one hand, a pretty impressive feat for a human. "Although I don't have access to any of his current experiments. But I want you to do something for
"Oh?" I humored. "And what is that, little human?"

The woman smiled ruefully, but it was bitter. "I want you to spare my daughter's life. She's hiding in the cabinets over there," She gestured to said cabinets. "She hasn't done anything wrong, and she won't understand anything I'm saying to you right now. We just moved here from Paris so that I could take Kanou's job offer; she doesn't speak Japanese."

_I'll kill her after I kill you._

"Okay, then," I said. "I'll spare the kid if you transfer the data."

The woman nodded, eyes cold, and she sat the gun down. She plugged the flash-drives in to the computer and with a few swift strokes, she sat back. The screen illuminated the dim room, and after a short period of time, in which the only sounds were the dying screams being cut short from the rest of the building, she pulled the flash-drives out of the computer and handed them to me.

"It's done," She said simply, and pushed past me to stand in the blood-spattered lab room. "Now, we should be getting on with it."

I tucked the flash-drives into my pocket, still a bit surprised by her bluntness. "Any last words?"

She appeared to ponder this, before she smiled. It didn't reach her eyes, which were as cold as ever. She moved, suddenly, and the gun from earlier was pressed against her temple. She laughed.

"Screw you."

She pulled the trigger, and as her blood sprayed, I blinked.

"Humans are... unpredictable," I muttered, turning back into the room with the computer and walking to the cabinets. I reached out, my bikaku curled around my leg, ready to make the kill short and swift.

But when I opened the cabinets, I froze.

Inside was a little girl, a bit on the chubby side, curled into a ball, with a pair of neon blue headphones over her ears and music blaring through them. Her hair was an odd shade of black, so dark it was almost blue, but her eyes, a near-neon blue, met mine and it was like they turned my bones to liquid.

I wasn't looking at a stranger. I was looking at a little Saiko, terrified and scared out of her wits, and I was the one who had caused her such terror. I had likely just made her an orphan, and even if her mother had deserved it, this child didn't.

[The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.]

She made a whimpering noise and curled up further, but I held my hands up, cursing my rusty French.

"Je-- Je ne te blesserai pas."

(*I will not hurt you)

The little girl reached up and removed her headphones hesitantly.
"Êtes-vous une goule?"

(*Are you a ghoul?)

It took me a moment to translate what she had said, and to figure out my response. It had been years since I had spoken French— not since high school, when I thought the class would be interesting to take as an elective for language.

"Pardonnez-moi pour mon mauvais français, je ne parle pas bien," I began, trying to recall the lessons."Je suis une goule, mais je ne vais pas vous faire du mal."

(*Forgive my bad French, I do not speak it well. I am a ghoul, but I will not hurt you.)

"Où est ma maman?" The girl asked, tugging on my sleeve. "Je veux ma maman!"

(*Where is my mama? I want my mama!)

I swallowed, thinking about the body of the woman, with the hole blown through her head. It wouldn't be right to let this little girl see that. But how was I supposed to explain that her mother was dead, and would never come back? And Haise's affectionate nickname, given to him by Saiko, struck a chord. It was abruptly difficult to speak, but I cleared my throat anyways.

"Va-- No, Votre maman a dû aller loin." I said, hesitating. "Elle a quitté pour le ciel, ma chérie."

(*Your mama had to go far away. She left for heaven, my dear. [ma chérie being a term of endearment])

The little girl's glassy blue eyes widened in despair, and they grew teary. Her hands clenched in my neon-colored sleeve, and she flung her arms around my neck, regardless of the blood that stained my shirt.

"Je ne veux pas qu'elle aille aux cieux!" She wailed, and it took me longer than I'd like to admit to decipher her cry. (*I don't want her to go to heaven!) When I did, I wrapped my arms around her gently and said,

"Je suis désolé, ma chérie. Mais elle a déjà disparu." I petted her pigtails gently, feeling oddly hollow. "Je vais vous vous emmener à un endroit sûr."

(*I am sorry, my dear. But she is already gone. I will take you to a safe place.)

"Je veux ma maman," She repeated, voice muffled by the fabric of my shirt. "Maman!"

(*I want my mama)

I didn't respond, but it wasn't because I didn't understand her. Rather, it was because I was unsure how to, one of the rare instances when my skill with words failed me. So instead I reached down and unbuttoned the over-shirt I wore, shrugging out of the stiff neon material and draping it over the little girl. The high collar wasn't enough to cover her eyes, but it shielded some of her vision, and I wrapped it around her tightly.

"Ne cherchez pas, d'accord?" I said quietly, picking her up and tucking her face against my shoulder.

(*Do not look, okay?)

"D'accord." She whispered, and I kept my hand firm against the back of her head to ensure that she
did so. With brisk, quick steps I left the room and through the bloody lab, regretting not bringing her headphones when she shivered at the screams. I merely tightened my hold and called, "No-Face!"

A moment later, his arms and clothes coated in blood and gore, Uta found his way to me, looking at the girl in my arms curiously.

"Pierrot?"

"I've got the data," I announced, "and now I've got a new idea, as well. Do me a favor and take charge here, won't you? I've got something to take care of, and I won't be back here tonight."

I thought that behind his mask, Uta might have been smiling. "Can-do, boss. Have fun with your idea, and don't do anything too stupid."


"Mm-hmm," Uta hummed, sounding rather unconvinced. "Well then, you'd better go. I'll make something up for the others."

"Thanks, No-Face," I said, but didn't say anything else as I turned and exited the facility, shutting the door firmly behind me. I tried to recall more of my rusty French, which was gradually coming back to me. "Ma chère, nous sommes à l'extérieur maintenant. Tu peux regarder."

(*My dear, we are outside now. You can look.)

Hesitantly, she peeked out of the fabric, and her teary blue eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "Où allons-nous, Monsieur Clown?"

(*Where are we going, Mister Clown?)

I laughed at that last bit, a surprisingly loud sound in the otherwise quiet evening. "Quelque part en sécurité. Et mon nom est Pierrot, ma chérie. Quel est votre nom?"

(*Somewhere safe. And my name is Pierrot, my dear. What is your name?)

"Anne," she replied, tiny hands fisting in my undershirt as she gazed around. I tightened my grip on her, not tight enough to hurt, just enough to be firm and not risk dropping her.

"Tenez bon, Anne." I instructed, my only warning before gauging the distance to the roof and taking a leap upwards. I had almost missed the roof ledge, but landed just on the edge, biting back a curse as I took a few quick steps forward to balance. Her eyes were wide, but with the bright astonishment that only a child could possess, free of fear. She gasped when I started forward, leaping from one roof to the next, so fast that her vision would have been blurred, although mine was clear. She watched everything as I moved, recalling the patterns ghoul investigators in the Sixth Ward normally patrolled in-- which wasn't random, as most believed-- and trying to track the smell of quinques, hoping I wouldn't accidentally run into a ghoul instead.

(*Hold on tight)

I got lucky, because it was indeed a pair of Ghoul Investigators, and one of them I recognized. Hayashimura and someone of lower rank, it appeared, probably his new partner. I had heard that he had been sent to the Sixth Ward, but I hadn't thought of it as any more than rumors.

"Hey, Doves!" I called, from my perch on the rooftop, many stories up from where they stood, at the entrance to an alley, which was actually rather clever of them and lucky for me, since alleys were
notorious for being popular feeding spots. "Got a minute?"

Hayashimura paled when the moonlight caught my mask, and the sharp end of his serrated quinque was pointed at me without hesitation.

"Pierrot? Oh shit. Rank 2 Nakanoi, call for backup!"

"Hold on a second," I waved my hand to gather their attention. "I'm not here for a fight. I want you to relay a message to all the other Doves for me, so listen up close, okay?" I shifted on the balls of my feet, holding onto Anne more tightly. "I'm sure you know who Kanou Akihiro is, right? On every one of your most wanted lists? Yeah, well, I'm kinda at war with him, so kindly \textit{stay the hell out of it}. If you \textit{do} get involved, then I'll make it my personal mission to hunt down and kill as many of you as I can, which would be, y'know, a lot."

Hayashimura's quinque didn't shake, something that was rather admirable, in this situation. "Why should I believe anything that comes out of your mouth, \textit{Pierrot}?"

"Because I've even brought a sign of goodwill!" I said cheerily. "Tonight I broke into one of Kanou's labs and killed everyone inside of it. But when I got inside, guess what? There was a little girl there! So, Doves, what do you think I did? I didn't kill her, I brought her to you! See, I don't like making a habit of killing innocents, but if you force my hand and get involved, I will."

Hayashimura glanced from me to the bundle in my arms, and his partner, an otherwise unremarkable young man, spoke.

"I'll do it! I'll relay your message if you surrender the civilian safely!"

Hayashimura looked furious that his subordinate had spoken out of turn. "\textit{Rank 2 Nakanoi, what are you doing}?"

But I ignored Hayashimura's angered outburst, stepping off the roof and landing in front of them neatly, setting Anne on the ground and patting her head gently. I leaned my head down and whispered, "\textit{Ces gars-là vous amènera à cela endroit sûr, d'accord? Soyez bon pour eux, ma chérie. Ils ne parlent pas français, mais quelqu'un qui viendra bientôt.}"

(These guys will take you to that safe place, okay? Be good for them, my dear. They do not speak French, but someone who does will come soon.)

Then I waved to Hayashimura and his partner, calling out to them as I jumped back up and landed on the rooftop, "\textit{Nice doing business with you, Doves}!"

I disappeared across the rooftops, back towards Banjou's place, where my change of clothes awaited me. Hinami would be there, and we would return to the Chateau together, just in time for dinner to be finished. It would all go according to plan, and Hinami would be put up for the night, and in the morning Uta and Itori would arrive to pick her up, as if everything was normal and I was just babysitting my little sister for my parents.

As if we hadn't just committed mass slaughter like it was a completely normal family bonding activity.

When I was far away, I could just faintly hear Anne shout, "\textit{Je vais, Monsieur Pierrot! Je vous remercie!}"

(*I will! Thank you, Mister Pierrot!)}
[The soul who sins shall die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.]

That's from Ezekiel 18:20. I'm not a religious person, and I'm not trying to bring attention to faith or anything of the sort from the quote. It just goes very well with the current setting. I do apologize if my use of a biblical quote (I think it's a biblical quote, anyways) offends or bothers anyone, and if it does, I can remove it.

More notes:

The little girl will only appear for another chapter, to finish off Hide's character development, and then you won't see any more of her. I try not to give OC large roles. Or names, most of the time.

Even more notes:

The only reason Hide knew the patterns the investigators in the Sixth Ward patrolled in was because he had to plan around them for when they attacked Kanou's lab. Hide isn't all-knowing, though he tries to be.

I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, I walked out of the bathroom with wet hair dripping onto my work clothes, but otherwise presentable. Downstairs, I found Hinami, drinking a mug of Haise's coffee with a half-eaten plate of food in front of her that must have been difficult to swallow down. But she looked perfectly at ease sitting at the table, nonetheless, chatting with a red-cheeked Shirazu as he tried to look natural.

"Oh yes, the movie was great! But I really liked the manga better," Hinami said cheerily. "Don't you agree, Niichan?"

"The movie was better, I think," I declared. "And I've only read part of the manga."

"When you start a series, you should finish it, Hide," Haise chided from the living room, where the television was playing the news. "Also, there's coffee in the pot for you."

"You're the best, Haise," I called, eagerly pouring the last of the coffee into a mug and moving to sit next to him on the couch. "So, what's up in world news?"

Mutsuki blinked. "Oh, that's right, you were out last night so you didn't hear about it. A group of ghouls attacked a research laboratory in the Sixth Ward."

"In the Sixth Ward?" I asked, with a faked expression of confusion. "Do we know who they were? Was it Aogiri?"

"No, it's worse than that," Haise sighed. "It was a lab run by Doctor Kanou Akihiro, apparently, and the ghouls were led by one who goes by the alias of Pierrot."

"Since when was he in the Sixth Ward?" I asked, sipping at my coffee. "I thought he was in the First Ward. In fact, didn't he attack you guys, before I came around?"

"That's right," Saiko said drowsily. "Shiragin and Uribo got there asses kicked."

"Pierrot is way too strong for us to take on, anyways," Haise said, brushing the subject away. "But anyways--" He broke off as his cellphone rang, and he lifted the phone to his ear, without glancing at the caller ID. "First Class Sasaki. Oh, Akira-san? What? No, I don't speak French. Give me a minute, I'll ask." Haise put the phone to his shoulder, calling, "Does anybody speak French?"

"I do," I offered. "Not too well, but I'm pretty fluent."

"I speak it, too," Saiko offered.

Haise brightened, and said into the phone, "Actually, Hide and Saiko do. Why? We have to come in right now? It's about the Pierrot case-- okay, okay, we'll be there in just a second," Haise finished, and slipped his phone back into his pocket. He looked confused, but announced, "Alright then. Akira-san said she needs us at Headquarters immediately."

"All of us?" I asked.

"I guess so," Haise said, sounding a little worried. "It sounded urgent. We should get going, but I
don't want to leave Hinami-chan here alone."

"It's okay, Sasaki-san," Hinami chimed. "I'll be okay alone until Ut--"

The doorbell cut her off, and I laughed. "Well, you know what they say, speak of the devil and he shall appear. Come on, Hinami-chan, I'll walk you out."

"Okay, Niichan," Hinami agreed, standing and setting her empty mug beside her plate. "Thank you all, for having me!"

"Anytime, Hinami-chan!" Haise said enthusiastically, standing up with me to walk her out. The Quinx echoed his call, Shirazu the loudest, and maybe with a bit of a stutter. "You're always welcome here!"

Hinami and Haise followed me as I went to open the door, but I froze. Behind the door stood not Uta or Itori, but Ayato, looking extremely agitated and worried. Hinami looked just as shell-shocked, and Haise just looked a bit confused. But Ayato looked relived beyond words when Hinami appeared behind me.

"Hinami!"

"Ayato-kun? What are you doing here?" Hinami asked, blinking.

"Oh, Hinami-chan, do you know him?" Haise asked her quizzically.

"I do," She assured him quickly. "He's my-- He's--"

"Ayato-kun is Hinami-chan's boyfriend!" I interrupted, to Hinami and Ayato's dismay. "Geez! If Uta and Itori were going to send you in their place, the least they could've done is call to let us know! Sorry for the trouble, Ayato-kun."

"It's not a big deal or anything," Ayato said, after a minute, playing along. There was still a bit of fading desperation in his eyes, and suspicion replacing it. "But Hinami! Why didn't you tell me you were staying over here? I was--" worried was probably the word he intended to use, but he stopped himself in time. "--concerned." I held back a snicker.

"Sorry, Ayato-kun," Hinami said smiling. "I just forgot to tell you I was staying at Niichan's. He took me out to see a movie while Itori and Uta were busy."

I laughed. "Well then, now that that's cleared up, you better get going, Hinami-chan. I've got to leave too, after all. I'll see you next Sunday!"

"Bye, Niichan, Sasaki-san!" Hinami called, and she led Ayato away by his hand, practically dragging him. His eyes were cold as they left and he shot a glance back at me, and I could convey the meaning in it perfectly.

This isn't over.

I sighed, shutting the door. "I think he's mad at me for stealing Hinami-chan away for a night. But it's not my fault if I'm the better choice! I mean, sure, he's got that whole bad-boy appeal. But I've got the better personality!"

Haise smiled mischievously. "But the bad boy always wins the girl in the end, as the plot goes."

"Hey!" I protested. "I won! I got you, didn't I?"
"Because there was no other competition," Haise teased, turning away. "And my god, that was probably the cheesiest line you've ever said."

I smiled triumphantly, seeing the flush on his cheeks, and pulled him back for a kiss.

Akira's urgent request to come in was because, unsurprisingly, of the need for a translator for Anne. Akira had filled us all in on the gory details of the night and Pierrot's attack-- which I knew, since I was Pierrot, but I figured I'd better not mention that-- but oddly left out my proclamation and delivering Anne to the CCG, before she had ushered us to the break room, where Anne sat, a blanket around her shoulders and my shirt in her lap as she colored with crayons on a sheet of blank computer paper. She was singing in off-key French, a song that I didn't know but Saiko apparently did.

"Alouette, gentille alouette, Alouette, je te plumerai~" Saiko sang with her, to Anne's delight.

"Tu parle français?" Anne asked, setting her crayons down.

(*You speak French?)

"Les deux d'entre nous," I answered, grinning and gesturing to Haise and Akira. "Mais pas lui. Ils n'apprécient la beauté de la langue française, apparemment."

(*We both do. But not him or her. They do not appreciate the beauty of French, apparently.)

Haise frowned. "I know I don't speak French and all, but that sounded like an insult."

"Not at all!" I said cheerily, as Saiko snickered and Anne laughed. "It was a compliment."

"Nagachika," Akira sighed, handing me papers in a manila envelope and a pen, which ended up being a blank profile for orphans in the CCG's care. "Down to business. Fill out her form."

"Yeah, yeah," I agreed, taking the papers and pen and moving to sit on the worn cushions at the low table next to Anne. "Let's see-- Um, Je dois vous poser quelques questions. Quel est votre nom, ma chérie?"

(*I've got to ask you some questions now. What's your name, my dear?)

"Anne Moreau," She answered, turning back to her coloring. It was a mess of bright colors I couldn't quite make out from where I sat.

"Mon nom est Yonebayashi Saiko, et ceci ne est Nagachika Hideyoshi, mais vous pouvez l'appeler Hide. Quel âge avez-vous, Moreau-chan?" Saiko asked, smiling and propping her head against her hand, sitting down on the other side of Anne.

(*My name is Yonebayashi Saiko, and this is Nagachika Hideyoshi, but you can call him Hide. How old are you, Moreau-chan?)
"Je suis âgé de cinq ans!" Anne declared, holding up five fingers for emphasis. She tilted her head to the side. "Que signifie chan, Yone-bay-a-shi?"

(*I'm five years old! What does chan mean, Yone-bay-a-shi?*)

I laughed at her careful pronunciation of Saiko's family name, and took a moment to explain. "It's different in France. Your given name comes first, like it does in America, remember? And they don't use our honorifics. So you'd just be Saiko, and I'd just be Hide, and Haise would be Haise, and Akira-san Akira."

Saiko nodded, then paused. "Well-- I mean, Chan est un mot japonais, Anne." She hesitated again, glancing at the form I held. "Okay, so next is... a statement? She's five. How are we supposed to take her statement?"

(*Chan is a Japanese word, Anne.*)

"Like this," I shot the little girl a charming grin. "Alors Anne, pouvez-vous me dire ce qui est arrivé hier soir?"

(*So Anne, can you tell me what happened last night?)

Anne nodded enthusiastically. "Maman m'a a fallu pour son travail avec elle, parce que je ne n'ai pas de corps pour me regarder. Elle me laissa écouter de la musique et joue aux jeux sur son téléphone, donc je étais ne vous ennuier pas."

(*Mama took me to her work with her, because I didn't have no body to watch me. She let me listen to music and play games on her phone, so I wasn't be bored.*)

Taking her kinder-garden grammar in stride, Saiko nodded and gestured for her to go on while I translated for Akira and Haise, who looked a little bit disappointed at being left out.

"We asked her to give us a run-down on what happened last night. She said her mother didn't have anybody to watch her, so she took Anne to work with her. Anne wasn't bored, though, because her mother let her play games on her phone and listen to music."

Akira sighed, but Haise looked amused. "Stick to the essentials, Nagachika. I want to know about the ghoul attack, not how she entertained herself."

"Fine, fine," I said, waving a hand. "If you insist. Ahem-- Qu'en est-il des goules, ma chère? Qu'est est passé quand ils sont venus?"

(*What about the ghouls, my dear? What happened when they came?)

Her hand, the crayon still clenched in it tightly, stilled. Anne's expression grew serious, and when she spoke, it had lost the cheery tone. "Maman m'a dit de me cacher, parce que les goules étaient mauvais, les gens effrayant qui me dévorera. Donc, Je cachai dans les armoires au, et j'ai entendu beaucoup de bruits effrayant, donc je mets mes écouteurs."

(*Mama told me to hide, because the ghouls were bad, scary people who would eat me up. So I hid in the cabinets, and I heard lots of scary noises, so I put my headphones on.*)

Saiko cleared her throat. "She said... that her mother told her to hide, because the ghouls were bad people who would eat her. Anne hid in the cabinets, and she heard... scary noises, so she put on her headphones."
"Qu’est-il arrivé ensuite, Anne?" Saiko asked gently. "Est-ce que les goules effrayant te fassent du mal?"

(*What happened then, Anne? Did the scary ghouls hurt you?)

Anne blinked her large blue eyes and shook her head vehemently. "Non! Monsieur Pierrot m’a trouvé, et il m’a donné sa chemise, donc je ne verrez rien! Il me conduisit dans le place-- sécuritaire de ici!" She held up the shirt stretched across her lap, as if for proof.

(*No! Mister Pierrot found me, and he gave me his shirt, so I would not see anything! He brought me to the safe place-- to here!)

"What now?" Saiko frowned. "That can't be right."

"I heard the same thing," I confirmed, faking confusion.

"What did you hear, Yonebayashi, Nagachika?" Akira demanded. Haise looked nervous, like he had assumed that it was a terrible statement and he didn't want to hear the story of this little girl's trauma.

"She said that... uh, 'Mister Pierrot' found her, and gave her his shirt so that she couldn't see anything. Then he brought her to the safe place-- to here."

"That can't be right..." Haise muttered. "Why would a ghoul like Pierrot do something like that?"

"It's what she said, alright," Saiko confirmed. "Papa's translation was the same thing I got."

"It matches the report perfectly, then," Akira murmured unhappily. "I didn't give you the full details. Pierrot brought the girl to a set of investigators in the Sixth Ward-- I've got their statements here, if you want them."

"I do," Haise said quietly, and I stood up to read the papers beside him while Saiko remained to entertain Anne, craning my head to rest on his shoulder. He held them out a little, and when he finished reading them, he shook his head. "It just doesn't make any sense. Pierrot is a notorious ghoul, with ties everywhere in the ghoul world. You think he'd be an ally of Doctor Kanou, not someone who'd swear vengeance against him. And did he really save Moreau-chan-- I mean, Anne-- as a token of goodwill?"

Akira took the files back, tucking them away, along with Anne's newly-filled out profile. "I don't know. We're at a loss, but it isn't our job to do any more snooping. We're just here until they fly in a proper translator from France. This is the Sixth Ward's case now." She ran a hand through her hair, shaking her head. "I hate to admit it, but I'm almost glad it isn't our case. Pierrot is... a difficult one. I'd even almost say scary."

Haise hesitated. "Is his profile really that bad, Akira-san? I've... only heard rumors, actually. And when he attacked Shirazu and Urie, I only saw him for a brief time."

"I don't have a copy of his file, but yes," Akira said grimly. "He is that bad, and I don't say it very often, but Pierrot... is a ghoul that I would not want to run into. I don't think that I would survive it."
Saiko didn't know what to make of the case. She hadn't ever heard the name Pierrot before, other than his attack on Shirazu and Urie, but from the way that Maman and Papa were talking with Akira, Pierrot was powerful, in the ghoul society and by himself– or herself? No, Akira had used male pronouns.

She frowned. Pierrot sounded dangerous, but... surely he wasn't too bad, for a ghoul. He hadn't killed Anne, after all. In fact, he had brought her to CCG Agents, and even shielded her from the gore. For a ghoul, he didn't sound too terrible. In fact, he sounded rather like...

"_Regardez ma photo, Mademoiselle Saiko!_" Anne insisted, tugging her sleeve. Saiko obeyed, looking to the crayon picture Anne had been working on.

(*Look at my picture, Miss Saiko!*)

It depicted a man with hair a peculiarly bright shade of orange, dressed all in garishly neon colors, greens and blues. His mask was a that of a clown, and he stood at what appeared to be the edge of a building, with a backdrop of glittering silver stars against the night sky. In his arms he held a little girl with dark blue hair and pale blue eyes.

"_C'est beau! Tu as fait du bon travail!_" Saiko praised, beaming.

(*It's beautiful! You did a good job!)

...a hero. Pierrot sounds like an anti-hero from a manga.

Saiko tried her best to push thoughts like those away. She wasn't stupid. Ghouls were terrible things that ate humans and killed them for sport. It was their job, as Investigators, to hunt ghouls down and kill them to protect the civilian population.

_But who were the real villains?_

Saiko recalled a conversation she had had with the rest of the Quinx squad, not too long ago, when Mutsuki had accidentally knocked over some papers in the archives. As they were putting the papers up, Saiko had read the case files, over a case in the Twentieth Ward. A mother ghoul had made her last stand to give her little girl enough time to escape from the Investigators.

"_It sounds like the ghouls... are the good guys._" She had remarked. "_We sound like the villains here._"

Urie had given her a scalding look, like she had said something absurdly stupid. Mutsuki had hesitated, then looked away from her, like he couldn't find an answer to give.

Shirazu had answered her.

"_Remember the position we're in, Rank 2 Yonebayashi. It isn't our job to think about what we do is right or wrong. We do as we're ordered, and that's that._"

He hadn't met her eyes while he spoke.

Chapter End Notes
That's it for the little girl! Saiko and Hide's character development is finished for a bit, and you got some insight to where Saiko stands on the ghouls-vs-humans mentality. And, Ayato made his (brief) debut!

Next up, the Mask Operation! Guess what? There's also insight to just how much influence Pierrot has over regular ghouls, and what he does with that influence.

Tell me what you thought of this chapter?

Thanks for reading!

*EDIT

Okay, so, I want to say thank you to JustaVeryCuddlyPerson for giving me some advice on whether or not I should add this in. It's a little more info about Hide (Pierrot) and the little oc girl (Anne), and Saiko. Our conversation went like this:

"As usual, pretty good! And I like how you had Saiko piecing things together. The only thing I can think of that's a little off is the little girl not recognising Hide's voice and calling him out as Pierrot in inadvertent excitement/realisation/whichever emotion that this is the ghoul that saved her. Being a little kid, she may not have realised the implications of doing that, and I was surprised Hide wasn't worried over her revealing him in front of Akira and his squad, even volunteering his knowledge of French translation (especially since she remembered enough to draw his hair despite her being tucked against him a fair bit, and Hide's hair IS a tad incriminating in that aspect since it's so bright)."

My response was:

"I said that she [Anne] was done with appearing, but I suppose that's a tad bit of a lie, because she does come into play once more, in the very last few chapters. [Or maybe sooner than that now that I've planned it out a little bit more] It's just off-screen, so I figured I'd leave it as a surprise. But I'll clarify a little bit: Hide is done seeing the little girl. Saiko isn't.

The little girl does, in fact, recognize Hide. They weren't with her for a very long time period, however; Saiko and Hide were only with her for as long as it took to fill out her basic information. This time.

It was intentionally a bit off. Hide's beginning to slip up too often, and his nature is beginning to clash with his new-found conscience. He's fraying at the seams, if you will, and that's not a good thing for anyone, because everybody's got a breaking point, and Hide's is coming up soon. Basically, the only reason he volunteered, despite it being foolish, was because he wanted to see the little girl who reminded him of Saiko. He did essentially kill her mother, so he's feeling guilty, even if he doesn't quite realize it yet.

I think I just spoiled a lot.

Thanks for reading and commenting!"

To summarize: it's not a mistake, Hide's slip-ups are happening more and more often, and he's getting careless. Anne does know he's Pierrot, but didn't find a good time to mention it (yet). Saiko isn't as ignorant as everybody in the Quinx Squad thinks she is,
and is leaning more towards the almost-ghoul-sympathizer mentality.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I ended up not getting a chance to meet with Uta, Itori, and everybody else before Operation Mask. There was no time; every free minute was spent planning for Operation Mask and countering any hitch that might have come up.

And now I stood on the roof of a neighboring skyscraper, dressed in a dark black athletic shirt with a high neck and dark athletic pants. A paler grey, sleeveless hoodie had been pulled over that, and I was glad for the warmth as I adjusted the unfamiliar mask over my face. The Quinx were dressed in similar get-up, and so was Haise, in his mask and loose white clothes, perfectly opposite to what he used to wear. But his mask was unnerving, although my discomfort wasn't from the way it looked. It was the way he looked wearing it.

_He looks too much like he used to._

"You know... You really look like a ghoul, Sassan." Shirazu muttered.

"Really?" Haise asked, his head tilting just a tiny bit to the side in a quizzical manner. "I think it's scary, how the gums are showing..."

"I look pretty good too, right?" Saiko asked, holding her arms out and twirling. The red three and the heart on her mask gleamed in the light of the setting sun.

"Of course you do," I beamed. "But the sun's starting to go down, and we shouldn't waste any more time. We've already started a week later than planned because of that Pierrot incident, so we should get going."

"You're right," Haise agreed, stretching. "Okay, does everybody remember where they're going tonight?"

"Me and Saiko 're going to the Eight Ward," Shirazu answered.

"I'm going to the Seventh Ward, with Mutsuki," Urie answered, tucking his hands into his pockets.

"That's right!" Haise confirmed. "And Hide and I are going to investigate the Fifth Ward. Remember to sniff out potential hunting grounds and steak them out, okay?"

I sighed, even at my discomfort at the mention of the Fifth Ward. "Even at a time like this, you're making puns? You don't have a serious bone in your body, I swear."

"No, but I've got a punny bone, Haise said, and behind his mask I was sure he was smiling. I rolled my eyes (though only one was visible behind my mask, like all of the Quinx's) and nudged him, not hard enough to threaten his balance but hard enough that it cut off his snicker. "Alright, alright, I'll stop. Seriously, though, be careful while you're out."

"We know, Sasaki," Urie said impatiently.

I sighed. "Well then, time to head out. It's seven right now, and the last train runs at one, so make sure you move fast, and catch the last train back home. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call. Good luck!"
"We will, Hide-san," Shirazu waved as they leapt from the building, something that was a bit unnerving to see, even if I knew they were ghouls and easily made it to the next roof. Saiko followed him, a bit slower, and they headed in the direction of the Eighth Ward. Mutsuki and Urie left in the direction of the Seventh Ward, and Haise and I departed for the Fifth Ward.

The Fifth Ward...

I grimaced.

"What's wrong, Hide?" Haise called over the whistling of the wind, looking concerned. I quickly schooled my expression into a grin.

"Nothing! I just landed wrong, but I'm fine now! The bonuses of regeneration never cease to amaze," I called back.

"If you say so," Haise said, with a glance down at my feet, which were clad in black running shoes.

"I do say so," I declared, and I thought I heard Haise laugh, faintly, before he ran in silence beside me, our steps falling into a rhythmical pattern. It was a comfortable silence, with the only sounds against the ever-constant noise of Tokyo, our breathing, and the sound of our shoes against the concrete. Around us, the world was moving so fast it blurred a bit, and the setting sun gleamed a bloody red and orange against the sky. It was a breathtaking view, and it would have been enjoyable, if we weren't currently on the job.

After a short period of time, I halted, my shoes grinding against the concrete. "We're deep enough into the Fifth Ward now, I think. We should start hunting for... well, hunting grounds."

"That sounds good," Haise agreed, coming to a stop beside me. "We shouldn't split up, though. Just like we told the kids; since it's unfamiliar territory, and we could come across hostile ghouls."

"Yeah," I agreed, and although I already knew where the hunting grounds were, I reached up and removed my mask, smelling the air deeply. Now that I was trying to decipher the smells, it was almost like a sensory overload. There was the smell of fast food, appealing and greasy, and the scent of garbage and rotting things from the dumpster beneath us. A breeze from the east caught my attention, however, because it carried with it the unmistakable smell of ghouls.

"The east," Haise said, at the same time I did. We stared at each other for a brief moment, then I laughed.

"Great minds think alike."

"And fools seldom differ," Haise finished, brushing his hair away from where it had gotten tucked into his mask. "Well then, to the east we go."

We stayed on top of the roofs, but our pace slowed as we went from one to the next and tracked the scent, which gradually grew stronger. I was careful to only follow the smell, rather than lead Haise directly to the hunting ground I knew we were headed for. I wavered when the scent wavered, my movements perfectly attuned to Haise's reactions, and together we made our way to the raised train tracks, which was a popular suicide hot-spot for jumpers. Haise seemed to sense that something was off, and slowed to a halt.

"There's something... off..."

"Can't you smell it?" I asked, concealing my knowledge with facts that were able to be picked up right now.
"Smell what?" Haise asked me curiously, leaning a little closer and sniffing, but he still looked confused.

"There are dead bodies underneath the train platform, Haise," I said gently, putting a hand on his shoulder and pointing to the spot far beneath us which normally would be too far away for humans to see. But we weren't human, and we could see the figures sprawled on the hard ground and concrete far below in sickening detail. Haise paled, and I tightened my grip on his shoulder as he uttered, "Oh."

The sweet smell in the air, enticing and hunger-inducing, was coming from the corpses.

Then more shapes and shadows shifted beneath us, and two figures began moving around the corpses. I nudged Haise, who still looked faintly pale but much more collected, and said,

"Bingo. There are our ghouls. Are you alright to move, or do you want a minute?"

"I'm okay, Hide," Haise said firmly. "Let's go."

"Alrighty then," I said, and stepped off the train platform, beginning the free-fall down that had to be almost ninety feet. A bone-breaking journey for a human, but as I landed, my knees bent to absorb the impact, I didn't even feel discomfort.

The ghouls scrambled back a little, and with a grimace I noted that it was a teenage girl, her long hair visible behind her mask, and a smaller boy that had to be around junior high-school aged. They had the same pale brown hair and skin that was a bit tanner than was average, and it wasn't hard to make the deduction they had to be siblings. Their masks, too, were the same dark-and-silver patterns-- the girl had a dark mask painted with a silver crescent moon, and the boy a silver star pattern.

Haise landed next to me, with the same finesse, and the girl tensed, stepping in front of the boy.

"The Eyepatch ghoul?" She hissed, and behind my mask I gritted my teeth. "What are you doing here?"

This is what I was afraid of happening, damn it. Eyepatch-- and his mask-- was just too famous. Even ghoul children knew the tale, just like they knew mine, and I was just grateful they didn't recognize my scent.

Then again, I did smell like Haise and the Quinx. Perhaps their scent masked mine, a little.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a second," I said, holding up my hands. "I know my friend here looks like the Eyepatch ghoul, but he isn't. Really, he's a big softie."

Haise elbowed me. "I am not!"

"You kind of are," I said, and the younger boy snickered. "But that's not my point. See, we're kinda in a tough spot, and we were looking for a little help."

"What kind of help?" The girl said suspiciously. "And... who are you? Both of you."

"Come on. You and I both know I'm not going to give my name out willy-nilly like that to someone I just met," I said, keeping the bright, cheery tone to my voice. "That'd be stupid of me. But you can call us by the names the Doves have given us-- I'm Esu, and he's Katame."

The girl laughed, but it was short, cautious. "Ace and One-Eye, huh? Well then, I'm Mikadzuki, and he's Hoshi."
"Crescent Moon and Star, eh?" I lowered my hands. "I guess we're on the same page, then."

"We are," Mikadzuki agreed. "So then, what help did you want?"

Haise spoke up here. "We used to live in the First Ward, but Aogiri Tree is stirring up trouble there, and the Doves have increased the security. It's become unlivable because of it, and we're looking for a new Ward."

"Aogiri Tree, huh?" Mikadzuki snorted. "Well, you don't have to worry about them here, that's for sure."

"Why not?" Haise asked, shifting and putting his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. "Aogiri is everywhere... aren't they? If the Doves can't keep them away, then nobody can."

"Well, you're wrong there!" Hoshi declared adamantly, his voice still that awkward pitch of between-puberty. "Our Ward is safe from them!"

"Why is that, I mean?" Haise rephrased. "Why is the Fifth Ward so safe?"

"Geez, you First Ward ghouls are ignorant about what's going on, aren't you?" Mikadzuki huffed. "I've heard the Doves control the news about ghoul trouble up there, but really, this is just pitiful."

"It kind of is," I sighed. "That's why we're looking for a new start, though. And we'd like somewhere safe, especially from Aogiri Tree. We've got some kids, see, and some of them don't fight really well."

"Doting parents, aren't you?" Mikadzuki snickered. "Anyways, we're safe from Aogiri because of Pierrot-san's declaration. He's severing his ties with the Tree, and the Clowns have followed suit. He's taken over them, lately, become the leader of the Clowns and started hunting down Aogiri Tree. None of them are tolerated in the Fifth Ward-- any Aogiri Tree members here are killed."

"'Cept for Yotsume," Hoshi said. "But keep that a secret. Aogiri ain't supposed to know, since she's working for Pierrot-san. A d-- A double--"

"Double-Agent," Mikadzuki finished, correcting him. "But anyways, if you've got kids, this is a good place. There are Doves, but not a lot, and the ward is definitely stable. It's how the Twentieth Ward used to be, or so Okaa-san and Otou-san say. I've never been there, and neither has Hoshi, but that's irrelevant, I guess."

"The Clowns are based here?" Haise asked, after a moment, sounding incredulous. "And... Pierrot runs the ward? Why isn't there more, y'know, chaos?"

"Because Pierrot-san cares about us," Hoshi said. "He keeps everyone in line, and he relocates kids who's parents get killed! The Clowns are scary, but they don't make trouble here, and they help keep things in line!"

"Not without fee," Mikadzuki corrected. "He takes the kids in and they work for him, to keep the Fifth Ward running smooth. It's a communal effort."

"Ah... I see," Haise said, but his voice sounded a bit off, like he couldn't believe it. I resisted cursing out loud, and my hands twitched, itching to curl into fists. This was why I didn't want us to investigate here. Now my Ward would be overrun with Doves, and I didn't even have a way to warn the inhabitants of the invasion. It would turn into an all-out war between the CCG and the Clowns.

It would turn into bloodshed, with everyone I cared about in the middle of it.
"Thanks for your help, then!" I announced, forcing my voice to stay light. "We've got to be getting home, though. Kids are waiting, and everything."

"I get it," Mikadzuki said, waving a hand. "Besides, you kind of interrupted our meal, and Okaa-san and Otou-san are waiting for us."

"Good luck with everything!" Hoshi declared, waving. "Be careful around the Doves! And come back and see us when you move, okay?"

"We will," I promised, and the bitter taste of the lie was sickeningly familiar. "Enjoy your meal, and hurry home!"

With the parting, Haise and I left, walking under the shadow of the elevated railway. Behind us, the sound of a corpse being torn apart could be heard, and I was thankful that we had just gotten our monthly 'meal' from the CCG. Even so, the sound was mouthwateringly appealing.

"Pierrot, huh..." Haise muttered, his voice muffled behind his mask. "It seems like he's everywhere lately."

"It sure seems like he's got a foot everywhere," I agreed, thinking that's because I do.

Haise was silent for a long time as we walked at a slower, almost leisurely pace in the direction of the First Ward. It would be a long walk, and even at the rate we had (literally) run here, the moon's position in the sky was worrying. Still, I let him remain in his silence, because I couldn't see his face, but I could feel his conflict, like it was tangible.

A long time later, when the two siblings had long since disappeared behind us, Haise finally stopped. I stopped with him.

"When Akira-san talked about Pierrot, I thought that he was the worst of the worst. The Clowns are... terrifying ghouls, that even Special Class Investigators don't want to mess with. Alone, they're dangerous, and together, they're crazy powerful. They thrive off of destruction and chaos. So when I heard that Pierrot was a Clown, and now that he essentially leads the Clowns, I thought that he must be a terrible person, even for a ghoul." Haise paused, sighing. "But Hide, he saved Anne. Moreover, he didn't let her see the dead body of her mother, and brought her to the CCG to ensure her safety, even if he called her a token of goodwill. And he brought stability to the Fifth Ward, going as far to relocate ghoul children and to keep the Ward free of Aogiri Tree members. And the Clowns helped him? It just doesn't make sense! Nothing makes sense anymore!"

Haise ran a hand through his hair, his visible grey eye clouded. "Hide, he sounds like a good person, and if I put down this information in my report, the ward will be swamped with CCG. I'll shatter this peace, and I'll kill all of those kids and families. And I don't care if it means I have a conscience-- I shouldn't feel this way about ghouls! Akira-san, Arima-san, they've told me time and time again--!"

"Haise," I said gently, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards me, into a hug. "Haise. Listen, about our reports... I think I'd be alright if we omitted this information. And before you say anything, listen to me. For the sake of this mission, our reports have to contain good intel. If we turn in blank reports, we fail, and the mission doesn't succeed. But..." I hesitated, cursing my soft, black heart. "I've done a little digging, on my own, and I got some interesting intel. I was planning on bringing it up later, but... I've been, um, collecting some information on the wards. I've got an... informant, you could say. A ghoul informant. Do you understand what I'm saying, Haise?"

He remained silent for a minute, but he said slowly, "I do understand. We'll omit what we learned
today from our reports, and put in the information that your informant gave you."

"But Haise," I said seriously, voice solemn. "Our co-workers... the CCG... can't know about my informant."

"I know." Haise replied, just as serious. "We can't let the CCG know that the information came from anywhere besides our investigation. We should work on our reports together and make sure our stories line up."

"We can do that once we get home," I agreed. "For now, why don't we head to the train station? I don't have a watch, but the moon's pretty high, and we should get going before they shut the trains down."

"That sounds good," Haise said quietly, and I smiled, slipping my hand into his. We walked to the train station in the same companionable silence, slowly, at a leisurely pace.

We ended up missing the last train by fifteen minutes.

"Maman, Papa!" Saiko exclaimed, when we finally arrived home, a little after six in the morning. "Where were you? We tried calling!"

"We sort of missed the last train," Haise admitted sheepishly. "And our phones were dead. They still are," I added.

"After all that chiding to make sure we caught the last train, you both managed to miss it," Urie muttered, rolling his eyes. He was concerned in his own way. He just happened to show it through disapproval and disgruntle. "Honestly, you're just as irresponsible as we are."

"Did you wait outside the station until it opened again? It was cold last night. Are you both okay?" Mutsuki asked, his genuine concern touching.

"We're fine," Haise assured them, removing his hoodie-- which, like mine, held his mask in the large front pocket-- and sinking down onto the couch, heaving a sigh. I followed suit. "Tired, but okay."

"Tired is a little bit of an understatement," I muttered.

Saiko wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell? It's like... bitter. And kind of nasty."

I raised a hand weakly, not bothering to open my eyes from my comfortable, slumped position on Haise's shoulder. "That would be us, probably. We camped out at a bar until the station opened again."

"You reek like alcohol," Shirazu agreed unhelpfully. "Badly."

"And we can't even drink it, which is really unfair," I said indignantly. "We just have to smell like the bar."
Haise smiled ruefully. "It really is a nasty smell, though. We ought to shower, Hide."

"I know, I know, I'm getting there," I groaned, standing and rubbing at my eyes, trying to keep them open. "It isn't exactly a pleasant smell for me either."

"I'll take the upstairs shower," Haise offered at the stairs, where we would need to part ways. "If you want to take the downstairs."

"Oka--" I began, but was cut off by Saiko, who was still sitting in the living room, with a mischievous smile that I had learned by now was never a good thing.

"You could save water and shower together!"

"Saiko!"

Chapter End Notes

Pierrot is slowly taking over, forcing Kanou and Aogiri Tree into a corner. To clarify, though, Hide had control of the Fifth Ward before all of this-- it was the ward he took away from the ghoul yakuza. Only recently, however, did he start reforming it. He isn't saving kids and ghouls of pure goodwill, after all: he's building an army. Will it backfire, forcing Kanou and the Tree into a corner, so soon? It might. Only time will tell...

Drop a comment and tell me what you thought? Thanks for reading!
When I got to our agreed meeting place on Sunday afternoon, everyone was there already besides Hinami. It was evident who was with whom, even if we were all one group. The Clowns had seated themselves around the table, and Banjou and his friends had done the same, but Tsukiyama and Kanae sat a bit more off to the side, still next to the table but clearly a bit more kept to themselves. The :re ghouls were running the store downstairs, minus Touka, who was in her kitchen, pouring cups of coffee with a mastered, absentminded ease.

"Where's Hinami-chan?" I asked, loosening my tie a little as I removed my shoes and sat down on one of the cushions of Touka's living room.

"She hasn't arrived yet," Touka informed, looking distantly worried. "I hope nothing came up with Aogiri."

"Hinami-chan can take care of herself," I said, but found that I was unable to tell whether or not I
said it to reassure myself of Touka. "She's an extremely competent fighter, and she's extraordinarily bright."

*Especially considering she never had a proper education,* I thought, but didn't say.

"Of course she can," Touka said quietly, sitting down opposite to me. I could hear the unsaid half of her sentence as clear as if she had shouted it. *But that doesn't mean I don't worry.*

I reached out to take a-hold of my coffee cup, but just as I did, the door flew open and Ayato, of all people, stormed in. Hinami followed him, catching the door before it slammed and shutting it gingerly, looking apologetic.

"Pierrot!" Ayato bellowed, suddenly transforming into the hot-headed and temperamental teenager. "Why the hell are you getting Hinami involved in your schemes? You put her in a house full of Doves!"

He stormed forward and reached out, perhaps for my neck or maybe for my shirtfront, but a hand intervened before even I could, adjusting Ayato's path just enough to miss me. The same person—Touka, I realized-- grasped his wrist and twisted his arm back, holding him in a deadlock with a sigh.

"Really, Ayato? I thought you had outgrown this."

"Aneki," Ayato hissed. "Why the hell are you defending this asshole? He's got Hinami mixed up in all of this--!"

Touka tightened her hold on his arm, and Ayato grit his teeth. Touka's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Listen to me, Ayato. You're acting like a stupid child right now, and making a fool of yourself. I know exactly what Hinami-chan is mixed up in, because I'm mixed up in Hide-kun's schemes too. And both of us have *willingly consented* to participate in this scheme, because it happens to involve someone we love and want to protect. And you *definitely* won't be assaulting my guests in my home, not while I'm around. So you can either *get out*, or you can act your age and sit down and talk this out like an *adult.*"

Touka released his hand, and their eyes, the same angry, dark blue, like navy flames, met. After a moment, Ayato make a disapproving sound and sat down, disgruntled. With an almost apologetic but somewhat angry smile, Hinami sat down beside him, looking somewhere between irritated and pleased that Ayato had gone to such lengths for her. Touka, the angry look in her eyes muted now, went into the kitchen and re-emerged with a new coffee cup, which she sat in front of Ayato before she returned to her own seat.

I cleared my throat, folding my hands neatly in my lap and meeting Ayato's coldly angry stare with a calm, collected one, but with a threat in them all the same.

"Ayato-kun. I'll answer any questions you have, so go ahead."

"What are you planning, Pierrot?" Ayato said flatly, bluntly. "What are you doing with Hinami?"

"It's exactly as Touka-chan said, Ayato," I laced my fingers in my lap. "I want to protect the people dear to me, and the ones gathered here share my sentiments, so they have agreed to assist me for various reasons."

"I have a hard time that's you're only reason, Clown," Ayato hissed. "Or should I say, Dove?"

"I'm both, so it's whatever you prefer, really," I said nonchalantly. "But you're completely correct. It
isn't my only reason, just the main one. I'll tell you the other, since you seem so eager to know," my eyes gleamed dangerously. "I'm going to kill Kanou, haven't you heard? It's all that's in the gossip. I'm going to kill him, and anybody who stands with him, including the people that guard him."

"Why?" Ayato demanded. "What's Hinami got to do with your little spat with your old man, Pierrot?"

"See, I kinda tried to sever my ties with the conniving old man, because he was attempting to take away the place my boyfriend's finally happy. Kanou wasn't very happy about that, and he's going to murder my children as a reprimand."

"Well, shit," Ayato muttered, and under his breath added, "Damn it, I wasn't expecting this family bullshit." Louder, he finished, "But what the hell does Hinami have to do with this?"

"That's because of the identity of my significant other," I said, perfectly patient. "But before I get into that, let's stop for a moment. Before I continue, I have to ask: will you relay any of this information to Aogiri Tree?"

I remained in my current position, the image of relaxed and confident, and I discreetly observed his reactions as he responded.

Ayato hesitated, but he met my gaze with a firm one, and his voice was sure. "I won't."

His loyalty to Hinami was admirable, and he showed none of the unconscious signs of lying-- his eye contact conveyed a desire to intimidate me, but that was it. Deciding to answer him honestly, I said, "His name is Sasaki Haise, and he's a First Class Ghoul Investigator. But he's an amnesiac, and he doesn't remember the first nineteen-or-so years of his life. In his previous life, if you will, his name was Kaneki Ken."

"You're kidding me. That little shit is still alive?"

"The same little shit that broke half of your bones, yeah, that's him," I replied mildly. "And he is your senior in age, you know."

"Whatever," Ayato muttered, looking away for a brief moment and to Hinami instead. "Hinami... Why didn't you tell me that he was the reason you're involved with Pierrot?"

"You say my name like it's an insult," I murmured, a little irked. "I'll repeat myself: Hinami is doing this of her own free will. And she, like all of the others here, have made the right choice. In the end, I'll be the one that gets the last laugh. Not Kanou, not Aogiri: me."

"You're arrogance will be your downfall," Ayato said, not unlike a threat. "And I won't let Hinami be caught up in it."

"Only misplaced arrogance will lead to downfall," I corrected him evenly, my eyes flashing dangerously. "And mine is certainly not misplaced. I am the strongest, and I will win, and Kanou will not lay a finger on anyone that I care about. He will die fist, and it will be by my hand. Anyone who stands in my way will share his fate and fall with him." I rested my head on my hand. "Do you understand me, Black Rabbit? Aogiri is currently my enemy, because they stand with Kanou. You are one of their executives, perhaps even the most prominent one. And I am not nearly as kind-hearted as Haise is. I won't half-kill you. If you get in my way, I will kill you."

"Niichan," Hinami said quietly. "Please."

I caught myself before I could make another threat and collected myself. "Of course, that doesn't
need to happen, Ayato-kun. After all, you came here because of Hinami-chan, did you not? She is here because she wants to be, and rest assured, she is safe with me. She saved Haise's life, and because of that, I'm in her debt. If anyone should try to harm her, they'll have to go through me first."

"Ayato-kun." Hinami said to him, just as quietly and just as serious as before. "I want to protect Oniichan. He protected me for a long time, and he was kind to me. It's my turn now, to protect him, and I'll do whatever I can if it means he's happy. I'm going to help Niichan take down Doctor Kanou. If that means betraying Aogiri Tree, I'll do it." Her eyes were dark and grown-up, and her tone matched her eyes. "Please, Ayato-kun. Just go back to the Tree and forget you ever saw us."

"I already said that I'm not going to report this to Aogiri," Ayato said firmly. "But I'm not going to leave, either."

"What do you mean, you won't leave?" Touka demanded. "You aren't saying that you're leaving Aogiri Tree, are you?"

"Of course I'm not leaving the Tree, Aneki," Ayato said, like it should have been blatantly obvious. "But I'm joining your little group, or whatever the hell this is. I'm not going to leave Hinami here alone."

I beamed, while Touka looked dismayed, and reached over the table to offer my hand. "Welcome to the club!"

_Don't make me hurt you. That would hurt Touka-chan and Hinami-chan. I don't want to hurt them._

Tsukiyama cleared his throat. "Ah, Nagachika-kun. If we may begin now?"

I retracted my hand, Ayato having shaken it reluctantly. "Of course, Tsukiyama-kun. Where is Hori Chie? Wasn't she supposed to come too?"

"Ah, Little Mouse ran into some... difficulties. She's given me the information to pass on to you instead," Tsukiyama said, waving a small flash drive. I thought back to the flash drives I had obtained from Kanou's lab, itching to look through them. I hadn't had the time lately, but the information on them could be unprecedentedly valuable to me. "It's about Kanou's residence. Or rather, _residences._"

I took the flash drive, which seemed absurdly heavy considering it was so small. It was all in my head, probably, but as Uta passed me a laptop-- my personal laptop, with firewalls designed by me, and top-notch security-- and plugged the flash drive in, I couldn't help but think so. After being scanned for viruses, it automatically opened up the file library, and I selected sideshow format.

The first thing to pop up was, unsurprisingly, a photograph. It was of a building, the grey walls and office-like exterior commonplace in Tokyo. The next thing was a document, explaining the photograph.

"It says that the building is not another of Kanou's labs, but an apartment building. There's an apartment there he keeps under a false name, but he isn't seen there regularly. She _does_ have pictures of him coming and going though..." I announced. "And an apartment number, with it's location in relevance to the picture."

Itori raised an eyebrow.

"It'll give it to the dwarf, she can collect information decently," Itori admitted. "Is there anything else?"
"A copy of financial statements stating the day the apartment was signed. It was paid for upfront, with cash, roughly a month ago. Before then, it seems that he had other apartments, and switched them monthly."

"Which means he'll only be there for a short while longer," Hinami said worriedly. "Niichan, does that mean that we'll attack the apartment soon?"

"No. We won't attack the apartment," I said firmly. "Too risky, too many civilians, and fighting in close quarters is never good."

"What are you planning to do, then, Hide-kun?" Touka asked, her hands clasped around her coffee cup.

"We can't wait until Kanou moves apartments," Banjou said, and he looked surprised and a little unnerved when Nico nodded his agreement.

"Kanou might destroy information before he moves. This is a chance we can't afford to miss out on."

"I know. I wasn't planning on missing out on it," I assured, but didn't elaborate.

Uta laughed. "Oh dear, I can see the gears turning in your head. What do you have planned, then, Hide?"

I smiled slowly. "Souta. Infiltration is your specialty, isn't it?"

"It is," Furuta said, after a brief pause. "Why?"

"Because, the way I see it, all we need is information from Kanou's apartment, right?" I paused. "So, we send you in, you pick the lock, get the information from his computer and get out."

"That seems... boringly simple." Roma said disappointedly.

"Murphy's Law, Roma," I reminded her, and when she met my eyes with a bored expression I made sure that my tone was lightly threatening. "If anything can go wrong, it will. So it's best to keep it simple, where less can go wrong. After we get the information, though..." I grinned sharply. "We'll go back to picking off his labs. Eventually, we'll raid his apartment, and get him there, too. Soon, Kanou will start making mistakes, like a cornered rat. He'll pull out all of his resources, start scrabbling for a shred of hope in the despair we'll cause. When he realizes there is none, that's when we'll crush him."

Roma laughed. "Maybe I was wrong to think you've gone soft! It seems you're as much of a sadist as ever! All right, Pierrot. I'll wait a little longer."

After everyone had left, I held Nico back for a moment. "The Fifth Ward... how is it doing?"

Nico smiled, and his lipstick gleamed. "Don't worry. We've still got full control over the ward. The Doves are still placid, but Aogiri is still retaliating. We've got them under our thumb, though. Any of
the Tree that sets foot inside the Fifth Ward doesn't make it back out."

I nodded. "Good. Make sure to keep it that way."

"Of course, boss," Nico said, with a grin.

When Nico left, I sat down and plugged the flash drives I had acquired from the raid we had conducted on Kanou's lab, drumming my fingers as the first, the data on the synthetic meat, loaded through. I scanned the documents briefly, finding that the experiment's status was labeled as *Complete*. It seemed as though it was, too; there was a detailed process for making the meat, instructions on how to inject the desired amount of RC Cells, and a short design brief and multiple lab reports. I only skimmed those for the moment, before I ejected the drive, satisfied, and plugged in the next one. My heart beat in my chest so fast I was sure Touka-chan could hear it, but she didn't say anything or even look towards me, from where she had wordlessly started cleaning up the dishes from the meeting.

"Touka-chan?"

"What is it, Hide-kun?"

I hesitated, but continued anyways. "Kosaka Yoriko... your friend from high school? Do you still talk with her?"

I couldn't see Touka's face, but her shoulders tensed as she washed the cups mechanically. "Of course not. I haven't talked to her since the Anteiku raid."

"She works at a bakery a few blocks from here."

A cup crashed in the sink, shattering. Touka turned to me, eyes wide."*What?*"

"You should go and see her sometime. I'm sure she misses you," I said, watching the loading bar gradually creep towards one hundred percent.

"How do you know where she works? Is she okay?" Touka demanded.

"The kids stopped by for a snack, and I recognized her. She recognized me, too, but I hadn't thought she would. It was a bit of a hassle, but since she only ever saw me at Anteiku, she knew me as Nagachika, so it worked out okay. Anyways, she's doing fine, or at least it seemed like it."

Touka's expression was hard to read, a jumble of emotions. Finally, she turned back to the sink, and she said after a long pause, "...I'll think about it."

"Don't make the same mistake Kaneki did, Touka-chan. Don't push your friends away. It only hurts you both."

The jump drive finished loading and pulled up in a files tab. With a shaking hand, I opened the files, not prepared in the slightest for what awaited me. The first seemed like a lab report, or a journal
Experiment 049 has not displayed any adverse side effects yet, and has been deemed to be taking the surgery well. It is the only of the experiments that survived the kakuhou transplant. Success rate is set at less than .00322%, compared to the original experiment's success rate, which was approximately .0016%. RC Cells were tested and recorded for a 95% genetic match. The unusually high number is speculated to be the result of the test-tube/incubation birth, making the experiments roughly the same genetically as identical twins, despite the RC Type being different. Only two RC Types were produced, Bikaku and Ukaku, with an estimated fifty-fifty dispersal of the types. The mother donor was a Bikaku RC Cell Type, with its parents RC Cell Types being Bikaku and Ukaku.

I read the same paragraph over again, the words not quite registering. The only of the experiments. Plural. More than one experiment. Since when was I not the only experiment? Surgery?

I read through the papers, my stomach doing sickening lurches when I finished them, my head pounding and my thoughts swimming. I stood, staggering, and made my way into the bathroom, slumping down next to the toilet and throwing up the coffee I had drank, which did not taste nearly as good coming back up as it had going down.

"Hide-kun?"

Touka was beside me, for a brief moment, but she stayed only to set a cup of water down beside me. It didn't take a genius to figure out what she was leaving to do, but I couldn't bring myself to care. She could read the papers if she liked; I wouldn't stop her. My fingers were numb, my body was numb, my entire being ached dully, and there was a sharp pain in my head.

Not the only... experiment...

"What the fuck?" Touka hissed from the living room, and I didn't respond, drawing my knees to my chest and resting my forehead against them. "Hide-kun, I don't understand the science shit, but-- are these papers saying what I think they're saying?!

"They are," I said, but it came out as a barely audible whisper. My hands clutched at my head, the pain unbearable. "They are."

"Kanou-- that absolute piece of shit-- how can he do that to children? No, not even kids- babies. Breeding them for-- for spare parts? How many kids died before you were made?!" There was a slamming-- it was Touka's hands on the bathroom wall. She looked equally furious and horrified.

"Six hundred and twenty-five," I said hoarsely. "That was how many fetuses were conceived. Five of them never made it to the nine-month mark, but at the nine-month mark, half of the remaining infants were Ukaku-RC Type positive, half Bikaku, with an almost perfect fifty percent dispersal rate. The Ukaku half had their kakuhous extracted-- they didn't survive it. The Bikaku infants underwent the half-ghoulization surgery. Of the three hundred and ten infants that underwent the procedure, I was the only survivor. That's approximately a .00322% chance of success." The words burned my throat, like scalding acid. My eyes were hot. "Touka-chan, I was the only survivor."

The sharp pains in my head grew stronger, and when the black began to creep in at the edges of my vision, I let myself drown in it eagerly. Never before had it felt so good to stop thinking, stop feeling.

Stop existing, even for a short period of time.
I woke up screaming, with the distant memory of a dream about blinding white lights and a baby wailing on my mind, clouding my thoughts, making everything muddled and foggy. The only thing on my mind was Kanou, the experiment, I wasn't the only one--!

A sudden shaft of light was opened in the dimly lit room, and a hand descended on my shoulder, and abruptly coming to my senses, I snapped my mouth shut and cut the scream off. My heart was racing, my vision blurred and hot, and my throat was thick. I had to blink a few times and swipe at my eyes for my vision to clear enough to see Touka, her eyes dark and worried, standing above me. I was laying on what had to be her bed, I realized distantly, in a dimly lit room that had to be her bedroom, the only light coming from the door she had opened when she entered.

"Hide-kun."

I tried to speak, but nothing came out, and my vision blurred again.

"Hide-kun!" Touka's voice seemed far away, distant, but her worry was evident. "If you can't pull it together, I'm going to have to call K--Sasaki-san to pick you up!"

_Do it, then, I thought vacuously. I want Haise._

"Oh, damn it, I'm calling him. He's been calling you all night, you know!" Touka said, but she wasn't angry in the slightest. The worry that saturated her tone was plain as day. A hand reached into my pocket and grabbed my phone, the screen blindingly bright in the room, and a moment later Haise's voice, distraught and panic-stricken, came through it.

"Hide? Are you alright?! Where are you?!"

"It's not Hide-kun, Sasaki-san. It's Kirishima Touka, from :re."

"Kirisima-san? Why do you have Hide's phone?" Haise paused. "Is he hurt?!"

"He's not alright, that's for sure," Touka said quietly. "Sasaki-san, listen. I'm a pretty good friend of Hide-kun's lately, and earlier tonight, he--" Touka faltered for a moment, then continued. "--he got some bad news. Family. I don't know what to do anymore. Can you come?"

Haise didn't hesitate, not even for a second."Where are you?"

"I live above :re. One of my waiters will let you in."

"I'll be there soon," Haise vowed, and then the line went dead.

Touka placed my phone on the desk, and turned back to me, her lips pressed into a thin line. "You could have that, right?"

I nodded, but it was like I was a doll, just doing as I was asked. I had heard their conversation, but I didn't register anything. Didn't register anything, not when Touka left and I was alone in the dim bedroom, not until there were rapid footsteps on the stairs and Touka's front door flew open, and Nishiki stood next to Haise, whose hair was windblown and eyes were wild.
"He's in there," Touka said, and I thought maybe she had gestured to her bedroom. "But Sasaki-san... it's not pretty."

Haise didn't listen, walking past her and into the room where I sat, grey eyes wide and sad. He didn't say anything at first, moving to sit beside me and draping an arm hesitantly around my shoulder.

"Hide..."

"Haise," I whispered, and my hands fisted in his shirt, my arms draped around his neck, and my vision blurred again. My chest ached, and I wished that I hadn't woken up again, had stayed like I had been.

Because breaking was a terrible thing.

Chapter End Notes

Hide, despite how he might seem, is still human. Everybody has a breaking point, and Hide finally reached his. He'll be okay, though: things are always stronger mended than before. And, relationships (working ones) have to go both ways-- it wouldn't be healthy for Haise to always rely on Hide. Now, it's the other way around.

As a bit of information on my numerical information:

Kanou's kakuhou transplant surgery with a Rize-base has a success rate of .0025%, meaning they got three successes (though Kanou considered two to be inferior) for 1200 bodies (or 400 bodies for one success). With a Yoshimura-base, a success rate is even lower, but exact figures aren't known. The data I've given means that during the first year, he produced 625 fetuses, five of which died before fully developed, leaving 620. Half of those infants were bikaku, half rinkaku, giving the experiment a roughly fifty-fifty dispersal of the mother's RC type (going off of the assumption that RC Cells can skip generations and the mother carried both of the [grand]parents RC Cell types). But the surgery only has a success of approximately .00322%, so for every 310 bodies, only 1 survives. And since infants have a very small amount of blood in their bodies, it's highly unlikely that they would survive long enough for the surgery would be completed, let alone survive long enough to regrow a kakuhou.

If there are any questions, feel free to ask! I don't bite (actually as a kid I used to).

Tell me what you thought? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hide fell asleep again, and Haise decided it was a good thing when, dismayed, he noticed that his shoulder wasn't damp with tears-- it was positively soaked.

"What kind of bad news," Haise asked Kirishima quietly, who had entered the room and stood in the doorway, "does this to a person?"

Kirishima hesitated. "That's... it's not my story to tell. When Hide wakes up, he can tell you himself, if he feels up to it."

"Ah... of course," Haise said, but he was faintly disappointed. "I understand. Thank you, Kirishima-san."

"No, I'm sorry to have called you out so late," Kirishima smiled sadly. "Hide-kun, Uta-san, and Itori-san have become good friends of mine recently, and when Hide-kun got the bad news, Uta-san and Itori-san had just left. He... fell asleep, and I thought that I'd let him crash here until morning, but he woke up screaming, and... well, I owed at least this much to him."

"Owed him? For what?" Haise asked curiously, shifting a little and making a soothing noise when Hide protested in his sleep.

Kirishima blinked, like she hadn't meant to let that slip. "Well... Hide-kun gave me some good advice over an old friend of mine, and he inadvertently helped me reunite with my little brother."

Haise smiled. "That sounds like Hide, all right. I hope it was a pleasant reunion."

"Well, we fought it out, and we're on a little bit rough terms," Kirishima admitted. "But we talked, and that's more than we had done in a long time. Ayato is just as stubborn as I used to be, but he's actually mellowed out a little," Kirishima laughed a little.

The name struck a chord with Haise, and it brought to mind a teenage boy with startlingly dark blue hair and eyes to match, leading Hinami away by her hand.

"...Hinami-chan's boyfriend?"

"Her boyfriend?" Kirishima looked dismayed. "They didn't tell me that!" She groaned and shook her head. "Yeah, well, that's him. Anyways, you can leave him here until morning, if you want. It's... better than waking him up again."

"Thank you for your offer, Kirishima-san," Haise said sincerely. "But I'm going to take Hide home. The k-- our subordinates, they're worried about him, and our bosses too. They're all back at the Chateau, waiting for him to come back home."

Kirishima smiled, and Haise thought, not for the first time, that it looked a little bit sad. "I see. Well then, safe travels."

"I can... help you carry him downstairs," The waiter that had showed Haise upstairs, with orange-brown hair and glasses, offered. "Nagachika can't be that light."
They don't know I have a ghoul's strength. They don't know what I am.

Haise smiled at them, standing and sliding an arm under Hide's knees and shoulders, lifting him up and cradling him as Hide's head lolled, like a rag-doll's.

"It's okay. I'm a Ghoul Investigator, remember? Hide isn't very heavy to me."

"Alright," The waiter said gruffly, sticking his hands into his pockets with a shrug. "Tell Nagachika to stop by when he's feeling better. He owes me a coffee after this shit."

It should have been rude, the manner of speaking, but Haise got the feeling it wasn't meant to be, not really.

"I'll tell him," Haise promised, starting down the steps and out of the cafe, to where the car was parked.

"Drive safe!" Kirishima called, waving.

"I will! Thank you, again!" Haise responded, maneuvering Hide's limp form into the passenger seat and snapping the seat belt in place. He followed soon after, sliding the keys into the ignition and beginning the drive home, through the still-bustling streets of Tokyo.

Let's go home, Hide.

When I woke up, I was alone, and there was the unmistakable sound of hushed voices coming from downstairs. It took me a minute to comprehend my surroundings, but I had slept without dreams, and it was easier to think. Things always look better in the morning, I supposed, but the knowledge still left me feeling ill and lethargic, although now it was to a more manageable extent. I rubbed at my eyes, grimacing when I felt salty tear tracks. I probably looked terrible.

A fact proven when I stood up and made my way into the bathroom quietly, with a fresh set of clothes and a mind to clean myself up before thinking about facing whatever awaited me downstairs. I stared at the mess that was my reflection-- my skin was pale, though my eyes weren't red, but they probably had been, and the skin wasn't puffy anymore, but the dried salt from the tear tracks remained and there were dark shadows underneath my eyes as well-- thinking that I should have been more disappointed in myself for showing my true emotions to Touka and Haise, but the apathetic sluggishness blunted it and made it rather hard to feel anything.

I unbuttoned the shirt from the previous night, folding it mechanically and setting it on the counter. My skin seemed too pale, and I reached around, tracing the scar around my shoulder blades. I had seen it before, but Kanou had always said that it was from an examination on my ukaku, in which they had accidentally given me too many RC Suppressants, which was what had left the scarring. I had accepted it as the truth without question.

What a fool I was.
I shrugged on the new shirt, buttoning it quickly to hide the accursed scar, and I slipped on a tie as well. A fresh pair of slacks were also donned, and I ran the water on a low setting as I washed my face, so as to not be noticed. I ran a damp hand through my hair, fluffing it back properly and ridding myself of bedhead. The shadows under my eyes and the unusual paleness of my skin couldn't be helped, so I called it good and took a deep breath to steady myself before I opened the door to the bathroom and started downstairs. Just as I turned to begin my decent of the stairs, I almost literally ran into Haise, who looked tired and worried, and carried a cup of coffee that smelled freshly made.

His eyes widened. "Hide! You're awake!"

I offered him a smile that was difficult to pull off and from the looks of it, didn't fool Haise in the slightest. "Yeah. Sorry about last night."

"Don't be sorry," Haise said firmly, eyes set and determined, if still shadowed by worry. "How do you feel, though?"


"You're lying," Haise said flatly. "You aren't fine in the slightest, but I won't pry until you're ready to talk. I meant to be there when you woke up, but I had to go cook breakfast. Speaking of, everybody's downstairs eating, and they're all worried about you."

"I'm headed down there now," I replied, the smile slipping off my face. Thank you, Haise. "But... I really am sorry, for making you worry, and for making you get out so late."

"Don't even mention it," Haise's tone was almost fierce. "It wasn't any issue at all. I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He reached out and gave me a one-armed hug, careful not to spill the scalding liquid in his other. "Come on, I'll pour you a mug of coffee downstairs. Everything looks brighter after coffee."

I smiled, just a slight upward twitch of my lips, and Haise looked a little bit less worried as he reached out and ruffled my hair fondly.

When I emerged downstairs, I did a double-take. Mutsuki, Saiko, Shirazu, and Urie were sitting around the table, eating breakfast-- that was no surprise. What was a surprise was the fact that Akira and Kishou Arima sat with them, eating breakfast like it was a mundane occurrence.

"Ah, I forgot to tell you... I called Akira-san and she called Arima-san when I couldn't reach you. I thought Akira-san might have known where you were, and... maybe she thought Arima-san might know?" Haise said quietly, discreetly.

Not discreet enough, apparently, because in a split-second a blur of blue pigtails flew at me with the clattering of silverware sat carelessly on the table. I didn't have any time to brace myself as Saiko threw her arms around my waist, tight enough that she could have been a belt.

"Papa!"

I ruffled her hair fondly, with a smile that wasn't forced. "Miss me, Saiko?"

"Hide-san!" Shirazu said, at the same time as Mutsuki, though they didn't seem to notice.

Urie didn't say anything, but he met my eyes briefly, and I was adept enough at reading his expressions to see something like a glimmer of worry. Or maybe genuine irritation.

"Are you feeling better, Nagachika?" Akira asked, setting her fork down and eyeing me with
nothing but genuine concern, which was touching.

Arima waited until last to speak, and even then it was only a simple, courteous, "My condolences. The news you received must have been terrible."

I was no fool. The only reason Arima had probably came was the fact I was a half-ghoul that had gone missing, possibly of my own free will. Still, it was odd that he had stayed, even after I had been brought home, and a little gratifying that the CCG's Reaper came all the way here for me. Maybe he was intrigued, still, from our little sparring matches, just after I had 'turned'?

"Thank you for your well-wishes, everyone, but I'm okay now, I promise," I said, smiling. "I suppose I just needed a little time to cope."

"What kind of news was it, Papa?" Saiko asked, as Haise slipped past me and into the kitchen, only to reemerge with a new mug for me, which I accepted with a grateful smile.

The thought that came from the darkest part of my mind was so quick it almost blindsided me.

*Lie. Lie to them, like you always do. You're Kanou's son, you can do it. You can weave a flawless lie.*

*I don't want to lie to them, I thought miserably. But I have to, don't I?*

Then I hesitated, wondering what sort of story I should give them. I didn't want to lie to them, any more than I had to, and as the saying went, there was a grain of truth in every lie. A brief reconciliation with my surgical knowledge later, I had thought of a somewhat truthful story.

"You don't have to tell us, if it's too hard," Haise assured me, interpreting my hesitation as grief-induced.

I smiled at him, but it seemed harder to pull off than normal, maybe a little dulled. "No, it's fine. I can tell you. I... I was looking through some old newspaper clippings of my parents that Touka-chan had happened to stumble across, and when I did, I found out some... unpleasant knowledge about my birth. I had a twin, apparently, that didn't live for very long after birth, and my lungs collapsed. My father made the decision to use my twin's organs in a lung transplant-- one that he preformed." I swallowed around the bile that rose in my throat and the anger that began to bubble under my skin, washing away my apathy and reviving me, like water for a man dying of dehydration. I took a long drink of my coffee, the familiar taste of Haise's brew helping me calm down and get the reins on my emotions. "I hadn't even known that I had a twin, let alone that his organs are in me."

The scars on my shoulders burned like fire.

"Are those... where your scars are from? I thought they might look like surgery scars, but...?" Haise asked quietly, reaching a hand out, as if to touch my shoulder blades and trace my scars, then paused, as if realizing that such a gesture might be improper with company sitting at the same table.

Arima's lips might have twitched, maybe just a split-second. "How do you know what his scars look like, Haise?"

Haise flushed, and withdrew his hand. I almost laughed. The most feared Dove was sitting at my table, teasing my boyfriend. Uta would never believe it-- Itori would have a field day.

I nodded in response to Haise's question, laughing bitterly. "It is. I'd always been told that it was from a lung transplant when I was an infant, but I had never known the rest of it. What a fool I am, taking that at face-value and never questioning it."
"It's in a child's nature to take the word's of the parents as truth without question, however foolish such an act may be," Urie said, his expression appearing bored. *It isn't your fault,* he was saying, in a slightly offending way, which was heartwarming in itself.

"Don' beat yourself up about it," Shirazu agreed. "Haven' a secret like that kept from ya... It ain't somethin' that happens normally, ya know?"

"It isn't your fault," Mutsuki said, in the quiet but reassuring way of his. "I wouldn't have... I wouldn't have ever suspected such a thing either, if I were you."

"They're right you know, Nagachika," Akira said sternly. "Something like that isn't your fault, nor could it have been something that you could have changed. You aren't a fool, but blaming yourself is a foolish act. And forgive my bluntness, but you're smarter than that, so quit acting stupidly."

I blinked. "I... thank you, Akira-san. I think I needed that. Actually, thank you, all of you."

"It's what we're here for, Hide," Haise said, with a soft smile that made my heart do funny things.

"You've supported us out a lot, Hide-san," Shirazu added firmly. "Now, it's time for you to let us return the favor."

In the end, we all rode to the CCG Headquarters together, opting to take the train rather than taking the car, which wouldn't fit us all anyways. Haise and the kids tried to get me to remain at home, but I was firm in my decision.

"I'd rather not be alone with my thoughts. Working will take my mind off of it," was all I said, and they let the matter be.

I took a deep breath before I entered the building, the folder in my hands tight. The information from my 'informant', which was actually the information Hinami had collected, was contained in it. Haise had a similar copy, our reports matching perfectly, and each of the Quinx had their own reports, detailing their findings. We had already compared them at home, swapped information, but at the meeting our findings would be reported as separate findings by two speakers.

I mused the findings as we parted from Akira and Arima and found our seats in the meeting room. Shirazu had opted to swap seats with me, and folders, so that Haise and I could do the run-down, which I wasn't very happy about. Urie and Mutsuki had discovered the link between Rose and the Tsukiyama family, thanks to some kind and loose-lipped ghouls-- a raid was imminent, now-- and one of them should have given the run-down over their findings. But they had both declined-- Mutsuki I understood a bit, but I couldn't fathom Urie's reasons.

I had told them I wouldn't send a warning, but perhaps I should. They were ready to evacuate at any moment, I knew, and they had spies watching our every move for when we were ready to make our move. But would it be enough? Maybe--

A hand ghosted over my cheek, almost insubstantial, and then it fell to grasp my hand underneath the
table. I blinked, and found myself looking at Haise, who smiled at me, just a small thing, and he
winded his fingers through mine.

"Hide. You said you wanted to come to work to take your mind off things, and not think too hard
about them, but I can see the gears turning."

I smiled. "I guess I was thinking pretty hard, wasn't I?"

"Be careful. I heard it was dangerous, that."

I gave him a flat look as Haise smiled innocently. "Not funny. Well, okay, it was pretty funny. But
still."

Haise's smile turned into something just a bit cheekier, and he released my hand, falling into a
perfectly professional pose as Ui and the S1 Squad filed into the room, their own folders in hand.
They were seated silently, and Ui laced his fingers, eyes dark and serious. When they weren't, I
wouldn't know.

"Alright. Fill us in on Operation Mask."

Haise stood up first, clearing his throat and flipping his file folder open. "First Class Nagachika and I
covered the Fifth Ward, where we engaged a young pair of ghouls and gained the following
information: an unknown ghoul, most likely the Rose ghoul who lead the attack on us, hired a group
of Aogiri Tree ghouls as manpower to attack us. Aogiri and Rose are only bound by monetary ties at
the moment, although it may be liable to change. The Rose ghoul's motives for attacking us
specifically are unknown."

He sat down, and I stood, skimming over the reports again as I did so.

"Rank 1 Mutsuki and Rank 1 Urie conducted an investigation in the Sixth Ward, but the ghouls there
are unusually high-strung and fled as soon as unfamiliar faces-- rather, masks-- appeared. However,
after a period of time, they did get some ghouls talking, and the Rose ghouls are servants of the
Tsukiyama Family. Rank 2 Yonebayashi and Rank 2 Shirazu's investigation was more fruitful in a
widespread information sense. They gained the following information:--" I walked to the white board
and drew a large map of Chiyoda and the surrounding wards. "--18 is Triple Blades' territory, so it's
Aogiri; 21 and 22 are fighting for leadership and are unstable; 7 revolted and ghouls are on high
alert; 5 is stable and relatively calm; and lastly, a ghoul called Shachi and his party controlled 6 in the
past, but someone else is calling the shots now. Their identity is unknown."

I sat down, and I stood, skimming over the reports again as I did so.

"I suppose the operation can be considered a success, then!"

"I'd classify it as one, information-wise," Ui said dryly, like he'd rather swallow acid than admit we
did something right. "But you've clearly overlooked one detail in order to be so happy. The
Tsukiyama family is involved in everything. If we were to take them out, it would cause a major
economic crisis. And we aren't even sure that the information First Class Sasaki and his squad
gathered is correct. We'll need to bring this to the Chairman and the Director before we can even
make a move, but our first move after that should be to order RC Level testing for everyone in the
Tsukiyama family."

"There are RC Level tests that prove the Tsukiyama family is human-- the copies of the papers
are in your folder-- but they've been identified as forages, and poor ones at that." Haise said, and Ui
nodded reluctantly.

"I agree," Furuta chimed, speaking for the first time. "First Class Sasaki has a point. We don't need to test their RC Levels at this point, although we should test the higher-ups in the Tsukiyama Corporation. If we draw the blood with an eyewitness we trust-- say, one of us-- and have a CCG doctor draw and test the blood with no outside interference, there isn't any chance of contamination."

Ui nodded again, looking thoughtful for a brief moment before he continued. "First Class Sasaki, First Class Nagachika. Go and see the vice-president of the Tsukiyama group and run it past them-- and to be safe, the board of directors, too. We want to avoid a major economic crisis, after all, but they'll need to be tested for they're RC Levels. In fact, everyone in the Tsukiyama parent company and affiliates will, but myself and the S1 Squad will handle the testing." His eyes were hard. "See to that as soon as the meeting is dismissed. We don't want the truth to spread to the public, however, so go unarmed and out of coat-- if worst comes to worst, you two have the best control over your kagune, and we don't want to alert the media of our investigation. Be discreet about it, and make sure that your firm in enforcing that no information may be leaked. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Haise and I said, perfectly and unintentionally in sync. "Understood."

"The meeting is dismissed, then. I'll run the information gathered by the Chairman and the Director, to get the approval for a raid." Ui announced, and there was the scraping of chairs and the rustling of papers that filled the room as we began packing up and putting together our notes. Ui and the S1 Squad-- after a bright, air-headed wave in our direction from Ihei-- departed first, and soon after they did, Saiko tugged on my coat sleeve worriedly.

"Papa, will you and Maman really be okay, going weaponless?"

"We can come with you, if you want us too," Mutsuki offered quietly.

Haise gave them a reassuring smile. "Hide and I will be fine. You heard Ui-- we have the best control over our kagune, and if it came down to a fight, we have the best regeneration, too."

*Ui's sending us weaponless, rather than any of you, because we're more expendable than you are. We're true half-ghous, true monsters, in his eyes,* I thought, but said "And you know it's true, if Ui said it! Come on, guys, you've seen us fight! We'll be fine!"

Shirazu grimaced, like he was re-imagining our latest sparring match, when I had thoroughly beaten him black and blue. "Yeah, we have. Both of ya 'ill be fine, I know it."

I ruffled his hair fondly. "See? Just have some faith in us, like Shirazu does! We'll be fine and back home before you know it!"

Mutsuki hesitated, but Saiko smiled, and Urie just nodded mutely, the only recognition he gave that he heard and acknowledged our conversation.

"Come on, Mucchan, Shiragin," Saiko said, pulling on Mutsuki's hand and leading him away, towards the door, leaving Shirazu and Urie to follow her. "There's a crepe cart near the train station! I wanna get one!"

"Saiko!" Mutsuki called, with a fond exasperation, as Saiko pulled him into the elevator. "Slow down!"

"Stay safe!" Shirazu called, before the elevator doors closed, and Mutsuki and Saiko chimed in with equally heartfelt calls.
But the one that made me smile the most was probably the barely audible "...Be careful," that Urie muttered.

I grinned, and it was a true smile. Surrounded by the Quinx and Haise... it was easy to forget.

"Hey, Haise?" I said quietly, as we rode the crowded train in side-by-side, opting to stand together rather than take a seat separately, our quinques and coats long since left behind us on our desks.

"What's wrong, Hide?"

I hesitated, thinking back to the Serpent fight and the Auction Raid and deciding that I hated Ui with every molecule of my being. "If... If it comes down to a fight, would you let me handle it?"

Haise's eyes, which had been the soft, open, dove-feather grey, suddenly hardened and narrowed.

"Hide... Is this because of what happened at the Serpent fight? And the Auction Raid?" Haise asked, eventually, his tone barely even.

"Kind of," I admitted.

Haise closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he spoke. When he did, it was even and measured, but completely devoid of emotion, like he had been over this conversation over and over in his head already. Like he was speaking a prerecorded message, practiced again and again.

"I understand. I'm sorry. I was expecting this. If my losing control frightens you, then I'll call Ui-san and have him assign you a new--"

"Haise!" I protested, taken aback by the sudden change of pace and tone. "Did you really think that was what I meant?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Haise's voice was still the same even, measured, emotionless tone, but he hadn't opened his eyes. "It's understandable. When I lose control I--"

"Haise. Stop that," I scolded. "Really, I told you this after the Serpent fight, didn't I? I'm not afraid of you in the slightest, you idiot. I'm concerned for your safety and well-being, because every time you have to use your kagune, I know it brings up unpleasant memories-- and after any fight that requires you to use it, you always come out battered. That doesn't happen to me, about the memories, so that's why I wanted you to let me handle it."

Haise met my eyes now, and his gaze was incredulous. "Hide. Was that really why you didn't want me to fight? It wasn't... because you didn't trust me?"

"I trust you with my life," I said seriously, then sighed. "Really, Haise. I'll say it however many times it takes to convince you I'm telling the truth. I'm not afraid of you."

Haise smiled, genuinely, and I thought that maybe for a second as his free hand found mine at our sides that his eyes looked a little watery. But he blinked at it was gone, and he laughed, a small but
true thing that made me smile.

"Hide... I'm not a damsel in distress, you know. I want to fight to protect you."

"I know," I said, giving his hand a squeeze, and I meant it. "You've got my back, and I've got yours. Always."

"Always," Haise agreed, with another bright smile that made my heart flutter.

*I'll protect that smile. Always.*

Chapter End Notes

It's never outright said, but...

Hide's breakdown has been a long time in the making. Yes, his new conscience has a part to play in it-- he's subconsciously feeling guilty because he essentially made Anne an orphan, and for all of the terrible things he's done to Ken/Haise-- but it's also due mostly because of the knowledge about Kanou's experiment. Hide's not an idiot; he knew that he couldn't have been the only experiment. He just assumed he was the only one that made it past the 'development' stage, because that's what Kanou had always told him. And Hide thought it to be true, because if not, why hadn't Kanou made more of him? (The answer to that being the fact it took at least nine years before he could even be put to use.)

What really got him, though, was the fact that an innocent infant was slaughtered and it's organs put into him. It was literally bred for spare parts-- it was never meant to live, or even given the chance to, because it was just an organ donor for him. It's the guilt that maybe if he hadn't been the one to survive, the sins he's committed may have never happened. Ken could have never met him, never been made into a tragedy.

And, deep down, it's the wish that someone else would have survived, too, so he wouldn't be 'one-of-a-kind', and the guilt that he would wish his fate upon someone else. Loneliness, even when you don't realize you're affected by it, can warp your physiological health. And that's what it's done to Hide. He's always grown up different, and if he's being honest, he doesn't want to be.

(Look at all those physiology classes being useful.)
"I can't believe this." The vice-president of the Tsukiyama Group shook his head, burying his face in his hands. "I can't believe Tsukiyama-san and his family are ghouls."

"Things like this aren't normal, and it's only natural to be shocked," Haise assured him. "I'm sorry we had to spring the news on you so suddenly, but our situation is dire. We want to avoid a major economic crisis when we exterminate the ghouls. And you understand that we'll need to test all of your RC Cell levels, as a precaution? And that none of your employees-- and especially your bosses, the Tsukiyama family themselves-- can know about the reason behind the testing?"

The vice-president nodded, face pale and distraught from the disastrous news. "I understand. I'll send out an email to our employees to alert them and say that it's an annual testing."

I nodded, courteous but serious. "We're glad you understand. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Of course," The vice-president said, but I thought he still looked faintly distraught. He was a good actor, but it didn't fool me-- he knew good and well that the Tsukiyama family were ghouls. He wasn't one, I could tell by his smell, but his distress was true. His list of crimes could go on and on if he were to be caught: harboring ghouls; not alerting the CCG to the presence of ghouls; conspiring against the good of humanity. It was endless, and the sentence would be death. "I wish you well on your operation."

"You have our well-wishes, too," Haise said, offering the vice-president a smile before we took our leave. We were lead into the lobby by a secretary, and I stopped to ask, with a charming smile, "Ah, before we leave, miss, may I use the bathrooms?"

The secretary smiled. "Of course. They're just through those doors there," she pointed me in the right direction and I left Haise with her, body language conveying my ease.

When I was inside the bathroom, it changed. The spy that had been tailing me, a young man with semi-long dark hair and dark eyes followed me into the bathroom. With a false yawn and running a hand through my hair to hide my intentions, I scanned the bathroom for cameras. When I found none, I drew a folded stack of papers out of my pocket and shoved it into the hands of the Tsukiyama servant ghoul's hands, holding a finger to my lips, as an extra precaution. I drew my phone out of my pocket and typed quickly,

Those are instructions on how to pass an RC Cell test. Give them to your masters, but warn them: they won't be any use to anybody until you've relocated under a new identity. A raid is imminent, and if you stay, you'll all be dead. Escape while you can.

The ghoul reached out for my phone hesitantly, and once I handed it to him, he typed,

I'm Yuuma, a servant of the Tsukiyama family. Thank you, for saving my masters.

When the phone was given back to my, I typed quickly, conscious of the time I had quickly draining away.

Don't mention it. I'll leave first, so wait a bit before you leave.
Yuuma nodded, dark bangs falling over his eyes. He typed a single, final message before passing me my phone, with a faint upturn of his lips.

_You aren't as cold as they say, Pierrot. You're actually quite kind._

I smiled as I walked out of the bathroom, but it was wry, and I thought, _I'm not kind. I am as cold as they say. But perhaps I'm not quite as cold anymore._

_For better or worse, I wonder?_

I dried my hands on my slacks for show, and Haise gave me an exasperated look.

"Hide, there are paper towels for a reason. And blow dryers. Yet you still chose to use your pants?"

Grinning, I reached up over and ruffled his hair with a still-wet hand, to which Haise batted my hand away with a flat look.

The secretary did her best to conceal a snicker.

My phone rang, two nights later, at five in the morning. I stared at it hatefully with one eye for a few moments, before I tossed the covers off and got out of bed to answer it. Haise rolled over unhelpfully to face the wall, and I threw my pillow at his head as I squinted at the caller ID on the painfully bright phone screen.

"First Class Nagachika. Who am I speaking to?" I asked blearily.

"Special Class Ui. The approval from the Director is in. Stop all investigations and begin the raid preparations. We attack in three and a half weeks. "

The phone went dead and I glared at it, with a mutter of, "Rude."

"We've entered the preparation period of the operation," I announced, hanging up the phone. "The approval from the Director came in. We'll raid in three and a half weeks from now."

"The approval is in already? That was fast." Haise said, blinking and rubbing his eyes tiredly, moving the pillow I had chucked at him back to its rightful place. "And why did Ui-san call so early again?"

"Because he hates us," I said cheerily, shutting off my phone screen and setting it back down on the desk. "Or he has no common sense. Same difference."

"Not really, they aren't," Haise said, rubbing at where I assumed a crick in his neck had formed. Using someone else's arm as a pillow tended to do that, but I didn't mention it. "And that is our boss you're talking about, you know."

"What Ui-san doesn't know won't kill him," I said, waving a hand dismissively. I clicked the desk lap on, reaching into the drawer to pull out a piece of blank paper and my Rose notes. "Anyways,
Haise did, squinting at the paper blankly until I picked up his glasses stuck them on his face, tapping my pencil against my Rose notes. "Look. Rose is mainly consisted of koukakus, right? So, I figured we can start drawing up a new formation for the raid. I want to assess everybody's skills again before we finalize it, though."

"...At five in the morning, Hide?" Haise asked, readjusting his glasses and blinking at the papers. "Can't we do this later?"

"But we're already up now," I protested. "No sense in wasting time."

Haise sighed. "I think another hour of sleep is pretty good incentive, but okay. I don't think I could fall back to sleep now, anyways."

I beamed. "I agree! So then, let's get down to planning, shall we?"

It was easier to smile, now that I pushed all thoughts relating to the news out of my mind. It was easy to do; I submerged myself in work and Haise and the kids, and I didn't think about anybody that could potentially bring up those memories.

Coward, the darker part of my mind whispered. Running from your problems won't solve anything.

I wanted to laugh.

I know running won't solve anything. But I'm not strong enough to face my problems. So I'm running, taking the cowards way out.

Cowardice, huh?

Just one more thing I got from Kanou.

"First Class Nagachika? Can I talk to you for a second?" Furuta asked me the next day, as the Quinx, Haise and I were headed to the training facilities, perfectly courteous and just meek enough to be appropriate for someone of a lower rank, his facade flawless. "It's about the raid."
"Sure, that's fine," I said, smiling and forming a completely false excuse. "Oh, is it about those notes from the meeting the other day?"

Furuta nodded, and I said, "Great! I've got a copy of them at my desk, if you want to follow me there?" Speaking to Haise and the Quinx, now, I said, "Sorry guys! I forgot that I promised Furuta-kun a copy of my notes the other day. Can I catch up with you later?"

"Sure, Hide," Haise said, smiling. "We'll wait for you in the training facilities, okay?"

"Kay!" I gave them a thumbs-up. "It shouldn't take me long!"

"Take your time, Hide-san," Mutsuki assured, adjusting his grip on his bag.

"We booked the trainin' room for all afternoon anyways," Shirazu added, as they walked away. "Ain't like a few minutes 'll matter any."

I kept the smile firmly in place on my face as I lead Furuta to my desk. I shifted through the papers, meticulously organized, and pulled out a copy of my notes, passing them cheerily to him.

"Here you go!"

When the papers switched from my hands to his, Furuta slipped a small flash-drive into my hand, wrapped in a sticky note, on which was written:

_The files from Kanou's. I inserted the bug as told. The computer can be wiped remotely now._

"Thank you, Nagachika-san!" Furuta said, with just as much enthusiastic cheer, although his eyes held something like distaste. I was sure I was the only one who could see it. "I can believe mine got ruined! What are the chances I spill my drink on them?"

"Statistically, pretty large, actually," I said, sticking my hands in my pockets casually and pocketing the flash-drive. "But hey, don't mention it! It's not a problem at all! I've got to go though, Haise and the kids are waiting for me. See you later, Furuta-kun!"

"You as well, Nagachika-san!" Furuta waved, the notes in his hand as I lead Furuta to my desk. I shifted through the papers, meticulously organized, and pulled out a copy of my notes, passing them cheerily to him.

"You're too nice, Nagachika," Akira scolded, as the elevator slid shut behind her. "And is that also your excuse for not being changed yet, and wasting more time?"

"Akira-san," I whined, as Haise muffled a snicker. "I just got here! Besides, look, I'm getting changed!" I declared, discarding my coat and unbuttoning my shirt, then discarding it too.
Underneath my clothes I wore clothes befitting a work-out or exercise, and I left my work clothes in a somewhat neat pile.

"All I hear are excuses," Akira deadpanned, with the scolding mother gaze that froze Haise stiff. "I don't see any training."

Half-expecting her to cuff me over the head, I huffed. "I'm going, I'm going. Hang on a minute, will you? Geez!" Turning to the Quinx and Haise (who wore the same shirt and shorts with leggings combination that he had worn at the Academy) I announced, "Okay! Have you all stretched?"

"We ain't little kids, ya know," Shirazu said flatly.

"Yet we need to nag you to turn in your paperwork on time," Haise teased. "And make sure you get up on time for Sunday meetings. And remind you to take your keys when you leave the house. And make sure the whites and the colors get separated when it's laundry day so that we don't all end up with pink clothes."

"That was one time!" Shirazu protested.

"My favorite shirt is permanently dyed bright pink," Saiko muttered. "And Mucchan's socks. And Uriebo's tie."

"It happened more than once," I agreed. "And you remember what happened when you didn't stretch before our training matches, don't you, Shirazu?"

Shirazu shuddered faintly, and I smirked. "Anyways, I'll take that as a yes, on both accounts. Let's get started, okay?"

"Um, Hide-san?" Mutsuki asked nervously. "Why are we training here, instead of at home?"

"You didn't tell them?" Arima asked, stepping through the elevator doors, a group of nervous-looking younger people-- they had to be newbies, or even still Academy or Junior Academy students-- following behind him.

"We planned it as a surprise," Haise explained, smiling brightly at Arima. "But you didn't tell me you were bringing an entire field trip with you, Arima-san!"

"Carry on as planned," Arima waved a hand, glasses glinting in the harsh industrial lighting. "Just ignore them like we agreed. There were more students that signed up than planned. Apparently a lot of them want to see a real fight."

I laughed. "Well, as close to a real fight as we can get, anyways. It'll be pretty brutal-- are you sure that they're ready for it, Arima-san?"

"Of course they are," Arima said, directing his gaze to the students. "Aren't you?"

Looking terrified but somehow still excited, the students managed to squeak out a mostly-together "Yes!"

"Well, I've got my answer then," I shrugged.

"Papa? Maman? What do you mean, a real fight?" Saiko frowned. "...Why are Arima-san and Akira-san here? And why are the students here with them?"

The students appeared to be thoroughly confused, more so when Haise answered her, unphased by
her affectionate nicknames, which were normal by now. "The students are here to observe our fight as a learning experience. Arima-san and Akira-san are here to supervise because we'll be using our kagune as well as our quinque."

"We're what?" Shirazu choked, eyes widening.

"You guys are going to attack us," I said cheerily. "Haise and I will defend, of course, and attack as well. We need to assess your skill sets again before the Tsukiyama Raid, so there's no holding back. You've got to come at us like your trying to kill us."


"Dead," Haise grinned, and I rolled my eyes.

"Not the time, Haise."

"It's always the right time for puns."

"So you want us to injure you?" Urie interrupted, eyes slitted. "Really hurt you?"

"Well, yeah," I shrugged. "We've all got awesome regeneration, and besides, you don't think it'll be so easy to actually hurt us, do you?"

"...we'll see, won't we?"

"We will indeed!" I agreed, raising my voice so that the Academy students could clearly hear me. "So, quick educational lesson for the students! Pop quiz!" I declared, pointing my finger at Shirazu, who blinked in surprise. "Quinx Squad Leader, Rank 2 Shirazu, what exactly are the Quinx?"

"We're Investigators that've had quinques implanted in us," Shirazu said, still looking a bit confused. "Kagune."

"Exactly!" I said, shifting my finger. "Rank 1 Mutsuki, explain in more detail what the Quinx are!"

Mutsuki swallowed nervously. "Well, we have, uh, kagune. And a kakuhou and kakugan."

"Correct!" I said, then shifted my finger again to land on Urie. "Rank 1 Urie! More Quinx facts!"

"We eat regular food, unlike ghouls, and are roughly twenty-five percent ghoul. Our implanted kakuhous are controlled using a unique frame system made of quinque steel," Urie defined, looking irritated that I was springing questions on them.

"Right as usual! So then, Rank 2 Yonebayashi," I pointed to her, "can you tell me what types of kagune you have?"

"Er," Saiko blinked, like she hadn't expected me to call on her. "I've got a rinkaku. Mucchan-- um, Rank 1 Mutsuki-- he's got a bikaku. Shiragin-- Rank 2 Shirazu-- he's got an ukaku, and Uribo-- Rank 1 Urie-- he's got a koukaku. Maman has a rinkaku, and Papa's got a bikaku. I mean, First Class Sasaki and First Class Nagachika."

One of the students hesitantly raised his hand, and I pointed at him. "You there, in the blue shirt? Shoot!"

"Ah, are you and First Class Sasaki Quinx too?" He asked, and Haise tensed a little. "I mean, if you've got kagune, you've got to be. It's not like you're real ghouls."
Akira, her posture and tone absolutely professional, spoke up. "Nagachika and Sasaki aren't, in fact, ghouls, but nor are they Quinx. They're circumstances are different-- and classified."

"No way," A girl said, suddenly looking fearful, which irked me a little. "You're-- You're real ghouls? You eat people?"

Haise attempted a smile that wouldn't have appeared real to even a stranger, his eyes dark, and he opened his mouth to speak--

"Don't talk about Sassan and Hide-san like that!" Shirazu hissed, eyes as fiery as his hair. "They ain't monsters!"

"Shiragin's right," Saiko said firmly, crossing her arms. "Maman and Papa aren't bad people, not at all, so don't talk about them like they are."

Mutsuki, timidness long vanished for something like a reserved anger, spoke up, his hands clenching in the hem of his shirt. "It doesn't matter if Hide-san and Sasaki are half-ghouls. It isn't-- it isn't their fault, and you don't know anything about them. Please don't say such rude things about people you don't even know."

The girl looked taken aback, and Arima announced, "I thought that Academy students such as yourself would know the proper code of conduct for your superiors. If you find that Haise and Nagachika's presence makes you uncomfortable, I'll send you back to the Academy."

"But Arima-san, the bus isn't supposed to come back for another four hours," a male student commented quizzically.

"You're supposed to be Junior Investigators, aren't you?" Akira said, smiling deviously. "We'll have you work on fitness until the bus comes back. You can run laps around the building. Or, you can stay and observe the fight."

"Well, I want to watch the fight," An oddly familiar voice piped up, and I found myself looking at the oddly pink-haired, pink-eyed Higemaru Touma. Beside him stood none other than Aura Shinsanpei, bangs concealing his eyes. "Hey, Nagachika-sensei! Remember us?"

I grinned. "Of course I remember you! Higemaru-kun and Aura-kun, I still owe you a favor at some point for showing me around campus, don't I?"

"You bet you do!" Higemaru declared. "I'm cashing mine in now, so you better give me a good fight!"

I thought for a moment that Arima might have actually chuckled. Haise seemed almost as surprised, and for a moment the room fell into silence.

"If the fight Nagachika puts up now is anything as good as our sparring matches used to be, I believe it will be more than a good fight." Arima's eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "So, does anyone want to leave?"

*Did the CCG's Reaper just compliment my fighting skills? I think he did. Oh my god, Arima Kishou just complimented my, Pierrot's, fighting skills. This might be the most satisfying thing I've heard in a long time. Uta and Itori won't believe it. I don't believe it.*

Nobody did want to leave, and I couldn't blame them. Akira and Arima could be slave drivers when they wanted to be.
"I believe you have your answer, Nagachika," Arima announced. "Now, how about that fight?"

Chapter End Notes

This is the last official arc. Once it's over, there'll just be another 'small' arc, consisting of a chapter or three of wrapping-up a things and an epilogue. Chapter-wise, I have no idea how many are left, because I don't write by 'chapter'. I have an outline set, and I just kind of fill it in, and when it gets to be too long I cut it and start the next one.

I'm not the best planner.

As a side note, I'm sorry for not updating or responding in the past three-or-so days. I've been taking the last of my finals (college finals are terrible and engineering finals are worse). But hey, everything is over now, and my school has officially let out!

I'm actually kind of disappointed, because I love school. Just not finals. Or getting up at five thirty in the morning.

On the up-side, I should be able to catch up with my update schedule now, so. Yeah.
Chapter 42

Quinque in hand, side by side with Haise, I stood facing the kids and with my back turned to the Academy students. Akira and Arima studied us for a moment, and softly, Arima called, "Begin."

"Offense or defense?" I asked quietly.

Haise gave me a small, almost imperceptible smile. "Offense."

Shirazu moved first, his red and grey kakugan appearing, and with the sound of tearing skin his ukaku erupted from his shoulder-blades, pelting us with a rapid barrage of ukaku shards. Almost as fast, my bikaku tore through the skin of my tailbone, and my kakugan gleamed in the lighting as I deflected every shot that came my way. Haise did the same think with his quinque, with seemingly no effort.

"Come on, Shirazu!" I called tauntingly. "You can do better than that!"

But it wasn't Shirazu who attacked next-- it was Urie and Mutsuki, moving at the same time and striking almost in sync. Mutsuki dove for me, knives ready to slash and stab, but I danced out of his way and switched places with Haise to confuse them. Urie's koukaku would have sliced a long arc down and across Haise's torso, but it never made contact with the skin, my quinque halting it in place and shoving Urie backwards, so that when he stumbled, off-balance, I swung a foot out and tripped him, sending him toppling to the floor. I drove my bikaku down, just next to his head, purposely missing by just a fraction of an inch.

"If this was a fight, you'd be dead!" I declared, leaping up inhumanly high to avoid Mutsuki's knives. One of the Academy students squealed as the knife flew towards them, and my bikaku shot out to bat it away before it could strike them. It clattered harmlessly against the wall. "C'mon, Urie, you can do better than that!"

With an angry "Tsk," Urie got back to his feet, just being missed my another round of Shirazu's ukaku shards, one of which scraped a cut along Haise's arm before I could halt it. Haise didn't even flinch, catching Saiko's quinque by the end of the hammer and swinging her around, sending her spinning in the opposite direction while the cut sewed itself shut.

"Sorry, Haise!" I called, and we swapped places again, just in time for me to send Shirazu flying across the room with a strike of the blunt end of my quinque, bikaku fending off another of Mutsuki's knives. Haise grasped onto my hand for a brief second, and instinctively I hoisted him up a little further as he kicked out in a sweeping arc, catching Urie and sending him flying into a pillar with a painful-sounding noise.

There was the familiar sound of tearing skin again, and suddenly four thin rinkaku tentacles emerged from Haise's lower back. I froze, for a split second, waiting for the onslaught of painful memories and the internal struggle to begin, tensed and ready to catch him when he doubled over, clutching his head and screaming in pain--

It never happened. Haise smiled at me, the kakugan in his left eye gleaming, perfectly at ease. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding, and I smiled at him in return, a genuine, bright smile.

"I'm okay," Haise assured me quietly, stepping around a barrage of kagune shards while I batted a
knife that would have sunk into my collarbone out of the air. "It won't happen again, I think. I'm... okay, now."

"Haise..." I began, speechless, but was cut off abruptly by the ukaku shard buried in my shoulder.

"You always tell us not to lose focus durin' battle, ya hypocrite," Shirazu said, his grin as sharp as his teeth.

Meanwhile, the Academy students were mostly freaking out because of the spray of blood from my shoulder.

"N-Nagachika-sensei!" Higemaru said, horrified, his eyes wide.

I laughed, waving a hand while Haise took over, batting away long-ranged attacks with his kagune and deflecting Mutsuki's rapid-fire barrage of slashes. I reached up and pulled the shard out of my shoulder, dropping it to the ground where it shattered and dissolved into a fine red mist.

"I'm fine! It doesn't even hurt!" I tapped at my shoulder, where despite the frayed and blood-stained hole in the fabric there wasn't even a blemish on my skin to show where a wound had been. "See? All healed up!"

They still looked rather pale and horror-stricken, but I jumped back into the fight regardless, announcing quietly to Haise, "Shirazu won't last much longer, stamina-wise. I'd top it fifteen more minutes. Urie'll last longer, and so will Mutsuki, so we've got to take them out. Saiko's yet to release her attack, which is the only real issue we've got to worry about."

Haise nodded, but didn't say anything until Urie had made his latest attack (yet again targeted at Haise) and we countered. I deflected his attack and Haise sent Urie spinning with a blow across his torso, hard enough to easily bruise ribs. Haise winced a little, like he was the one who had been hurt, but the pained look passed. I thought that he was thinking what I was:

They'll face ghouls who won't show them mercy. We've got to train them for that.

With that thought in mind-- and Haise's expression, however brief-- I said quietly, "Keep Urie occupied when he gets back up. I'll take offense for now and take Mutsuki down."

"Got it. I'll take over defense for now," Haise confirmed, glancing between Shirazu, whose attacks had slowed considerably, and Urie, who was forcing breaths with a hand clutched against possibly cracked ribs.

When Saiko came back for another attack, swinging her quinque like a baseball bat, I ducked out of the way and swapped sides with Haise, leaving him to defend the Academy students and to fend off Saiko's attack.

I struck out with my quinque, but Mutsuki blocked the strike with a determined look, his two knives-- that he didn't carry as throwing knives, Iraft and Abksol-- steady. Accompanied by the same sound, his bikaku emerged, serrated and long, and in a flash he swiped downwards with it. I was forced to leap backwards to dodge it and twist to avoid a slash of one knife. I dropped my quinque and reached out to grab his wrists, twisting them until he released the knives with a hiss of pain. I kicked the knives away and grimaced.

"Sorry, Mucchan."

I hit him with my bikaku, and he went flying, smacking into a pillar near the wall. Wisely, he didn't get up again.
Haise had effectively disarmed Saiko, grabbing her hammer-like quinque and swinging her around at painfully fast speeds until she let go. She landed much more gently, in a dizzy heap, after stumbling a few steps. Shirazu had reached his time limit, and had slumped to the floor where he had been standing, not too far from Urie. His kagune was gone, dissolved back into a fine mist of RC Cells. Similarly, I dismissed mine, seeing Haise had already done the same. I blinked and my kakugan vanished as I walked towards where Haise stood.

Akira sighed. "Well then, I suppose that ends our mock-battle. I'll call in someone to clean up the blood later, but I'll send Shiba down to take a look at you and make sure there's no serious injuries."

"While Akira does that," Arima announced to the Academy students, "do any of you have questions?"

A few hands were raised, hesitant but no longer afraid. Arima called on one of them.

"Sasaki-sensei, Nagachika-sensei, is it true that you can't eat food?"

Haise and I exchanged unsure looks, but Arima said nothing. He was observing our reactions, perhaps. Seeing how well we could handle the situation ourselves seemed like the most likely reasoning behind his silence.

I took the initiative, slinging my arm around Haise's shoulders and grinning, a wide, sunny smile.

"No, we can't. We can drink coffee though, and let me tell you, Haise makes great coffee! And I mean, it's to die for."

I thought that maybe I heard a snicker or a muffled laugh from the group, and I smiled wider. If they could laugh, it meant that they were warming up to us, trusting us a little more. Maybe if they did, Haise wouldn't be quite so hurt from their initial adverse reactions.

"Maman does make really good coffee," Saiko said, rubbing at her eyes like she was still dizzy. "And food. He makes really good food."

"What about me, Saiko?" I said, hurt. "I cook too!"

"It isn't as good as Sasaki's," Mutsuki said, smiling weakly as he made his way back to us, nudging Shirazu with the toe of his shoe gently. "Come on, Shirazu. Get up. You didn't even get hurt."

"I'm tired..." Shirazu muttered. "I'm fine here."

"You sound like Saiko," Urie scolded, one hand still lingering on his ribs, which were probably healed but sore. "Get up."

Saiko laughed. "Slacker-hancho."

"I am not a slacker!" Shirazu protested, and from just in front of the elevator Shiba chuckled.

"It looks like my services aren't needed, but I'll do a check-up anyways. You can keep answering the questions of your fans while I do, though."
Shiba's check-over didn't take long, and he gave us the all-clear without issue. The student's questions were cut short, too, because the bus came to take them back to the Second Academy.

I stretched, rubbing at the crick in my shoulders and sitting down against the metal floor with a pleased sigh. "Well then, Haise, I think our formation will work."

"I think so too," Haise agreed, sitting down next to me, back against the cool steel walls. "We should work on the more physical aspect of training from now on, I think. Running more laps and building up more stamina and muscle strength."

"Stamina is concerning," I agreed. "The attacks need to be more spaced out and coordinated. We should run drills, have them figure out how to approach different attacks."

"Are you going to actually explain any of this, or just sit there and chat about us?" Urie deadpanned.

Haise stopped, looking a little sheepish, and I laughed, explaining. "Ah, sorry. We planned out a battle like this to assess your kagune proficiency, to make sure our current battle formation used all of your assets to the max. It does."

"Mutsuki, since you excel at short-range combat, you'll be taking the vanguard. Urie will support Mutsuki as vanguard-assistance and support Saiko as center-assistance, since you're attacks are also short-range. Saiko, because you're attacks take a long time to begin and are very powerful and essentially one-time use, you'll take the middle, and Shirazu, you'll take the rear, since you're taking command and have long-ranged attacks for general support." Haise said, to give them further details. "We've got about three weeks to prepare for the raid. In that time, your training will focus primarily on more normal physical aspects, rather than kagune. Stamina and muscle strength, endurance."

Saiko made an unhappy noise. "Aw, Papa, Maman... Does that mean more laps?"

"It does," I said, hoisting myself to my feet and tugging Haise to his. I ruffled her hair. "Sorry, kiddo."

Saiko's only response was a grumble.

"Well then," I said, as we emerged into the cooling evening air. "What do you say we go out to eat tonight? It's my treat."

"Can we go to :re?" Shirazu asked, maybe a little too eagerly. I held back a grimace at the name.

It wasn't that I disliked :re or any of the employees-- in fact, I loved that coffee shop, and Touka, Nishiki, and Yomo were close enough to be friends rather than acquaintances. Though, Yomo was almost more of an uncle, with his near-constant presence since my childhood.

Haise laughed, tone teasing. "Well, it's not really dinner. And you just want to see Kirishima-san, Shirazu."
"They do serve food there, though," Mutsuki said quietly. "And it's not far from here. I'd be okay with going."

"I like Kirishima-san's coffee," Saiko said, smiling. "And the bakery Kosaka-san works at isn't far away from :re-- we can go and get dessert afterwards!"

Urie 'tsk'ed. "Is dessert all you think about?"

"No, but I think about food constantly," Saiko teased. "Sweet foods especially, Kuki."

Urie's expression seemed even more deadpan than normal, and Saiko laughed. Mutsuki stifled a chuckle, and Shirazu grinned widely. Haise tried to conceal his amusement, but praised, "You've learned well, young grasshopper." Then, avoiding Urie's venous stare, he added, "So, :re it is, then?"

I shrugged. "Sure, why not? I could use some good coffee."

Haise smiled, that warm smile that gave me the courage to keep walking towards :re even though every single fiber of my being was screaming not to. It wasn't my fight-or-flight instinct, no, this was something else. This was all of my cowardice, screaming at me to run away.

But I twined my fingers through Haise's, and maybe he understood, because through all the time we walked towards :re, listening to Saiko and Shirazu bickering playfully and Mutsuki trying to act as peacekeeper, he never let go of my hand, nor did he say a word when my fingers tightened around his with every step we took closer to :re.

He just held my hand.

Saiko got to the door of :re first, and Shirazu followed her, almost like it was a race to see who could get there first. Mutsuki and Urie followed them slower, with more patience, Mutsuki having given up on playing peacekeeper and resigning himself to following them with an amused smile. The warm smell of :re relaxed me a little as I walked in, waiting for Nishio's gruff, somewhat rude greeting and Touka's warm one--

I flinched as a metal spatula descended on my head in a lightning-fast and painful slap.

"Hide-kun you-- you absolute, fucking idiot!" I held a hand to my wounded head, taken aback by the genuine worry and anger in Touka's voice. Her eyes blazed, and her spatula hovered in the air between us threateningly. "You haven't answered any of my calls, Uta-san and Itori-san are worried sick, and Ayato was ready to march over to the Chateau to kick your ass for making Hinami-chan so goddamned afraid for you. And you couldn't even call us to let us know you were okay?"

I held a hand up defensively, in case she wanted to hit me again. "A-Ah, hey, Touka-chan! I really meant to call, I did, I just--"

"Oh no you don't," Touka waved her spatula at my face. "Do not try to lie to me! You didn't mean to call at all-- you were taking the coward's way out and running away from your problems, and you are better than that, damn you! I took your stupid advice and stopped running from my problems, and I went and I talked to Yoriko, and if I can face my problems then you can too! So stop being such a coward and you march up those steps and you better tell Hinami-chan you're sorry before Ayato tries to kill you! Again! And I won't stop him this time!"

"Hinami-chan is upstairs?" I asked, rubbing the stinging part of my head. "Why is she here?"

Touka gave me a flat glare. "Because you missed coffee yesterday and she was really worried something had happened to you, that's why. She's been here all of today and last night! Now go and
give her a sincere apology for being such a coward! And call Uta-san and Itori-san while you're at it!"

She swatted me with her spatula again until I reluctantly started my way up the stairs, with Touka's angry stare at my back until I disappeared through her door, giving a sigh of relief when I shut the door behind me.

My relief didn't last long, because Ayato punched me so hard that I was pretty sure one of my ribs broken and another fractured. I slumped down against the closed door, wheezing, a hand pressed to the injured bones.

"You asshole," Ayato declared, hands still clenched into fists. "You fucking asshole, making Hinami worry like that."

"Oh... kay..." I waved a hand and fought to catch my breath, every inhale and exhale burning my ribs like fire. "I kind of... deserved that..."

"Niichan!" Hinami wove around Ayato, kneeling next to me, but her lips were pressed into a thin, slightly angry line. At Ayato, I sincerely doubted. "Ayato-kun!"

"He said it himself, Hinami!" Ayato declared, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "He deserved it!"

"That doesn't mean you have to hurt him!" Hinami protested, feeling gently at the spot where Ayato had punched me, and I schooled my expression into a smile, even when the touch send bolts of pain through me. Pain, physical pain, was nothing, bearable. As long as I didn't hurt Hinami any further. "Did Ayato-kun break anything, Niichan? Where are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Hinami-chan," I assured her, mentally taking stock of what had broken. One false rib and one true rib-- my right eight rib was broken and my right seventh rib was fractured. They wouldn't take long to heal, as long as they hadn't broken free of the cartilage that kept them connected. I hauled myself to my feet, offering her a smile that didn't have any traces of pain. "See? Totally fine!"

"Liar," Ayato sniffed. "I know I heard bones break, or else I would have hit you again to break some."

"Ayato-kun!" Hinami huffed, exasperated. "Violence isn't always the answer!"

"Most of the time politics work, although violence is always a good fallback plan," I chimed, touching my ribs gingerly and finding the breaks had mended already, the only thing left a fading soreness. "One of them always works."

"I don't like politics," Ayato said distastefully. "It's just a bunch of cleverly disguised lies and hidden barbs. There's just no point in it, in my opinion. If you're going to insult someone, do it without all the fancy cover-ups."

I laughed. "Much as I hate to agree, everything is easier without the fancy words. But then, in politics, people rarely die. At least, it's not a common occurrence." I smiled, and maybe it was a little sharp. "And it is rather satisfying when you outsmart your opponent, rather than just punch their lights out. The latter is pretty fun too, though."

Hinami shook her head exasperatedly, like she couldn't fathom our thoughts.

"Men."
*the suffix -hancho literally translates to 'squad leader'\

*In case you didn't catch it, Haise and Hide weren't just referring to themselves in 'defense'; they were referring to defending the Academy students from rouge strikes, as well.

*Saiko's pun was in Urie's given name, because it sounds like cookie.

Thanks for reading!
I called Uta and Itori, and let them know I was okay, and we talked for awhile. Nico had held the Ward together, but Aogiri’s attacks on the Fifth Ward’s boarders had become more and more frequent. Roma was getting restless, and Uta wanted to launch an attack on another of Kanou’s labs, this time, two of them at the same time.

"Two birds with one stone," he had said. "Let's hit Kanou hard and fast."

I had agreed, the acidic anger bubbling up in my chest at the thought of the bloodshed I would cause in retaliation.

Then I went downstairs to find that everyone had already finished eating their sandwiches, and Touka was filling up to-go cups of fresh coffee. She thrust one into my hands, smiling.

"Better now, aren't we?"


Touka sighed. "It wasn't a big problem. But don't do it again. You've got people that care about you, idiot."

_I do, don't I? How many other people can say that they've got a ghoul family and friends, and a human-- and Doves, at that-- family and friends?_

"I know I do, Touka-chan," I smiled, genuinely, and perhaps the first true smile since I had learned about the other experiments.

A hand descended on my hair, ruffling it like I was a child. Yomo, in all his silver-haired glory, loomed above me like a mountain.

"You're doing okay, Hideyoshi."

It wasn't a question, and I smiled at him.

"I am."

"I ain't ever seen Kirishima-san so..." Shirazu trailed off, looking faintly terrified as we walked out of Re. We had vetoed to skip out on the bakery, since it was already closed now, according to Touka.

"Scary?" I supplied, with a smile. "You should have seen her as a teenager. She was terrifying."
"Surely she wasn't so bad," Mutsuki said, leather eye-patch gleaming in the glow of the streetlights. "Kirishima-san is so nice."

I shook my head vehemently. "Oh no, she was the most hot-blooded, short-tempered teenager I had ever met-- besides her little brother, Ayato, who had even more anger in an even smaller body. Well, he's taller now, though."

"Hinami-chan's boyfriend?" Haise asked. "He's Kirishima-san's younger brother, right? He seemed plenty mild-mannered when he came to pick her up."

Shirazu looked appalled. "Boyfriend?"

Saiko snickered. "You didn't think you actually had a chance with her, right?"

"Whaddya mean, I didn't have a chance?!"

While they spoke, I answered Haise. "He's mellowed out a bit now, but don't be fooled. He still packs a punch."

"Speaking of, Hide..." Haise hesitated. "Did something break when you were upstairs? It sounded like something hit the wall or the door and shattered."

*My ribs,* I thought wryly. Outwardly, I laughed. "Oh, Ayato-kun just threw a cup at me and I stumbled back into the door to avoid it. I'm alright, but the cup isn't so lucky."

Haise rolled his eyes, smiling. "You kind of deserved it, Hide."

"Haise! You traitor!"

When we got back home, everybody said their good-nights and left for bed, exhausted. Haise and I trudged up the stairs after Saiko had, ready to change and sleep. It had been a long day, and I was ready to sleep. I had fought all of our squad with Haise, talked it out with Hinami, Touka, Itori, Uta, and even Yomo, in his strange way.

I had come to my own terms, more or less, that I hadn't been the only of Kanou's experiments. I hadn't accepted it, per say, but I had made my decision: I wouldn't stop. I wouldn't ever look back or have regrets, because now it wasn't just my fight. I was fighting for the six-hundred and twenty-four other monsters Kanou had created-- monsters that shouldn't have ever existed but didn't deserve to die before they had a chance to live.

I should have felt heavy, with a burden that big, but it was like I had been carrying heavy shackles that had suddenly vanished.

"Hey, Hide?" Haise asked, undoing the buttons of his dress shirt in an absentminded, mechanical way. "I've... been thinking. Can I talk to you?"

"Why would you even ask? Of course you can talk to me," I said, confused, as I sat my clothes in
the hamper sitting by the door. "What's wrong, Haise? It's not the nightmares, is it? I hadn't thought you'd been having them anymore?"

"Nothing's wrong, exactly," Haise began slowly. "It's... I wonder if I should look into that book, after all. And the two ghouls-- they said that I was the 'Eyepatch Ghoul'. Is that-- Is that who I used to be?"

I was very careful not to show an outward reaction, and I forced my muscles not to tense as I left my t-shirt in the drawer and moved to sit beside Haise. "...what brought this up, Haise? Did the 'monster' make another appearance? Maybe you shouldn't have used your kagune today."

I wondered briefly when it had become so normal, talking about the figment of Haise's imaginations, the embodiment of the past him.

Haise shook his head, eyes clouded and thoughtful. "No. No, he hasn't appeared again. That's the thing, Hide. I don't think that he's a monster at all. He's a little boy, not a monster, and he's so, so sad. I... I want to save him, Hide."

Oh, Haise. You really haven't changed at all, have you? At least now, you're trying to save yourself... I think?

"Haise," I began cautiously. "Have you... talked, to this little boy?"

"Yeah," Haise affirmed miserably. "I have. He said something along the lines of 'the only way you can save me is to let me sleep and have happy dreams' and 'to live for me'. He hasn't come back in my head since then, and Hide, it's making me afraid. It's-- he's a part of me, the past me, and if I lose him, how will I be strong enough to fight? How can I protect, if the part of me that was strong... is gone?"

I sighed. "Oh, Haise... you can't lose a part of you. I don't care if your an amnesiac or not, you'll always be the same person. Didn't you see how you fought today? You're plenty strong. You protected the Academy students, didn't you?"

"I did, but--"

"No 'but's," I scolded. "Listen, Haise. If you want to discover more about your past, then that's fine. But only if you're doing it because you want to, not because you feel obligated to. So then, Haise, I'm going to ask you and you answer me honestly: Do you want to learn who you used to be? Are you ready to?"

"I'm not ready," Haise croaked, head turned downward, and something wet splashed onto the back of his hand. "I don't want to accept the Kaneki Ken they call a ghoul, an existence that even the ghouls were afraid of. I want-- I want to stay human, even with a body like mine. I want the life that I have now, with you and the kids, to go on forever. But somewhere deep down, I know that's impossible... because lately I've been getting this odd feeling. It's like... I have to remember eventually. That's not logic or emotions, but something more like fate... I think... I have no choice but to remember eventually."

I interrupted his monologue by slinging an arm around his shoulders and tugging him closer. He ended up laying with his head on my lap.

"Then don't remember. You don't have to until you're ready, and even then, the life you have right now won't up and disappear. This isn't a dream-- it doesn't matter if you remember what you've been missing up until now. You can still be Sasaki Haise. You still will be Sasaki Haise." I ran my hands
through his hair, pleased that it was almost completely black, just the very tips remaining white. A thought, lying somewhere between foolish and risky, came to mind. "Have you remembered anything before?"

Haise was quiet for a long time, his eyes closed as my hands methodically worked their way through his hair. For a moment, I thought he might have fallen asleep, but his shoulders were still tensed. Eventually, they relaxed, and Haise said, "I think so. At least, I've come close, sometimes. Glimpses of things that don't make sense. Little, insignificant fragments. Sometimes I'll remember a flash of something, but it's never for long, and it's always the same-- it's like-- it's like--"

"Like you're trying to put together a puzzle, except that you don't have a clue what the puzzle is supposed to look like, and you've only got a handful of pieces that won't fit together," I suggested, and Haise nodded.

"That's exactly how it is. It gives me a headache, sometimes, when I think about it too hard-- like someone's stabbing my eyes out."

It took every ounce of my self-control not to tense up when he said that, but my hands did still in his hair for a brief moment. Haise didn't seem to notice.

"Speaking of which, I think my vision is getting worse," Haise added, trying to change to a lighter topic. I let him. "I might have to start wearing my glasses all the time."

I laughed, shifting his head off my lap to go and turn off the lights. When I returned, I flicked his forehead, rolling my eyes.

"Or it could be that you're dead tired eighty percent of the time."

---

_Amon Koutarou, huh..._ I thought, running my hands along the spines of the archived case files, in their neat rows of binders on the bookshelves. I was on the ground floor of the Main Branch Headquarters, where the massive archive was located, searching for the case file I knew was in here somewhere-- knew because I filed it, when I was Amon and Akira's underling. My fingers skimmed along the spines of the binders, eyes searching. _Eyepatch, Eyepatch... or would it be Centipede? Where are you, files?_

_This is where they should be. I filed them here, just where they were supposed to be, in accordance to the case number. So where are they?_ I frowned. The files were unusually loose here, like a binder was missing--

"How enthusiastic of you, Nagachika," Akira said flatly.

I whirled around, my eyes widening fractionally. Akira stood behind me, a thick binder-- doubtlessly the one I had been searching for-- in her hand, her arms crossed. Her eyes were dull but firm, like the upcoming conversation was one that she wasn't pleased to be having.

The feeling was mutual.
"Akira-san. Were you looking for files, too?" I asked her cheerily, with a sun-bright smile.

"Drop the act, Nagachika. I know why you're here. For these, right?" Akira said, tapping a finger against the binder, the clearly typed label reading *Number 240: Code-name Eyepatch/Centipede.* "You're looking into who Haise used to be. Unfortunately for you, these files haven't been on the Archive Shelves in more than three years now."

I dropped the act.

"I am," I admitted.

"Did Haise ask you to?" Akira asked, eyes narrowing.

"You and I both know that Haise wouldn't do that, Akira-san," I said with a sigh. "I came here of my own violation. Haise doesn't know I'm here, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Why is that, Nagachika?"

I met her eyes. They were cold and an odd shade of purple. "Well, because Haise has to remember eventually, doesn't he? I'd like to be able to help him along-- but only when he wants it. It's a terrifying thing for him, Akira-san. He has no clue where he grew up, what his name is, why his hair was white, how he got to be a half-ghoul-- he doesn't even know what he's given to him, so when he isn't afraid of himself anymore and he wants to know more about who he is, I want to be able to give it to him. But if he's only trying to discover who he used to be out of *fear* of who he is, then I won't let him. I won't let him put himself through that."

*I wanted to hide the files, so that he didn't go looking for them out of fear.*

"I never pegged you for a romantic," Akira said dryly.

I shrugged, with a small smile. "I suppose I might be. But that's not really what's important right now, is it?"

"It's not," Akira agreed, and the atmosphere changed, becoming colder, more professional. "How did you hear the name Amon Koutarou?"

I pursed my lips. "I've been conducting an investigation on the Eyepatch ghoul, suspecting him to be Haise's past alias, for quite a while now. I narrowed my results down based upon the locations of investigators stationed in other wards, knowing the Eyepatch ghoul was active almost solely in the Twentieth Ward-- at least, at first. The only two field investigators stationed in the Twentieth Ward when Eyepatch became active were you, Akira-san, and a man by the name of Amon Koutarou, then ranking First Class. I decided it would be respectful to ask the senior of the partners."

"Wise choice," Akira praised, the twitch of her lips perhaps involuntary. "If it weren't for the fact that Investigator *Special Class* Amon Koutarou died in the Owl Suppression Operation, which is more widely-known as the Anteiku Raid."

I let my face fall into an expression of surprise, blinking owlishly. The fact Amon had been jumped two ranks in death was a surprise to me, however, it wasn't surprising. The man was full of surprises.

"Oh."

"Yes, 'oh'," Akira said unamusedly, the cold, professional air never wavering. "So, First Class Nagachika, what will you do now? Return home with your tail tucked between your legs?"
"Of course not! C'mon, Akira-san, you know me better than that! I never admit defeat!" I declared, propping a hand on my hip. "Now I'll ask you. Associate Special Class Mado, will you inform me of your investigation of the Eyepatch ghoul, conducted in your former station in the Twentieth Ward?"

Akira sighed, and she glanced around briefly, to ensure that nobody was inside the archives. Assured there wasn't anyone, the professional air faded, and she announced, "I will. I've already cleared it with Arima, but you must understand that these files are classified. Only by Arima's graces are you able to view these, so thank him sometime. And, the information that you read here must never be revealed to anybody-- especially not Haise. If you think that he's... stable, enough to handle this knowledge, then come and file a statement with Arima. When it comes down to it, he's the one who subdued and captured the person who Haise used to be, so he has ownership rights."

It was my turn to narrow my eyes.

"Ownership rights?" I asked coldly. "Haise isn't a pet. Nobody owns him, Akira-san."

"That may be true," Akira conceded. "Admittedly, in the very beginning, I may have thought that he was just another mindless ghoul. But now, I don't believe so either, Nagachika. Arima is quite the same, I suspect-- it's a very much parental affection that he feels for Haise, not unlike that of a father to a son, and I believe that some of the things you'll find out in the report will assure you of so."

"Like?" I asked, relaxing a little. If Akira truly believed Arima's intentions to be... fatherly, then perhaps they were. Her ability to read people was excellent, her intuition even better. And I hadn't gotten anything besides an unnerving inability to read Arima whenever I tried-- and whatever readings I had gotten were brief and only when he dropped his guard, like just after sparring matches and on the not-so-rare occasion when Haise would pleasantly surprise him, like with his Christmas gift or with new books.

"When Haise was in Cochlea, unable to remember anything, Arima brought him books," Akira looked like she might be trying not to laugh. "And blankets, because his cell was cold. Some of his methods were admittedly... strange, and sometimes unusually harsh, but everything was done in Haise's interests, in my opinion. Haise wouldn't be who he is-- literally-- and where he is without Arima."

_Haise is who he is because Arima stabbed him through the head twice._

With the new knowledge in mind, I wondered if maybe I needed to assess Arima again. More precisely, his loyalties and motives.

"Speaking of, why did Arima-san let me have access to the files?" I asked, moving to sit beside her at one of the wooden tables. "Not that I'm complaining. I'm just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat, Nagachika," Akira reminded, but she was smiling. "But give me a moment. Hmm... how did Arima phrase it?" She mused to herself. "It was something along the lines of you looking out for Haise's best interests, but there was something else... And how did he phrase that?"

_Phrase... what exactly?_

Akira snapped her fingers. "I remember. He said, 'Nagachika should know the real name of the person he's sleeping with.'"

My expression of utter shock and surprise wasn't faked, for once.

_Even the Reaper has a sense of humor._
Two more of Kanou's labs will be gone, and the question of how many labs he has and how many of them still remain will be answered soon. Also, Amon Koutarou. He'll play a part in this, too...

Thanks for reading!
"This makes raid number seven," Chie announced, perfectly cheery as she showed me photos of the carnage. Bloody bodies, some sloppily torn to shreds, side-by-side with clean and neat kills. "The body count is rising to the high-hundreds, almost thousands. Kanou's switched apartments six different times now."

I grinned, ghosting my fingers over the photos. "What about information?"

Itori shrugged. "Nothing new yet, kiddo. Kanou's keeping his new experiment-- if there is one-- under wraps. Nobody's got clearance to it."

I nodded slowly. "Alright. How many more labs are there?"

"We know of thirteen laboratories, and are ninety-nine percent certain that's all he has," Banjou said, reaching over to mark the locations on the map tacked to Touka's wall in blue, "and of the thirteen we've already taken out these seven," and seven of the laboratories were marked over in red. "The remaining six all have tighter security, and of the six, two of them are located in the Eighteenth Ward, which is Triple Blades' territory. The Twenty-Second Ward has three, and the Seventh Ward has the last."

I laced my fingers. "Alright. Nico, how are we with numbers?"

"Currently, there are fifteen ghouls from the Fifth Ward that have joined us in exchange for the protection of their children," Nico informed. "And as for children, there's seventeen of them. So far, no casualties have come to the volunteers."

"What are their estimated rankings? The adults, I mean."

"In accordance to the Dove's system, there are ten B-rated ghouls and five A-rated," Furuta said, leaning his head against his hand, elbow propped on the tabletop. "Not too bad, considering none of them are known enough to have aliases given to them by the CCG."

I nodded thoughtfully, running the numbers in my head. I flipped through images of the laboratories, pausing on the one with the higher security and larger population. I tossed the photo to Roma with a sharp snap of my wrist, and she caught the photo in a hand, examining it curiously. "Roma, how many people would you need to wipe out the laboratory there?"

Roma studied the picture, then smiled at me deviously. "Give me five of the volunteers, and Nico. It'll be done in fifteen minutes, tops."

I chuckled. "I'll send six of the volunteers, to be safe. Banjou-kun, will your three subordinates and five of the volunteers suffice, for the second laboratory in the Eighteenth Ward?"

Banjou shook his head. "No, I don't need that many volunteers. I've got some ghouls from my ward willing to lend a hand, so just send me three."

"Duly noted," I conceded. "Hinami-chan, will you be able to lead a raid in the Twenty-Second ward? I want to avoid having you in the Eighteenth, since there's too great a risk of you being seen, what with it being Dwarf-chan-- I mean, Miza-san's Ward. I can send four of the remaining seven
volunteers with you."

Hinami nodded. "I will. I'll just need one more person, of a higher rank than the vol--"

"I'll go with you," Ayato said firmly. "I can get away from Aogiri for long enough. They don't keep
tabs on me like they used to, when I was younger."

Hinami smiled. "Thank you, Ayato-kun."

I drummed my fingers against the table lightly, thinking. "There are three volunteers left. I need one
more raid to be conducted, so..."

"I'll take it," Uta offered, at the same time Itori did. They blinked at each other, and Itori pouted.

"U-chan! I wanted to have some fun for once! You always lead the raids!"

"Not always," Uta corrected, smirking, "just most of the time. I'm a better fighter, than you are,
Itori~"

"Mean!" Itori declared. "I killed more investigators than you did when we were saving Hide from
that Whack-A-Mole operation!"

"Okay, okay," I placated, before they could go into more details of the embarrassing childhood
incident. "You'll both go. And I'll lead the last raid on the lab in the final lab in the Twenty-Second
Ward. I'll take Souta, and whoever can come from :re."

"The cafe can close a little early for a night," Touka declared. "We can all come, then."

"Don't just go volunteering me for raids, Shitty Manager," Nishio muttered.

Touka raised an eyebrow. "You were going to tag along anyways, though. It's better to have a
correct headcount."

"Whatever," Nishio mumbled into his coffee with a shrug.

I just smiled. "That's the last of the raids I needed, then."

"There's still the laboratory in the Seventh Ward, though. What are you going to do with it?" Furuta
inquired.

I smiled innocently. "Why, Souta, don't you get it? I'm letting Kanou have a sliver of hope. That's his
biggest, most well-guarded laboratory. I don't want to lead a raid on it, quite yet. No, I want to lead a
full-on assault, but in the meantime, I want Kanou to simmer in his anxiety. He knows I'm coming to
destroy everything he's worked so hard for and to end his life, but he doesn't know when. He's
always going to be looking over his shoulder, double-checking his locks, the paranoia building and
building up inside until I finally end it all."

Roma laughed gleefully.
A hand caught the back of my white coat as I began my walk home, and I turned to find Kanae, dressed in a loose hat that hid his oddly purple hair and sunglasses to conceal his eyes.

"Pierrot. Can I have a moment?"

I glanced around briefly, then nodded. "If it'll take long, we should duck into a cafe or something."

"It won't take long," Kanae said firmly. "I came to wish you farewell. And... this."

A long white coat was thrust into my hands, and I stared at the garment for a minute. It appeared to be the same coat I had given Kanae, expect free of bloodstains.

"It's not the same coat," Kanae assured. "I haven't forgotten why you told me to keep it. I still owe you a favor, and I intend to return it when you're in need of my service. But it's to replace the one I took."

"Ah." I hadn't actually expected that. I had expected Kanae to disappear with the Tsukiyama family and servants tonight without a word, off for America, where they could start anew under fresh identities-- and where they didn't have extradite laws for well-known ghoul fugitives, as far as I knew. I hadn't thought he would actually come to remind *me* he owed me a favor, let alone give me a new coat.

Now that I was examining it closer, it definitely wasn't my coat from before. Our coats were made of a thicker, coarser material, less resistant to tear and much cheaper for the rate we went through them. This one was made of fine fabric, built for style rather than practical use. But the gesture was oddly warming, and I was taken aback for a moment. I was smiling-- *really* smiling-- because of something like this?

"You didn't have to do this, Kanae-kun."

Kanae smiled too, but it was fainter. "I know I didn't. I wanted to let you know I hadn't forgotten I was in your debt, and... to say *Danke*, for saving my life. For giving me more time with Master Shuu."

I held out a hand, and Kanae stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending.

"A handshake. That's the American custom, right?"

"Ah. I... suppose it is," Kanae agreed. "I'll need to get accustomed to their ways, if we'll be in America."


(*Forget the favor. You aren't in my debt.)

Kanae blinked his oddly-colored eyes, just a few shades different from Tsukiyama's.

*Ich konnte das nicht tun!*"

(*I couldn't do that!*)

I shook my head, still smiling.
"Nur kümmern sich um Ihre Meister für mich, okay? Tsukiyama Shuu ist wichtig zu Haise, auch wenn er ihn nicht daran erinnern, gerade jetzt."

(*Just take care of your Master for me, okay? Tsukiyama Shuu is important to Haise, even if he doesn't remember him right now.)

Kanae hesitated, but when my gaze didn't waver, he nodded firmly.

"Ich verstehe, Pierrot. Ich werde. Achten Sie auf sich, bitte."

(*I understand, Pierrot. I will. Take care of yourself, please.)


(*I will, Kanae. You do the same.)

We shook hands.

"Papa," Saiko asked, when I returned home. "Where'd you get the extra coat?"

I removed my shoes and stepped inside, setting down my set of keys in the key-bowl and undoing the belt around the coat I wore, hanging it on the appropriate hook.

"A friend of mine gave it to me, as a good-bye gift. He's going to America for awhile with his family."

"You should have told me you were going to see a friend," Haise said, and I could hear the clattering of dishes in the kitchen. "I would have made extra and sent some food with you!"

I hung the coat Kanae gave me up as well, before I rolled up my sleeves and into the kitchen, grabbing a hand-towel while I was at it. I stopped next to Haise and began drying the dishes he'd washed.

"Nah, they're real big food freaks. Critiques, I guess. That's one of the reasons they're going to America, I think." I paused, putting a plate up in the proper place. "Not that I don't think that your food isn't up to their standards. Because you cook really good food."

Haise laughed. "How would you know? You can't eat it, Hide."

"But I used to be able to," I said, as another wet dish exchanged hands. "And it was really damn good."

Haise just smiled, with a fondly exasperated expression. "Anyways, Saiko wanted to see a movie on television tonight-- it'll be on in just a little bit. Want to watch it with us? Shirazu and Mutsuki are going to watch it, too."

"Do you really think I'd pass up a movie night, Haise," I said, faking offense and hurt. "I'm
wounded! What kind of sane person would miss movie night?"

Haise laughed, and I beamed at the sound.

"Hey, Tooru, what'd Hide-san mean, 'bout America and food?" Shirazu asked, from where he sat at the counter, a soda in his hands. Mutsuki sat on the other bar-stool counter seat, reading a book quietly, but he looked up at Shirazu's inquiry.

"I think America is sort of like a... a melding pot of cultures. They've got a lot of different varieties of food there."


"Fatass."

"Topknot."

"Shut-in."

"Perv."

Urie rolled his eyes as he listened to their conversation. He was dressed for a jog, I noted, even though it was already fairly late into the evening. He liked to run later, I knew, when it was cooler.

"If you're going to run, take some money for a taxi home. It's supposed to rain soon, and I don't want you to get caught in it," I advised, drying another dish and putting it up.

Urie didn't respond right away, glancing from where Shirazu and Saiko were still bickering, to Mutsuki trying to play the medium for them, to the television in the living room, paused on the movie, to where Haise and I stood doing dishes.

"...I don't think I'll run tonight."

---

We all ended up in the living room to watch it. Saiko sprawled out on the longer couch, laying her head on Mutsuki's lap and her feet on Shirazu, to his dismay. Urie was sitting right in between Shirazu and Mutsuki, and had much of Saiko's torso stretched across his lap, to his mild irritation that I thought seemed a little blunted and maybe even fond. The popcorn bowl was balanced on top of Saiko's knees, looking like it might tip over and spill the buttery treat everywhere. The kids drank soda, and Haise made coffee, despite the hour being later than would normally be appropriate for coffee. I sat on the loveseat, and Haise sat with me, and we watched the Quinx shift around and bicker lightly until everyone was relatively comfortable before Haise hit play.

The movie was supposed to be some sort of romantic comedy, but I honestly didn't pay much attention to it. It wasn't that my mind was otherwise occupied; I simply sat there and enjoyed the commentary on the film, courtesy of the Quinx with varying levels of snarkiness, Urie's being the most witty. I had always imagined it would be terrible, to not be constantly thinking and planning some scheme or other, but it was strangely enjoyable, to be not thinking about anything in particular.
Relaxing or calming might not have been the right words, but enjoyable fit the bill. It was enjoyable to just sit there, my hand in Haise's, his head on my shoulder, and the kids an arms reach away.

We didn't think about ghouls, or work, or the upcoming raid. We just enjoyed the moment, what was here and now, something I had never imagined I would ever do. It was very... domestic, and I loved it.

I wondered why I couldn't dismiss the nagging feeling that this couldn't last.

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit shorter than normal, but I had to cut it off here to keep the next chapter’s main focus all together. It's when Amon, Nashiro, and Kurona make their cameo, and when Hide learns what was on the flashdrive Furuta gave him.

Thanks for reading, and sorry about the chapter length!
I'M SORRY I LIED, AMON, NASHIRO, AND KURONA DON'T COME UNTIL THE NEXT CHAPTER! I got ahead of myself and forgot that SAIKO'S HUGE MOMENT was supposed to come next!

Saiko, armed with boxes of her favorite, G-rated animes, subbed in French, and a portable DVD player, walked into the familiar building that was the CCG's First Ward Junior Academy. Specifically, in the Kindergarten section.

The building itself brought up unpleasant memories from her childhood, and the dull white walls and shiny floors had a melancholy feeling that seemed to weigh heavy in the air. Saiko emerged into the dorm division, and entered the girl's ward.

Rows of cots with threadbare, worn-looking, but clean pink sheets spanned either wall in neat rows. There were bright crayon pictures tacked up everywhere, and finger-paintings. A portion of them were normal pictures that a child might draw, like pictures of flowers and cute-looking animals, dolls, dresses, and bows. A frighteningly large number of them, however, depicted monsters with red-and-black eyes, or heroic-looking men and women in white coats.

Which wasn't all that surprising, actually, Saiko thought, frowning as she took in the sheer amount of girls in the dormitory. Almost all of them were sitting alone on cots, dull-eyed and overall fairly depressed-seeming. The sheer number of kindergarten-aged girls was a bit overwhelming-- wasn't the First Ward uninhabitable to ghouls, the safest Ward? Why was there so many orphans?

"It's because the other Wards' orphans are here, too," An older woman said, with a flat expression. Her hair was in a neat bun, her uniform impeccable. "I get the same question from every other Investigator. Are you here to question the girl that got here yesterday-- the one from the Grave Robber case in Twenty-One?"

"Um... No?" The straightforward, no-nonsense nature of the woman had taken Saiko off-guard. Wasn't someone who worked with children supposed to me more cheery? Or at the very least, not look so... scary? "I'm Rank 2 Yonebayashi. I'm here to visit?"

The old woman raised an eyebrow. "A visitor?" She snorted, like the very thought was stupid.

"Did I come at the wrong time?" Saiko asked, confused. It would be about her luck to come on a day when visitors weren't allowed. "I can visit, can't I?"

The old woman shrugged. "There's nothing against it. But there aren't many people who want to visit a bunch of teary-eyed orphans. I practically have to drag most of them outside for the required amount of daily exercise-- and the boys' dorm isn't any better. The fact that I've got to drag them outside for exercise and fresh air is stupid. If they want to mope around all day, who am I to stop them?"

"Aren't you their caretaker?" Saiko asked, blinking in surprise. "Fresh air and exercise is good for
them."

*I'm a bit of a hypocrite, aren't I?*

The old woman merely shrugged again, looking irritated at Saiko's questioning. "I make sure their sheets are clean, make sure they get food, and make sure they go outside once a day for a few hours. That's what they pay me for. If they don't want to eat or do anything besides mope, it's not my problem."

*It is your problem, Saiko thought angrily. Aren't you supposed to be taking care of them?*

But Saiko said nothing, biting her cheek and sighing. *I'm too much of a coward to stand up to the terrifying old hag,* she thought miserably. "Where can I find Moreau Anne?"

The old woman pointed a finger to one of the cots. "The foreign girl? She's over there. There isn't a translator for her, though, so you'll need to use app on the tablet over there."

*An app? There's nobody to stay with her?*

Saiko walked away before she could say something she'd probably regret and end up getting her banned from the Kindergarten division of the CCG's First Ward Junior Academy.

Anne, with her dark blue hair done up in messy pigtails, sat on a cot with worn-looking pink sheets. The cot had a nameplate with her name labeled on it in bright, sloppy, kindergarten scrawl. Beneath her name was a picture of a small stick-girl with dark blue pigtails and pale blue eyes, holding the hand of a stick-man in garishly bright green-and-blue clothes, and a head of bright orange hair. The man's face was hidden by the mask of a grinning clown with a red nose.

Pierrot.

"*Bonjour, Anne! Comment allez-vous?*"

(*Hello, Anne! How are you?*)

Looking startled, the young girl sat her crayons down on her pad of paper, and Saiko noted that her neon green and blue crayons were surprisingly worn-down and used. So was the dark blue crayon, and the orange.

"*Mademoiselle Saiko! Tu m'as manqué!*" Anne declared cheerfully, launching herself off the cot and wrapping her arms around Saiko's neck. After a moment, the small girl released Saiko from her vise-like hug and plopped back down onto the cot, looking around with wide, eager eyes. "*Est-ce que Monsieur Pierrot venez me rendre visite, aussi?*

(*Miss Saiko! I've missed you! Did Mister Pierrot come to visit me again, too?*)

After a brief moment in which she translated the little girl's statement, Saiko frowned, noting the *again* in her statement and feeling her heart skip a beat. Had a ghoul somehow slipped past the defenses of the CCG?

Hesitantly, Saiko inquired, "*Dispose Pierrot venez pour vous rendre visite depuis qu'il vous a laissé avec nous, Anne?*"

(*Has Pierrot come to see you since he left you with us, Anne?*)

Now seeming a bit puzzled, Anne nodded. "*Il a! Vous étiez avec lui, Mademoiselle Saiko! Vous avez
dit son nom était ... Hi... Hi-de?"

(*He has! You were with him, Miss Saiko! You called him... Hi... Hi-de?)

It felt like Saiko's heart stopped. She sat, frozen, on Anne's cot, her thoughts stopped dead until Anne tugged at her coat sleeve.

"Mademoiselle Saiko? Ce qui est erroné, Mademoiselle Saiko?"

(*Miss Saiko? What's wrong, Miss Saiko?)

Saiko grasped the little girl's hands, perhaps just a little bit too tight. "Anne. Avez-vous dessiné Pierrot sans qu'il se masque?"

(*Anne. Have you drawn Pierrot without his mask?)

Looking startled now, Anne nodded and pulled her hands away from Saiko's to grasp the pad of paper she had been coloring in. She handed it to Saiko, looking very proud of her drawings.

Saiko flipped through the pages. On some, there was a tall woman with black hair and blue eyes, who Saiko assumed to be Anne's mother. A handful of pages even featured Saiko herself. On the majority, the pages were full of portraits of a single man-- Pierrot, dressed in his garishly neon get-up and wearing his clown mask. On the few others that were left, it depicted the man Saiko had affectionately dubbed 'Papa': Nagachika Hideyoshi, in his white investigators coat and a wide smile.

Anne leaned over, pointing to one portrait of him, her finger resting on his white coat. "Voir? Il est là! Ne est ce pas une bonne image, Mademoiselle Saiko?" At Saiko's pause, when it felt like she was suffocating because there was a lump in her throat, Anne frowned worriedly, her eyes wide and innocent, despite everything. "Je faisais faire un bon travail, non?"

(*See? There he is! Isn't it a good picture, Miss Saiko? I did do a good job, right?)

"Vous avez fait un excellent travail," Saiko said hoarsely. "L'image est la belle."

This is impossible, isn't it? Papa can't be Pierrot. Papa is... Papa is...

Memories flashed behind Saiko's eyes as Anne rambled on happily about Saiko's praise.

Papa, making dinner when Haise was at meetings. Playing her games with her. Teaching Mucchan material he didn't understand. Comforting Shiragin after Nutcracker. Giving Uribo training advice. Buying her sweets, even after Akira scolded him for it. Leaping in front of them to defend them from the ghoul at the Auction Raid. Solving cases, making Maman happy.

Being the first one to brave the screaming and sobbing, to check on Maman during one of his nightmares.

And Pierrot saved Anne, didn't he? That's something Papa would do. His voice, his hair-- they aren't forgettable. Anne was close enough to hear his voice clearly through Pierrot's mask, without it being muffled and distorted. She would remember the man that had saved her.

Fear seized Saiko, terror gripping her like a cold hand around her heart. She grasped Anne's small hands with an urgency that stopped the younger girl's cheerful French babble in its tracks.

"Avez-vous laisser quelqu'un d'autre sache que Nagachika Hideyoshi ne est Pierrot?"

Eyes wide and confused, Anne shook her head. "No. Ne me comprend voilà."
Though the statement was faintly worrying and angering, Saiko had never been more relieved. Fear's cold claws released her heart, and she sighed.

"Écoutez attentivement, Anne. Ne parlez à personne sur l'identité de Pierrot." Saiko said, eyes dark. "Ce doit être un secret."

(*Listen carefully, Anne. No one must know Pierrot's identity. It must be a secret.)

"Personne... ne sait?"

(*Nobody... knows?)


(*Yes. And we must keep it that way. If anyone knows, Pierrot will be in danger. Bad people will hurt him.)

Too serious for such a small child, Anne nodded seriously. "Je ne veux pas Monsieur Pierrot afin de être blessé. Je ne vais pas dire à personne."

(*I don't want Mister Pierrot to be hurt. I won't tell anyone.)


(*Good. Thank you, Anne.)

Anne nodded solemnly, holding onto Saiko's hands tightly. "Monsieur Pierrot est comme un super-héros, non? Étes-vous son acolyte, Mademoiselle Saiko?"

(*Mister Pierrot is like a superhero, right? Are you his sidekick, Miss Saiko?)

Sidekick, huh...

Saiko smiled at her, softly. "Sidekicks prennent en charge des héros, non? Donc je suppose que je suis."

(*Sidekicks support heroes, right? So I guess I am.)

Anne smiled. "Prenez soin de lui, Mademoiselle Saiko. Promesse?"

(*Take care of him, Miss Saiko. Promise?)

"Je vais. Je promets," Saiko vowed. Then, glancing down at her gifts, she left them on Anne's bed and stood. "Je dois partir maintenant. Regarder ces avec les autres, d'accord? Essayez et les réconforter."

(*I will. I promise. I have to go now. Watch these with the others, okay? Try and cheer them up.)

[See notes on above translation.]

Feeling the burden of this small child's expectations and the weight of her promise, Saiko felt heavy like she never had before. But somehow, she knew she wouldn't regret it.
"Je le ferai." Anne seemed hesitant, but she asked, "Mademoiselle Saiko?"

(*I will do it. Miss Saiko?)

"Oui, Anne?"

(*Yes, Anne?)

Anne's eyes, for the first time, seemed as dark, dull, and shiny with tears as the rest of the orphans in the dormitory. "Vas-tu... venez visiter à nouveau?"

(*Will you... come visit again?)

Saiko swallowed around the lump in her throat. *Papa had a gesture for times like this, didn't he? ...Ah, that was it.*

Saiko reached out and ruffled the little girl's pigtails, offering her best impression of his bright, sunny smile. "Je le ferai. Je promets. Et la prochaine fois, je vais apporter des bonbons. Assez pour tout le monde."

(*I will. I promise. And next time, I'll bring sweets. Enough for everyone.)

Anne smiled, and it wasn't so sad anymore. "A plus tard, Mademoiselle Saiko."

(*See you later, Miss Saiko.)

"A plus tard, Anne."

I won't say goodbye. Goodbye sounds... final.

---

Saiko left the CCG's First Ward Junior Academy, feeling heavy but somehow light, like all of the pieces of a puzzle she didn't know she was trying to solve had fallen into place. She walked through the blank, melancholy hallways with an absent mind and a determined stride. There were a few things she was very sure of at this point, and she vowed to know more.

_Papa is... Pierrot. He is a ghoul. A half-ghoul. He is like Maman is. He's hiding a lot. He has lied to us, and will probably continue to. He has been carrying all of the secrets on his own, and secrets weigh a lot._

_He loves all of us, very, very much. Especially Maman._

Saiko smiled as she stepped out of the building, breathing in the cold air that winter brought. It was crisp, clean, and fresh.

_I'll be a detective and find out what secrets he's hiding. A proper investigator, for the first time._

The air burned her lungs a little when she breathed in deeply, but that was okay.
It doesn't matter that he's Pierrot. It's okay. I won't let him do it on his own anymore. I'll help him.

It was a good stinging.

Chapter End Notes

This is a little bit shorter than normal too, since it's technically not a chapter but an Interlude, and that's also why it's told by Saiko and not by Hide.

The [See notes for above translation] bit was about this: Literally translated, the statement means "I will. I promise. I have to go now. Watch these with the others, okay? Try and comfort them."

Comfort them. Not 'cheer them up'. But it was the closest I could get, and it's rather... fitting, I think.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

It's the Yasuhisa twins, and Amon! Before I get into that, though, I'll say this: I actually had the Yasuhisa twin's role set before the recent chapter came out (I've had their roles set for a long time now, actually). So this isn't a fix-it or anything-- the fact they aren't 'conjoined' was already planned out.

I plugged the flash drive Furuta had given me into my laptop on the Wednesday afternoon exactly a week and a half from the raid date, sitting at :re and drinking a coffee, like I was just an average customer.

Nishio appeared and replaced my empty cup with a full one, glancing at me wordlessly for a brief moment before he paused.

"How is... How's Kaneki doing?"

Surprised, I paused before opening the file library. "Haise is doing fine. He's just a little stressed about the raid, but that's only normal."

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant, and you know it," Nishio said, with a flat look. "Mentally. How's he holding up mentally? He didn't look like he was doing all that well after the fight, but afterwards he seemed alright. I'm not at the meetings. I don't know any of the updates the others do, just what Touka fills me in on."

Is he still concerned about what happened after the fight?

"I calmed him down after the fight, and after a short recovery period in the hospital, Haise was fine. He still is. He hasn't had any big breakdowns-- well, actually, there was that one time at the Auction Raid, but he's alright now-- since then. I wouldn't say Haise is the most mentally healthy person on the planet, though."

"That's normal. He's been through a lot of shit, even for a ghoul," Nishio muttered. "I expected him to be in shittier shape."

"Nah. Haise is more resilient than he looks," I assured him. "And I'm there. I won't let him break."

Nishio didn't say anything for a moment, re-adjusting his grip on my empty cup.

"Good. You better be, because that wimpy piece of crap can't do it on his own."

I watched him leave before I took a deep breath and opened the file library. There was an entry on a document by Furuta, and I opened it up.

Everything from Kanou's computer is copied onto this. It doesn't look like the files are anything new, and I couldn't find any files relating to you and your experiment, nor any new files or experiments. I planted the bug, like I was told, in Kanou's computer. It can be wiped remotely and tracked now. There was more information on his living arrangements and Aogiri's financial situation, though, and something interesting. One of the 'Floppies'. Didn't you used to work under someone called Amon.
Koutarou?

I frowned at the note, and at the link to the document beneath it. Amon Koutarou was dead, his body rejecting the transplant from Yoshimura, as far as I had been aware of. I hadn't been the one to preform his specific surgery, but I had preformed others, and Kanou had told me he had just been another floppy.

Of course, I don't know why I had taken anything the old crone said at face-value. That in mind, I selected the link and waited.

It was a profile, exactly like the thousands of others Kanou kept. Amon's date of birth, age, blood type, and the RC Type of the kakuhou implant were all listed there, among other basic information. Beneath that were carefully written and detailed updates on his progress, and I stopped at the last entry.

Subject has escaped from facility, killing five and wounding three. In a crazed, half-starved and sedated state, it is unlikely it will get far. Regeneration capabilities are inefficient-- the missing arm regenerated with three fingers rather than five, and although it's body took the transplant well and it's kagune usage is surprisingly adept, the Subject is unerringly disobedient. Labeled as a Floppy. Status is assumed deceased.

I studied the passage briefly, then sighed, running a hand through my hair. Three fingers-- as in, the same person with a three-fingered hand that saved Saiko. Amon had survived, and was more powerful than Kanou had probably expected. In fact, Kanou hadn't expected Amon to live at all.

This could mean one of two things: a new ally, or a new enemy. And the only way to find out where he was meant calling in favors, which was something I didn't like to do.

I tucked my laptop away and stood, walking to the counter and paying for my drinks.

"Hey, Yomo. Will you keep my laptop here until Touka-chan can take it back upstairs?"

Yomo nodded, reaching out and taking the laptop from me, sliding it underneath the counter.

"What are you planning now, Hide?"

I smiled briefly. "Just a meeting with some old acquaintances of mine, and then a meeting with my old boss. Nothing too big."

Yomo stared at me flatly, and eventually he reached out and patted my head.

"Be careful."

I smiled. "Don't worry, Yomo, I will be." Then, I paused, and my smile was rueful. "I'll have to call Haise, though. It doesn't look like I'll make it home in time for dinner."

I changed my clothes at :re, and when it became dark, I donned my mask and a long, dark overcoat,
with a dark hat to hide my mask from view. I left as the moon started to rise, making my way across the rooftops until I reached the Fifth Ward, when I descended into the streets and walked at a brisk but casual pace towards an apartment building in the middle of the ward.

The apartment building was upper middle-class and nice enough, and when I walked into the building, the secretary at the front desk greeted me cheerily.

"Pierrot-san! It's been a long time since you've visited us here. Are you here to see the twins?"

I nodded. "I am. How are the kids?"

"Oh, they're doing fine. They really like school," she added, with another smile. "I don't know how you managed to get us a family registry, but I can't thank you enough."

I laughed and waved a hand. "It's been two years. Something like that isn't a big deal."

"It is a big deal," she insisted, but let the matter be. "But I'm sure you're on a time crunch, so I'll let you go. Shiro-chan and Kuro-chan are in their apartment."

"I see. Thanks again," I called, stepping into the elevator and riding it up two floors. When it dinged open I walked along the hallway, stopping at the second-to-last apartment. I knocked on the door, and after a short moment, a young woman with black hair and dark eyes opened the door.

"Hide-nii!" Yasuhisa Kurona declared, opening the door wider. "You didn't tell us you were stopping by! Come in!"

"Yeah. Sorry for dropping by so suddenly, Kuro-chan, but it's urgent."

Kuro just nodded and ushered me inside.

Once inside the apartment, I removed my mask and outer garments, hanging my coat neatly on the hook and placing my hat beside it. Kurona called out as I did, "Shiro! Hide-nii is here!"

A young woman, eerily similar to Kurona in every feature besides the color of her hair, which was black but tipped in white, emerged from the bedroom of the apartment, a book in her hand.

"Hide-nii? It's been forever!"

"Hi, Shiro-chan," I said cheerily, as Nashiro set her book down and moved to hug me, at the same time as Kurona did. "How are you two holding up?"

"Wonderfully," Nashiro said cheerfully. "College is going well, and everything is well in the Fifth Ward. You've done a great job keeping Aogiri out."

"Aw, thanks," I said, ruffling their hair. We moved into the living room, painted in monochrome shades of grey and white, and they sat on the couch while I sat in an armchair. Outside of the sliding glass door that lead to the balcony, the city was visible, skyscrapers glittering like stars against the navy sky. "I wish that I could stop by more often, but I haven't had the time recently. Even now, I stopped by because of business."

"Business?" Kurona asked. "You know if we can help you, we will, Hide-nii. Ask us anything."

I tucked a lock of ruffled orange hair behind my ear and made a reminder to get it trimmed again, before it grew out more. "Well, it's about Kanou. More precisely, about one of his 'floppies'."

It seemed like their dark eyes grew darker, and I didn't blame them. Kanou had left them for dead,
and Nashiro, at the very least, would have died back when Kaneki and his group invaded his lab, followed by the CCG, if I hadn't helped them escape and patched them up. Afterwards, I had relocated them here, to the Fifth Ward.

Of course, I didn't do it out of the goodness of my (black) heart. I had done it because Kurona and Nashiro, despite being labeled as 'floppies' by Kanou, were exceptional fighters and as information collectors, none too shabby. They were two more cards up my sleeve, just like this entire building was.

This particular apartment building was owned by no one person, although the name on the building's lease was a fake identity of mine, and it was the safe haven, the Anteiku, of the Fifth Ward, where orphaned children were relocated and where a makeshift hospital, on occasion, was set up. Families of ghouls lived here, with falsified family registries, and regular jobs, with kids that went to school. Perfectly blending into human society, with only the best actors-- the Clowns-- to model themselves after.

"A specific floppy, Hide-nii?" Nashiro asked, tilting her head to the side a little. At my nod of confirmation, she asked, "Which one?"

"Amon Koutarou," I announced, and was met with briefly blank stares. Then, Kurona and Nashiro spoke at the same time.

"Amon... Koutarou?"

It was in their voices. They knew him... but how?

"You know him?"

Kurona nodded. "We do... or did, anyways. He was one of our guest lecturers, when we were still Academy students."

"Oh." That sounded like Amon, alright. He always had a soft spot for kids-- and orphans, especially. It was probably due to his past with Donato and the orphanage, which I had figured out by hacking into his (classified) file when I worked under him. "Well, I'm looking for him because I think he might be able to help me annihilate Kanou. He doesn't have any lost love for the old crone, at the very least, and his fighting skill is pretty amazing. Also, he kind of saved my daughter, and I want to thank him properly."

Kurona and Nashiro smiled, in the perfect synchronization that was eerie.

"Did you bring us pictures yet, Hide-nii?" Nashiro asked, and I beamed.

"I did, actually!" I said, slipping a hand into my pocket and fishing out my wallet. Inside were photos, and I displayed it proudly for them to see. "Here, look! That's Saiko, and that's Urie, and that one's Mutsuki, and that one right there, that's Shirazu."

"You're like a doting father," Kurona said amusedly.

"I am a doting father!" I declared, grinning. "But anyways, that's off topic. Amon. Have you heard anything about a 'Robed Giant'?"

Nashiro nodded. "We have, actually. Not too long ago, somebody showed up at the apartment building. A man dressed in long white robes and carrying a staff. Security sent him away, but later on a few of the children that were playing in the lobby came and told us that he had said our name, 'Yasuhisa', and that was it."
I frowned. "He asked for you? Are you sure that the children are credible?"

Kurona confirmed it. "They are. The children are young, but not ignorant. They collect information too, however small it may be, because they feel you'll want to know about it eventually. They want to please you, Hide-nii, and they want to be useful. We all do."

I smiled, and maybe it was real. "Are they the same children that are in the lobby now?"

"Yes. Their mother is on shift now, so they play in the lobby while she works."

I stood, stretching. "Alright then. Thank you both. I'll try and stop by again sooner, okay? Oh, and make sure to keep your grades up, especially for your final exams. You might be the first ghouls to attend med school, so make sure you knock 'em outta the ball park!"

With their eerie synchronization, the twins smiled.

"We will, Hide-nii."

When I emerged from the elevator into the lobby, my coat in my hands and mask on my face, I paused. There were three young children, wrestling and chasing each other around, tripping over their own feet and filling the lobby with cheerful, bell-like laughter. The youngest is barely more than an baby, stumbling around on unsteady feet behind the older two.

They all stopped, with wide, large eyes as I approached them, frozen in place when I crouched down and sat on the heels of my feet so that I was eye-level with them.

"Are you the children that gave Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan information about the Robed Giant?"

Nervously, but with no hesitation, they nod their heads like bobble-headed dolls.

I reached up and pulled my mask up, so that it rested perched on the top of my head and isn't concealing my face. I beamed at them, making sure it's my best, sunniest, most charming smile, and I ruffled their hair fondly.

"Thank you. You helped me out a lot."

I stood up and donned my coat and hat, so that it concealed my ghoul clothes and mask. As I turned to leave, a small, high-pitched voice called out,

"Bye-bye, Pierrot-san!"

I turned back to wave at them, my voice cheerful and carefree.

"Bye-bye!"
When I'm outside, I breathe in the cool air and close my eyes briefly. I walked around to the side of the building and climbed the fire escapes with an absentminded ease, until I was standing on the rooftop. I started back towards the First Ward at a casual pace, striding across the rooftops until I found myself at the boarder of the Fifth and First Ward, standing at the edge of an especially tall building. The stars seem dizzyingly bright, and the buildings twinkling like comets didn't help my sudden vertigo.

I sat down on the edge of the roof and rested my elbow on my legs, which were dangling over the edge, using my palm as a pillow for my cheek. The night air was colder up higher, and it was pleasant against my skin. I closed my eyes, waiting for my odd vertigo to fade.

Until, that is, there are footsteps behind me. I don't tense, don't show any signs that I've heard the footsteps, but I'm ready to leap off the building and make my escape, should I need to, or better yet, ready to fight.

There's a metal tap-tap-tapping that accompanies the footsteps, until the noise stops all together and there's silence on the rooftop, except for the quiet blowing of the wind. My vertigo is long gone, washed away and devoured by the adrenaline pumping through my veins, urging me to move, fight, kill, do anything besides sit there.

"Pierrot. I know that you know I'm here."

The voice is chillingly familiar, but I stand and reach up to remove my hat, staring at the hooded face of my former superior, Amon Koutarou.

"Hello, Robed Giant."

"That's not my name," Amon said, his hand tight on his staff. "And you know it."

"My, my, how would I know your real name?" I asked, but my muscles were tensed. "This is our first meeting, isn't it?"

"Drop the act." Amon's voice was humorless and serious. The strict superior tone, the one from the office. "We both know this isn't our first meeting."

I sighed.

"Fine. This is your first meeting, though, with Pierrot."

"But not with Nagachika Hideyoshi." Amon's eyes were mismatched in the moonlight, one kakugan gleaming. "Or should I say, Kanou Hideyoshi."
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

nm@dA drew Anne, and it's awesome! Go check it out!

https://m.facebook.com/NotaloidMaster-656446584490058/

(And to nm@dA, thank you again!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Or should I say Kanou Hideyoshi."

I frowned, reaching up to remove my mask. "I don't go by that name, any longer, so please don't call me by it. It's impolite, Amon-san."

"So it is you, Nagachika," Amon said coldly, but I thought that his voice sounded a little bit sad. "I'd rather not hurt you any more than I have to, so please just answer my questions."

"You won't be hurting Hide-nii at all," Nashiro said adamantly, abruptly appearing from over the side of the building. Kurona wasn't far behind her, and they moved to stand partially on front of me, like guards. The gesture was touching, but unnecessary. "We won't let you."

Amon looked taken aback. "You're... the Yasuhisa girls?"

"Hello again, Amon-san," Kurona said dryly. "It seems we always meet under unpleasant circumstances."

"Kuro-chan? Shiro-chan?" I asked, careful to keep the incredulous note out of my tone. "Why are you two here?"

"We guessed that Amon-san would still be keeping an eye on the building." Nashiro explained, never taking her eyes off of Amon. "So we followed you, Hide-nii, taking the gamble he'd recognize your mask and jump you."

"Wise gamble," I praised. "But Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan, I don't need protection. It's alright. I'll answer a few of his questions, as thanks."

"Thanks? What have I ever done to make you thank me, Pierrot?"

I smiled. "You saved my daughter that once, don't you remember? And I'm not ungrateful. I'll answer your questions, as thanks."

Amon hesitated. "I've done no such things."

I reached into my pocket, drawing out my wallet and opening it, showing him the photos that lay inside. His gaze focused on Saiko's picture briefly.

"The young ghoul investigator that was hiding behind the parking garage. She's... your daughter." He sounded skeptical, and I tucked my wallet away, back into my pocket.
"Well, Haise-- he's my partner, in both senses of the word, I'll add-- and I, we're kind of surrogate parents to our subordinates. They're like our children." I explained briefly. "But that's not the important thing right now, is it? You're questions, please."

"Why was-- no, is-- Kanou's son working for the CCG? Just for your own twisted amusement?" Amon asked, apparently taking advantage of my free reign on the questions. "You're a ghoul. How did you pass through the RC Scan Gates? And you ate food, so how did you not suffer from it?"

Ignoring the barb in his statement, I answered his questions in stride. "The RC Scan Gates are programmed to not go off for certain RC Cell patterns, which is how the quinques don't set them off every time we go through them. I hacked into the system and input my own RC Cell pattern into the scan gates. It was troublesome and time-consuming, but not hard. As for the food part, I was born a half-ghoul, so I can consume human food without any ill side-effects. The reason I infiltrated the CCG is a bit more complicated, but if you want to find a coffee shop or something, then I can take my time in explaining it."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Amon said firmly, his three-fingered hand tightening on his staff. "I don't care how long it takes. Explain."

I sighed. "I'm literally about to tell you my life story. Can we please find somewhere to sit down?"

"You're what?"

In the end, Amon agreed to come back to Kurona and Nashiro's apartment. They let us have our space while I did indeed tell him my life story-- and bits and pieces about Kaneki Ken's. It was just enough for him to understand the full picture, but I did explain my motives now, and what I aimed to do.

"Destroy Kanou, huh..." Amon stared at the coffee in his hands. "I... understand a little, now. His experiments are horrifying, but why would his own son..."

"Because the people who raised me may have had questionable morals," I announced. "But they did have morals, unlike Kanou. If I hadn't been raised how I was, if I had grown up under Kanou's thumb, at his beck and call, I've got no doubt. I would have been a complete monster. And that's what I'm trying to stop-- Kanou's trying to create another me, to replace me, since I've no doubt been deemed a 'floppy' for being so disobedient. The child he's creating will be kept under careful watch, under only Kanou's influence, and it'll obey Kanou completely, to please 'Father.' child won't be like me, with an abrupt change of heart. It'll be an absolute monster, simply Kanou's mindless puppet, and in order to get that one child, another six hundred and twenty-four will be sacrificed. Innocent children will be born and will die simply for that purpose, for spare parts."

Amon, for as big and strong of a man that he was, looked sickened. "Children will be... bred... for spare parts?"

I nodded, swallowing around the bile in my own throat and keeping my expression carefully collected and calm. "I'm not some hero, Amon-san. I'm not going to get around the fact that I've done
a lot of terrible things and will probably continue to do so, if that's what it takes to reach my goals, all of which are mostly selfish and for my own gain. But it's not just my vendetta against Kanou any longer: it's the revenge for six-hundred and twenty-four others."

His face was... pale. But I didn't give him a chance to respond, looking him dead in the eye and hoping that he still had a soft spot for children and a strong sense of justice.

"So, what do you say, Amon Koutarou? Will you try to stop me, or will you lend me your assistance?"

"I'm not stupid, Nagachika," Amon said flatly. "I want to help you, but I also want to hear your terms first."

I chuckled. "Smart as always, huh, Amon-san? Well then, how about we meet tomorrow afternoon, in a coffee shop I know? It's late now, and I've got a meeting tomorrow. I need to make a call home and tell Haise that I won't be making there in the morning, so he needs to bring my case notes with him. Can I do that, before it gets any later?"

Amon hesitated, but nodded, and I made the call. Haise picked up on the first ring, sounding sleepy but not like he'd been asleep.

"Hide. What's wrong?"

"Hello to you too, geez," I sniffed. "And why do you always assume something is wrong when I call? Can't I just call to hear your voice?"

"Hide. It's midnight-- almost one. Whenever you call later than ten, I assume it's always something wrong."

"That is-- actually, pretty true," I admitted. "But I just won't be making it home tonight. Won't get to the train station in time, so I'm just going to crash at Uta's. Will you bring my case notes with you in the morning, to the meeting?"

"Of course I will. Oh, and Doctor Shiba called. He wants to draw some blood tomorrow and update our RC Cell Count, so make sure you get to Headquarters earlier than normal."

Internally grimacing at the thought of the preparations I would need to go through, I said, "Alright, I will! But hey, make some eggs for breakfast tomorrow, won't you? And make Mutsuki drink some orange juice. Or milk, at the very least."

"I can do it," Haise confirmed. "But why eggs and orange juice?"

"Eggs and milk have b-12 in them," I explained, waving a hand despite the fact that he couldn't see me. "And orange juice has vitamin C. Both of those things help with anemia, most of the time, and you know how bad Mutsuki's gets sometimes."

"Okay, I'll make sure I do that," Haise said, and what sounded like a muffled yawn came through the phone. "Goodnight, Hide. I love you."

"I love you too, Haise. Sleep well," I said, then tucked my phone back into my pocket as the line went dead. I sighed. "Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan! Wanna try out some of your medical training first-hand?"
"Yeah, that's right," I confirmed, as Kurona and Nashiro made incisions into my arms, much to Amon's fascination and horror. "Then insert the plastic tubes into my arms-- and make sure they're sealed completely, we don't want the blood leaking out. They should have been soaking in the RC Suppressants long enough now, so they won't dissolve for a good twelve hours or so, definitely long enough for the blood test to be taken."

The Yasuhisa twins' concentration really was a marvel. Their kakugans didn't appear even once, something that couldn't be said for Amon, whose kakugan had bled into his right eye the minute the incisions had been made and the smell of my blood had seeped into the air. Their hands were steady as they set down the scalpels, which had been made of quinque steel and coated in suppressants, down and inserted the tubes full of blood into my arms, resting just above my veins.

"How... How will this help you pass a blood test?" Amon said, looking like he was fighting to keep his kakugan suppressed and failing miserably.

"When Doctor Shiba draws my blood tomorrow, he'll draw it from the tubes instead of my veins," I explained, as the twins checked their handiwork carefully. "The blood inside the tubes matches my blood type, and the RC Cell Levels are just a little bit higher than the last time I faked my blood test. It's from the same donor, too-- a ghoul in this apartment building, actually-- so the DNA matches the last time. Anyways, it's basically so the CCG doesn't have my real DNA, nor do they have my actual RC Cell Level."

Amon still looked distantly ill as my incisions healed over and Nashiro handed me a gauze pad soaked in alcohol, and I wiped the blood off my arms with a bright smile.

"Good work, Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan! All of those hours cramming medical knowledge has finally been put to good use!"

They beamed at the praise, and I ruffled their hair after setting the bloodstained cloth down. Then, the atmosphere turned slightly serious, as I focused back on Amon.

"So, Amon-san. I was telling you about that coffee shop, and I can explain all of my terms and plans then. When are you free? My meeting should let out at eleven-ish or, at the latest, noon."

"I don't have... plans, tomorrow," Amon said, after a moment. "I can be at this coffee shop of yours at eleven, and I don't mind waiting."

I smiled. "Alright, that's settled, then! Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan, will you show him to :re tomorrow? It won't interfere with you're classes, right?"

Kurona shook her head. "No, we don't have classes then. We can show him to :re. Do we tell Kirishima-san he's with you, Hide-nii?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that'd be best. Don't worry, Amon-san, the cafe is run by some close friends of mine. They're ghouls too, is what I mean, so don't bother ordering food to keep up appearances. But please wear something other than those robes. It's a little... conspicuous, and my friends are trying to stay under the CCG's radar."
Amon had an odd expression for a moment, and with an abrupt realization, I wasn't sure if he had anything else to wear. Two years of living on his own, technically declared deceased, with no family registry, and a body that had suddenly been altered beyond recognition...

*This is how Kaneki could have turned out, without Anteiku.*

"Say, Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan, would you get something for Amon-san to wear?" I asked. "I'll put him up in one of the spare apartments for tonight, and I'd be a hassle to send him home at this point."

Nashiro understood, and Kurona wasn't far behind her. They nodded, in the eerie synchronization of theirs, and Nashiro said, "Of course, Hide-nii. No guarantee on the perfection of the fit, though."

Amon looked relieved. "Thank you, both. I don't mind how the clothes fit."

I stood and stretched, then sighed as the muscles in my back creaked in protest. "Well then, Amon-san, let's go downstairs and arrange to be put up in an apartment for the night."

Amon stood up and followed me, bowing stiffly to Kurona and Nashiro as we left.

"Thank you both again. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"It's fine, Amon-san," Kurona assured, and Nashiro nodded her agreement. "We don't mind it. Good night, Hide-nii."

"Night, Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan!" I called cheerily, shutting the door behind me. I didn't say anything to Amon until we were in the elevator, then my smile turned cold.

"Listen, Amon-san," I said, and my tone was just a hint diminutive and mocking, my kakugan gleaming. "If you betray my trust and hurt anyone in this building, you'll pay dearly. I'll make you hurt tenfold for every person you even think about injuring. Am I clear?"

The shock he felt at my abrupt change was displayed on Amon's face as clearly as a neon sign.

"I wouldn't think about hurting anyone here."

The cold, threatening aura that permeated the air of the elevator vanished in a flash, and my smile was sunny in the blink of an eye, my kakugan dissipating in an instant. The doors dinged, and I stepped out, making sure that my voice was cheery but quiet, so as to not wake the three children sleeping peacefully on the lobby couch.

"Great! Shall we go, then?"

"Hide, you're tie isn't knotted right," Haise scolded, looking amused, as I entered Doctor Shiba's office thirty minutes before the meeting was due to start. "And your hair is messed up."

"Oh, like it's any worse than your bedhead," I muttered, but I reached up to fix it nonetheless.
"Anyways, I didn't end up getting to sleep until after two, so shut it."

Haise chuckled, standing from where he sat in a waiting chair while Shiba drew Urie's blood, the rest of the Quinx already gone-- they had probably already had blood drawn, and gone up to the meeting already. When he reached where I stood, trying to tame my hair (or at the very least, make it presentable), he reached up and undid my tie, fixing the knot. "Oh, poor baby."

"Are you mocking me?" I asked, letting a faux hurt creep into my tone. "Haise! You're mean!"

"You've pulled all-nighters before," Haise reminded, still smiling, as we moved to sit down. "At least now you've slept a few hours."

"True, true," I hummed, giving up on taming my hair. "On a side note, do you know a good place to get my hair cut at? It's annoyingly long."

"I can cut it," Haise offered. "I know how to. At least, I cut Mutsuki's hair, and I trim Saiko's, when it needs to be. Shirazu does his own thing, and Urie goes to see a professional, though."

Kaneki used to cut my hair... before he 'disappeared', anyways. But when did Haise learn to cut hair?

I voiced my thoughts. "When'd you learn how to cut hair? They don't teach that in the Academy."

Haise got that distant look in his eyes, for just a brief second. "I don't know. I just... know how to do it. Nobody taught me, that I can remember, but I think I learned how to... before." He glanced down at his hands. "I don't remember who taught me, or how I learned, or even why. But I think that I used to cut someone's hair... someone important to me, maybe?"

He... remembers?

My thoughts were cut short by Urie leaving, the door to Shiba's office closing with a whooshing of air.

"Alright, Sasaki, Nagachika. I'll prep the quinque needles, so give me a moment."

Haise, the distant look gone, smiled at Shiba. "Of course, Doctor Shiba."

I thought to myself that the smile was outwardly polite, even demure. Inwardly, it was a bit more reserved, but not fake.

It wasn't fake.

I smiled too.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, don't panic! That wasn't Hide's full 'talk' with Amon-- there's still more to come, I promise!
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

The notes overflowed. I had to use the summary too.

Teodora87 recently brought up a point that I've been wanting to approach forever now, but I've never found a good reason to because nobody mentioned it before. The question was:

"[T]here is one thing that is bugging me in this chapter. Isn't Haise a bit too chatty with someone he knows nothing about? After all he is in a delicate situation, being a half ghoul and a ccg investigator, he should be more careful sharing such information."

And that's completely correct. Because yes, the Quinx Project wasn't kept under wraps, considering that all of the Academy students had to take an aptitude test for it, but Haise is sharing government secrets with someone who, despite being an Academy student, is essentially a complete stranger.

So why did he do that? Let's delve into my reasoning.

Chapter Notes

I've consulted my psychology knowledge [textbooks, booklets, books over various theories, websites] but one of my main bases for my reasoning is something called the Motivated Forgetting Theory, which suggests that people forget things because they either do not want to remember them or for another particular reason. Painful and disturbing memories are made unconscious and very difficult to retrieve, but still remain in storage. Retrieval Suppression is one way in which we are able to stop the retrieval of unpleasant memories using cognitive control. This theory was tested by Anderson and Green using the Think/No-Think paradigm. (Simplified definition courtesy of Wikipedia). The thing here is that people never truly forget things completely, because even using the Decay Theory as soon as the neurons are re-activated, memory returns.

So even if memories are suppressed (such as, due to amnesia caused by massive brain damage) they're never out of the subconscious mind's reach.

Then, Teodora87 brought up another excellent point that gave me more chances to explain my bases for the way I think Haise's mind works. (Which I'm really happy about, actually) The question (or rather, statement that I took gladly as a question) was:

"Oh, I completely agree with the subconscious trust, I do understand Haise's feelings when it comes to Hide. But I thought that maybe he would be using his rational mind over his emotions, since he is a professional, somewhat like Arima. For some reason I really like Arima's influence on Haise."

(I really like Arima's influence on Haise too)
What's happening here, Haise opening up about topics that he really shouldn't, isn't based on his conscious reasoning. It's his unconscious mind telling him that he knows this person, it's okay to talk, it's alright to open up. Hide is familiar and comforting and (too) easy to open up to, but Haise doesn't know why. He doesn't even consciously recognize the fact that he wouldn't (shouldn't) open up this much to someone who is essentially a complete stranger. Because subconsciously, this person isn't a stranger to him. This is his best friend, the only friend he ever had growing up.

He just doesn't realize it.

My reasoning for that was based on a lot of things, but a lot of them come from Sigmund Freud. I've (subtly) included a lot of psychological reasoning in this-- hours upon hours worth, which was really fun to do. And I'm not being sarcastic-- psychology is fun.

I think that Arima did influence Haise a lot, and probably continues to. Even after regaining his memories, after all, Kaneki/Sasaki still looks up to Arima like a father-figure. The rational portion of his mind is influencing his decisions, but when taking the three parts of the mind (conscious, pre/subconscious, and unconscious) the 'conscious' or 'rational' part of the mind only accounts for roughly ten percent of the mind, while the subconscious mind occupies fifty to sixty percent, and the unconscious mind occupies thirty to forty percent. So the part of his mind that remembers Hide is a whopping total of ninety percent-- Haise just can't recall any of it (or rather, him) consciously.

Another thing relating to that: the subconscious mind and the unconscious mind process all of the past data (memories and experiences) combined with the data your conscious mind is receiving, then the two parts ultimately make the decisions based on what is best for your survival. In essence, if it worked in the past and you survived/and or it kept you the safest, the subconscious and unconscious mind will make the same choice again, regardless of how the results might negatively impact your current 'conscious' goals and/or life.

In Haise's case, not trusting Hide in the past (Hide told him not to go with Rize because she was out of his league [Sasaki/Kaneki doesn't know that Hide was planning on sending him with Rize all along], and in the end, Hide gave him the chance at living as 'Haise' [in which he doesn't have to fear being hunted for his nature], and stopped his hunger-induced, manic state when he was half-dead in the sewers) ended up being a bad decision. Subconsciously and unconsciously, he's made the decision to best guarantee his survival-- trusting Hide. Which would trump the ten percent of his mind (conscious) that is telling him to stick to the professional nature he'd gained under Arima's influence.

And all of this is going on inside Haise's head without him knowing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After the meeting, during which Ui approved all of our battle formations, gave us copies of the Tsukiyama Manor's layout, and our assigned areas to enter the building, with a mostly-complete list of our objectives, I walked to :re, while Haise and the kids went their own ways.

When I entered the cafe, Nishio was waiting, and he jerked a thumb to a corner booth.

"You're friend is waiting for you. He's been here since eleven."
"I know," I said, glancing at my watch. It was almost noon. "Thanks, Nishio-san."

Nishio just shrugged, leaving for behind the counter, and I walked to where Amon was sitting, dressed in a suit and looking eerily similar to how he used to.

"Hello, Amon-san."

He inclined his head, setting down his coffee. "Hello, Nagachika."

I loosened the belt of my white coat when I sat down, shifting a little and setting my briefcase down. I remembered when Haise and I had first started coming to :re, and the ghoul customers would be nervous, watching our briefcases with skiddish eyes. Touka had assured them that we weren't to be worried about, and now I didn't even receive a second glance, despite my attire.

"Can we get right down to business? I've got training with Shirazu-- ah, the boy with the orange hair-- this afternoon, so I've got to make it home by then," I explained. Nishio sat a cup of coffee down in front of me, glancing at Amon once before returning to wiping down tables. "So, what do you want first? What I want you to do, or what you'll receive in return?"

"It doesn't matter," Amon shrugged, and I took it as an answer, beginning to launch into my practiced speech.

"My current strategy is simply to pick off his laboratories, and to kill the ones who stand with him-- which is the Aogiri Tree members that guard him and the lab assistants that work for him. None of them are innocent, but I will say this: I'm only killing them. I'll spare the children, if there are any there, which is doubtful. Simple in theory, but it does require more manpower than I'd like, which is where you'd come in. As a second job, you'd help keep Aogiri Tree out of my ward-- that is to say, the Fifth Ward-- and to help the Clowns keep order there. Work as security for the apartment, maybe." I paused to take a drink of my coffee. "As for what you'll receive, it'll be worth it. A family registry good enough to pass the CCG inspecting it with a microscope, an apartment in the building, information. If you really need it, food, but there aren't that many suicide victims and I like to reserve those for the families that can't hunt for themselves. Name it, and I'll get it."

Amon laced his fingers. "You say you need manpower, but do you, really? You could get by with the strength you have now, surely. So why? Why are you going to such lengths to help me?"

I surprised myself when I answered honestly.

"I don't really know myself. Maybe it's because I used to know you, and I feel a little guilty for turning you into a ghoul. But I think it's a bit more than that. I think it's because you remind me of what I did to Kaneki, and what could have happened to him, if he hadn't had Anteiku there to help him."

Amon still looked a little bit confused, a little hesitant, and I laughed bitterly.

*I'll put it into words you understand, man of God.*

"You remind me of my sins, Amon Koutarou, and I want to make amends."

---
I wondered if I was doing something wrong by keeping Touka and Hinami's identities from him. Rabbit and Daughter Ghoul had killed his first partner, and I didn't have enough information on his psyche yet to accurately predict his reaction. I had a few ideas, but I wouldn't take the risk of testing them.

*I won't hurt Touka-chan and Hinami-chan because of my mistakes. I just need to keep Amon away from them while they're masked.*

"That's enough for today, Shirazu," I said, taking my foot off of his chest and offering him a hand. "I didn't break anything, did I?"

Shirazu, panting and sweating, looking a bit like he'd been through the wringer, took my proffered hand and I pulled him up. He shook his head, unable to speak until he'd caught his breath.

"Nah... I'm... fine."

I laughed, and tossed a towel at him. He caught it reflectively, and I noted just how much he'd improved. "Okay. I'm going to go get a new water bottle, so I'll grab you one too, while you stretch out. You want to use the downstairs shower or the upstairs?"

"Downstairs," Shirazu puffed, and I left him there while I walked out of the training room and into the kitchen. Haise was sitting on a couch in the living room, his glasses perched on his nose, a book held in his hand.

"Hide? Done training?" Haise asked, carefully marking his page and setting it down, turning his eyes to me. His glasses are sitting at the very edge of his nose and I resist the urge to laugh.

"Yeah," I answer, digging two water bottles out of the fridge and walking back down the hall way, just enough to see Shirazu sprawled out on the ground and definitely not doing cool-down stretches. With a disapproving gaze, I left his water bottle and chuck it down the hallway. It struck his side and Shirazu made a muffled noise of protest. "Shirazu's going to take a shower, but I think I'll go for a walk first, to cool down."

Haise looked thoughtful as I uncapped my water bottle and drank it down at a rapid rate. "I think I'll come with you, if that's okay. A walk sounds nice."

A little surprised, I blinked, but had no qualms. "Yeah, sure. That's fine with me."

Haise smiled, leaving his book on the coffee table and going to put his shoes on with me. We left the house, and I took a breath of the fresh air, slightly chilled mid-fall air. The sky is drearily grey, the setting sun hidden behind clouds, but I don't mind the chill. Haise's hand found mine and we walked away from the Chateau-- which is actually situated in a nice community, with decent security. A lot
of higher-ranking ghoul investigators lived here, which made sense, considering that most of them also had vengeful ghouls baying for their blood and wanted a nice, safe community for their children to live. Another bonus: if one of us were to lose control, plenty of strong investigators to subdue us. At least, I was sure that was the CCG's reasoning-- until we had made our way into the city. I hadn't realized we had walked very far until thunder rumbled, and Haise looked at the sky worriedly.

"It wasn't supposed to rain today. We didn't bring an umbrella."

"Well, weathermen can be wrong," I said with mirth, though just how much the sky had darkened was slightly worrying. "Do you think we can make it home before the rain starts?"

"Maybe," Haise said, but he still looked worried. I tightened my hold on his hand and laughed.

"A little rain won't hurt us. We've been through a lot worse than a storm, after all."

Haise turned away from the sky and towards me as I spoke, and I compared absentmindedly the color of the storm clouds and his eyes.

"You're right, Hide."

"What are you talking about? I'm always right!"

Ironically, I liked the color of Haise's eyes, the soft, dove-feather grey, much better.

Amon looked uncomfortable and more than a little freaked out when I lead him to HySy, six days before the Tsukiyama raid was to take place.

"What is this place, again?" He asked warily, and I paused, my hand on the knocker-like doorknob.

"It's HySy ArtMask Studio," I said, but he still looked confused and I rolled my eyes. "It's where people go to have masks made. Which is the reason I've brought you here, mister new-to-everything-ghoul."

Amon tactfully ignored my jibe, which didn't really have any ill intent behind it, as I flung the door open. Uta was nowhere to be found, but there was a suspiciously human-shaped lump underneath a sheet, on top of one of the display cases. Amon seemed to notice it too, because he walked towards the sheet hesitantly, picking up the edge and lifting it up slowly. Uta blinked up at him, with his dyed eyes and pierced grin.

"Boo!"

Amon wasn't scared, but a he was more than a little mystified. "Ah. Hello?"

Itori popped up from behind Uta's desk, pouting as she walked towards us in frighteningly tall heels. "U-chan! You needed to jump out at him-- like rawr!" She exclaimed, and leaped upwards, wrapping her arms around Amon's neck, much to his dismay.
Uta frowned. "But I didn't want to do that to a customer. That would be rude."

Itori paid him no mind, tilting her head to the side and peering at Amon. "But wow, you're a big guy! Kiddo, why didn't you tell me you were bringing home another handsome fellow?"

I sighed, but it was fond. "I-chan, you make it sound like I'm cheating or something. And this is specifically the reason I didn't tell you I was bringing someone home. You react like this."

Itori gasped, like I had personally injured her, and threw and arm across her forehead dramatically, leaning back but keeping a vise-like arm around Amon's neck. He made a choked noise and an alarmed look. I wondered if she was actually cutting off his air supply-- it seemed like she was.

"How rude! U-chan, this is all your fault! I didn't raise him like this!"

"No, you did," Uta assured her. "And now, please get off my customer. You'll ruin my business like this, Itori."

Itori stuck her tongue out at Uta in a childish manner, but she did climb down off of Amon's shoulders, to his relief and Uta's amusement.

"Now then," Uta hopped off of the glass case, walking to his desk and getting a long measuring tape, along with a jar of eyes, not-so-carefully plucked from their skulls. "Before I get started, does anyone want a snack?"

Amon looked sick. "I don't... eat people..."

I frowned. "Well then, what do you eat?"

The question seemed to make him uncomfortable, but I didn't relent.

"I eat ghouls," Amon said eventually, and I wanted to bang my head against a wall. I had heard of similar instances with young ghoul children, who broke down in tears at the thought of killing someone to eat. I'd never understood such qualms about eating people-- sure, they weren't cattle or anything, but I'd never lost sleep over killing someone to eat them.

_Had I?_

_I stood in my carefully tailored neon clothes, holding onto Itori and Uta's hands like life-lines. I was young, very young, but already smart enough to know that I was different. We walked from rooftop to rooftop at a pace too fast for a human child to keep up but just slow enough for a ghoul child to run. My mask seemed to fit to my face like a second skin, my breaths too loud. The night sky seemed dazzlingly bright, the stars wonderfully close, and I tripped over my feet trying to look at them. Itori and Uta steadied me gently._

"Now's not the time to space out, Kiddo," Itori said softly. _Her mask, the sharp teeth and card symbols gleaming in the moon's light, seemed like a ray of light in it's own right to me, my young brown eyes wide._
"I'm sleepy, I-tan, U-ta," I said, but it wasn't whining, just a mere statement of a fact. "Where're 'e going?"

Itori and Uta, fluent in my toddler-speech, didn't even bat an eye at my butchered pronunciations.

"To grab a bite to eat," Uta said cheerfully. "You're going to go hunting all by yourself."

"Don' kno' how to," I said, confused. "Wha's... hunt-ing?"

"Hunting is a noun," Itori explained, in the way they always had explained foreign words to me. "It means 'the activity of hunting wild animals or game, especially for food or sport'."

"It's derived from the verb 'hunt', for which the best definition to fit our circumstance is the second meaning, 'of an animal, chase and kill, it's prey'." Uta explained further.

I nodded slowly as we jumped from one roof to the next, Itori and Uta swinging me over the divide. The feeling, like flying, made me grin and giggle.

"Wha' 'r' we hunt-ing?" I asked, as we slowed to a stop at the edge of a roof. "Food?"

"Mmm-hmm," Itori hummed. "You're gonna make your first kill tonight, Kiddo!"

"...kill," I said thoughtfully. "'erb. 'Cause the de... death of'."

"Good boy!" Uta said, ruffling my hair, and I beamed at his praise. "We're going to go kill somebody, so that you can eat. Does that make sense, Hide?"

It seemed confusing, to me, the need to kill someone to eat. I was too young to have made the distinction between ghouls and humans, then, and everyone was a person to me.

"Kill... some-bo-dy?" I asked. It wasn't a question of right or wrong, to me: it was simply an inquiry to sate my curiosity. "Why?"

Itori and Uta exchanged glances at my question, and they took off their masks to crouch beside me.

"It's because you're special, Hide. You're a ghoul, but you can eat regular food. Other ghouls can't do that. You've still got to eat regular people, though, in order to get big and strong. You've got to eat humans. And to eat humans, you've got to kill them," Itori explained.

"Why's that, I-tan?" I asked again, tilting my head to the side a little, the picture of curiosity.

Uta answered me instead, smiling.

"This world is a very nasty place, Hide, however exciting it may be. It's survival of the fittest. Only the strong survive. To become strong, you need to eat. To eat, you need to kill." He pinched my cheek, something that normally irritated me but now just cemented the memory. "So eat, eat and kill, Hide. Become strong. Survive."
I sat bolt upright in bed, breathing just a little bit hard, my heart going just a little bit too fast.

Haise stirred at my abrupt awakening, reaching up to rub his eyes and blink at me hazily.

"Hide? Is something wrong?" More awake now, he sat up beside me, looking concerned. His hand found mine, twining his fingers through mine, helping to chase away the last bits of sleep. "...did you have a nightmare again, Hide?"

I blinked a few times to clear my vision, still clouded from sleep. For a brief moment, it was hard to tell the difference between reality and the memory, but the confusion vanished as soon as it had appeared. I wasn't a child, standing in an alleyway, looking down at the kill I had made. I was home, in bed, and was worrying Haise.

Lie to him. Don't make him worry.

I smiled at him, ignoring my still-racing heartbeat. "I'm fine, Haise. I can't even remember what I dreamed about, now. Sorry for waking you."

"It's nothing to be sorry about," Haise said, and there were still shadows of concern in his voice and gleaming in eyes. "Can you fall back to sleep, or should I go start the coffee? We can talk instead."

I want to talk about it.

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Let's just go back to sleep."

Haise nodded, and I made sure that when we laid back down, I tucked an arm around his waist so that he lay with his back turned to me. That way, he didn't notice when I stayed awake, eyes wide open and mind far away, lost in the memory of a bloody alley and a messy decapitation.

The night I had made my first kill. Or rather, my first voluntary kill.

The scars on my back burned.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, we haven't seen much of Amon in :re, and I'm really not sure how to write him. He's had no lines beside the "Yasuhisa" bit, and I don't think I would have had Hide meeting him (properly) if it weren't for the fact that Amon does appear at the very end of this, when he finally gets a talk with Kaneki/Sasaki. And it's an important talk. Boy, is it important. In fact, it may end up being the closer for this entire fic.

Anyways, that's why Amon's part is so small. I have no idea how to write him. And since he doesn't have any lines, I can't really dissect what his mental state is or what's going on inside his head. Help on the probable changes to his personality would be appreciated in the comments.

Also, that isn't the last bit about Hide's past that'll be included. Because something I do want to draw attention to something else: just because his father is a doctor doesn't mean he automatically knew lots of medical/surgical procedures. He's actually put a lot of time into studying them, and why exactly he did so is what will be touched upon.
It was raining, something that faintly irritated me, as I stood on the edge of a rooftop, staring at the innocent-seeming clinic across the street.

Ha. Innocent. As if.

It was really a cover-up for one of Kanou's laboratories, which spanned into a basement that was just as extensive as the upper floor, which was another irritating thing. I was edgy, ready to move, ready to fight, but I had to wait for the others to arrive.

I didn't wait long. Soon, Furuta arrived.

"Hello, Souta," I said, from my perch on the edge of the roof. "Nice weather, isn't it?"

"I can never tell if you're being sarcastic or not," Furuta muttered, coming to sit beside me and sighing boredly. "Do we really have to wait for the others? I'm sure we could wipe them all out between the two of us."

"I could wipe them all out on my own," I said, propping a head on my hand. "But that doesn't mean I could guarantee there'd be no survivors. Between the two of us, we can't block off all of the exits and ensure that nobody lives."

"We could just knock the building's supports out," Furuta suggested. "Or set a bomb off. Or set the building on fire."

"That's no fun," I reproached. "Killing indirectly is a cowardly thing to do. If you're going to kill, you've got to at least do it with your own two hands."

"How courteous of you, killing them manually," Nishio said dryly, his voice partially muffled by his mask.

"Ah, Touka-chan, Nishio-san, Yomo!" I said, jumping to my feet eagerly. "You're all here? Let's get going, then!"

"Eager, aren't we," Touka commented, but she merely tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and shrugged. "Alright, let's go."

I took a few steps back before glancing down, making sure none of the civilians were looking up. When it was confirmed they weren't, I took a running leap, clearing the street in a single, swift jump. In a few seconds time-span, everyone had successfully followed me over, clearing the gap with feet to spare.

There was a door, leading down into the building, set on the roof. Nishio started towards it, inspecting the lock, his head tilted to the side a little as he studied it. I opened my mouth, ready to ask if he was going to simply pry the door open--

--and Nishio kicked the door in with enough force to crack it in half and rip it off the hinges, smashing into bits when it collided with the wall.
Furuta snickered. "I like this one."

I sighed. "So much for stealth. I'll lead the charge down the stairs. Touka, Yomo, you two cover the front exit, and Nishio, Furuta, you two take the back. We'll try to make this raid quick, since we don't need any information this time. Remember, I want no survivors."

"Understood, boss," Touka said, and I glared at the nickname through my mask. She and Yomo were gone, however, before I could comment on it. I turned to where Furuta had been, but both he and Nishio were also already gone to man their posts and infiltrate from their assigned points.

I was alone on the roof, and with a roll of my eyes, I started down the stairs.

The first Aogiri members I came across were rushing up the stairs to meet me. I beheaded them, taking a small bit of pride in my clean kills, my signature. Then, not giving my perfect decapitations another thought, I reached up to unbutton my stiff-collared outer shirt, stopping with only half of the buttons left. My outer-shirt folded back over itself neatly, stopping just above my tailbone. The white undershirt I wore beneath it, just as oddly formal and stiff-collared but otherwise undecorated, had a section of the back cut out neatly. My ukaku, like two brightly-colored wings of RC Cells, unfurled from my shoulders with the sounds of tearing skin, just in time for me to emerge from the stairwell and into the main laboratory. My arrival was accompanied by a choir of screeching, as scientists scrambled for quinque guns and Aogiri guards swarmed towards me, only to be cut to pieces by a barrage fist-sized ukaku shards that tore through abdomens and throats, sending a rain of blood splattering all over the pristine white walls. A few times, scientists did get off shots before I killed them, and I dodged all the bullets like it was child's play. And to me, it was.

I heard a disapproving noise, and looked up to see Touka glaring at me through her mask's eye-holes.

"Did you even need us? It looks like you're handling mass slaughter pretty well on your own. At this rate, there won't be anyone left for us to kill."

I paused, and my ukaku dissipated to conserve my RC Cells. With a glance around the laboratory's room, I realized that I had already killed everyone in it. "Ah... sorry, Rabbit-chan. I guess I got a little... carried away."

It had felt good to kill with my ukaku, though I knew tactically it was foolish of me, when it would have been a better choice to use my bikaku, which was overall more powerful and had more advantages. But some illogical portion of me wanted to continue on with my ukaku rampage. It felt like my shoulders were burning with the urge to release my ukaku regardless of the action's foolishness. It was euphoric, almost, to kill in this way, when I hadn't in so long.

_It was like... by killing with the kagune that wasn't truly mine to begin with, I accepted the burden that was six-hundred and twenty-four other's revenge. I was giving them their revenge while I accomplished mine._

Touka just shrugged. "Well, we'll handle sweeping the floor here. I think N-- Serpent and Souta already went down to start clearing the basement level, if you want to head down there."

I nodded. "I'll do that. Thanks, Rabbit-chan."

"Be careful, Pierrot."

Taking her warning in stride and trying to quell the acidic anger and desire for bloodshed that had risen inside of me with the high of epinephrine, I stepped over torn corpses and broken ukaku shards,
making my way to the door that lead to the basement, which had already been broken and set aside. The stairwell that lead down was covered in blood, the bodies of scientists and Aogiri Tree guards cluttering the passageway. I stepped over-- and sometimes, on-- their fallen forms as I made my way down.

The floor of the basement was more bloodstained than the hallway had been, and I easily identified Furuta's messy kills and Nishio's more... quick, kills. Furuta liked to make the victim suffer. Nishio normally didn't.

I found them in a lab, killing the remaining survivors. Nishio kicked one rather unfortunate scientist into the wall, and she slumped to the floor, neck hanging in an odd fashion that suggested a clean spinal break, which I almost commended Nishio on.

I didn't have the chance, because he jerked a thumb to a metal door.

"Oi. Check it out. That wasn't on the blueprints."

Frowning, I inspected the door. It smelled oddly, and I reached out to touch it, pressing against it and testing it's strength. With a grimace, my suspicions confirmed, I pulled back.

"It's made of quinque steel. I'll need to break it down with force, and it won't bend like normal metal- it'll shatter, and the shards will cut you, so stand back."

Furuta waved a hand. "You could have just said 'stand back'."

I ignored him, studying the door for another brief moment before letting my bikaku emerge and smash into it. Like I had said it would, the metal shattered and broke into bits of shrapnel that flew into the air at dangerously high speeds. I swatted them away absentmindedly, but Furuta wasn't so lucky, yelping irritably when one cut his leg.

Nishio snickered, and I suppressed one of my own.

"I did tell you to stand back."

Furuta threw a fist-sized shard of the door at me, but I ducked into the stairwell, not bothering to conceal my laughter any longer.

My laughter didn't last long, because as soon as I ducked out of the stairwell and into the hidden floor of the basement, a gun fired at my head and I didn't have time to dodge, forcing me to bat away the bullet with my hand. It burned my hand, but I didn't even wince, the pain just an irritating prickling as I inspected the bullet I had caught. A large-caliber quinque bullet-- probably from something larger than the simple handguns being used in the above-ground labs. These were heavier, too, made completely of quinque steel, and it was coated in a thick substance that reeked of something acridly metallic and hauntingly familiar to me. Something that slowed my healing considerably.

RC Suppressants. Strong ones, at that.

I dropped the bullet with a disgusted look, wiping my bloody and stinging hand on my pants.

"Serpent, Souta, keep back. They've got heavy-duty RC Suppressants coated on their bullets-- and these bullets are completely made of quinque steel. If you get a bullet to a vital, you're done for, and I don't know how efficiently you both can dodge yet."

"Alright. Be careful, you Shitty Clown," Nishio called, and Furuta dared to stick his head around the stairwell for a glimpse of the floor.
I took in my surroundings warily. There was a high-rise structure that was definitely a control tower in the center of the room, a circular structure that looked similar to a lighthouse in design with steps that wound around it to the top platform, and around the room there were cells with similar metal doors. The rooms for the 'floppies', I supposed-- the ones that had lived, anyways.

Another shot rang out and I dodged, moving just enough to avoid being struck. The bullet ricocheted against the metal floors and skittered away from me, but the second bullet had been enough. I traced it's trajectory upwards, to the control tower, where a lone scientist stood, a sniper rifle in his hands.

He shot again, before I had time to start towards him, and I frowned irritably as I had to dodge the bullet, hindering my movement forward. With a tunnel-vision like focus, I darted forward with speed worthy of an ukaku ghoul, my kakugan flickering to life in my right eye, I grasped the railings of the stairs and shot up, one level, four levels, then I was at the top and looking down the barrel of the rifle, the scientist stumbling back in surprise. I grasped the gun and twisted the barrel downwards, bending the metal, but the scientist managed a devilish smile and smashed a lever down, snapping the handle off completely.

There was a whooshing of air and the cell doors slid open, failed experiments beginning to creep out of their cages in a frenzied, mindless swarm.

With a genuinely irritated expression, my hand shot out and grasped the scientist by his shirtfront, and I hauled him over the railing effortlessly, dangling him there and watching his smug smile twist into terror, a high-pitched whine of fear beginning in his throat, his terror tangible.

Once my amusement had been sated, I grinned devilishly, my kakugan gleaming harshly through my mask.

"Bye-bye," I announced, releasing him. He shrieked as he fell down, abruptly stopping when he hit the ground with a wonderful cracking noise, the sound of bones breaking and shattering. My grin was ear-to-ear when he moaned in pain-- he wasn't dead yet, but the floppies swarmed him, tearing at his skin until the moaning stopped.

"Sniper's dead," I called. "But he released the failures, and they're hungry, so be cautious."

Furuta responded by dashing out in front of Nishio and cutting down the floppies in extremely violent fashion, ripping them apart-- literally. Limbs were torn off, heads half-torn away from bodies, and internal organs splattered the floors. Even for a Clown, it was gruesome, and I perched atop the railing, letting my ukaku unfurl once more, trying to shoot down as many of the floppies as I could before Furuta got to them. Nishio seemed to have the same mindset, making quick, efficient kills-- but not as neat as mine were, I noted gleefully-- before Furuta could tear the failures apart. The air was saturated with the screaming of the floppies; most of them had been investigators, before Kanou had gotten his hands on them, some of them had even perhaps been my comrades, like Amon and Takizawa. The once-strong and proud Doves were reduced to nothing more than mindless monsters, with a desire to eat and nothing more.

It was pitiable, and my blood-lust, which had before been fueling me like gasoline in a fire, began to dwindle. These kills, mercy kills, brought me no joy, and I longed for more scientists or Aogiri guards, deaths that would bring me a fervorous drive to *slaughter and avenge, to kill more, to track Kanou down like a snake closing in on its prey and to murder him--*

I blinked, and the heated thoughts dissipated with my ukaku and kakugan. The sick feeling in my stomach had been burned away by the fiery acid of the thoughts, and I took a deep breath to calm myself, glancing around the bloodstained room.
Aside from myself, Nishio, and Furuta, nobody else remained in the room, excluding the crimson-stained corpses.

"Alright. You two sweep the rest of the basement and make sure there aren't anymore surprises," I said the word with acidic anger, "then we'll leave and call it good for tonight, assuming Rabbit-chan and Raven's sweep went well."

Furuta gave me a salute, somewhat ruined by his red-stained hands, which were coated in blood to the elbows. "Aye-aye, Boss!"

Nishio sighed, audible even from my perch. "Yeah, yeah. I've got it."

I smiled, despite the fact he couldn't see me behind my mask. "Thanks, Serpent."

Nishio shrugged, and didn't say a word besides that, leaving to sweep the basement, but I was certain that it wasn't out of irritation. My smile remained as I leapt off the watchtower and landed in a puddle of blood gracefully, staining my neon boots with crimson splatter. I ignored the squeaking of my shoes as I started up the stairs, making it up to the ground floor without issues. Touka and Yomo were waiting for me, patiently, in the main lab.

"Is the basement cleared?" Touka asked, and I nodded my affirmation.

"Yeah. We ran into a bit of a surprise, but it wasn't anything more than an irritation. Serpent and Souta are sweeping the basement to make sure that it's clear, though."

Yomo spoke, for the first time. "We've swept this floor already. It's clear."

"That's g--" I began, but was cut off rather rudely by a scientist dropping down from what had to have been the rafters of the low ceiling, a gun pointed at my forehead, at point-blank range. My hand darted out, my grin sharp and victorious as I moved faster than she had probably thought possible, swatting the gun out of her hand and sending it skidding across the floor. But another of the blasted guns was in her other hand, and she whipped it up, firing three consecutive shots that buried themselves in my shoulder, each making an individual circle of red blossom on my clothes. The wet, sticky, warm feeling of blood began to seep across the skin of my shoulder.

Yomo struck fast, and the scientist was dead in the blink of an eye, half of her head gone in an instant.

"That was rude," I said, but my voice seemed tinny and my vision out-of-focus, my stomach churning. "Shooting me out of the blue."

I stumbled, and Yomo steadied me. Touka's maskless face was suddenly visible to me, her blue eyes wide and worried.

"Hide-kun?" The tone of her voice was hollow, almost afraid.

I tried to laugh, but found that I couldn't. My head ached. "What's wrong, Touka-chan?"

Am I slurring my words?

Touka had to swallow hard before she managed to ask her question.

"Why-- Why isn't your regeneration starting?"
That's it for this chapter! The next one should be up really soon-- it's 5:40 p.m. ish where I am, and the next chapter is mostly written out already, so it'll probably be up around 8 ish? Unless there are unexpected delays, but I don't think there will be.

Also. Saiko's moment is next chapter. Are you ready for it?

Thanks for reading!
"Why-- Why isn't your regeneration starting?"

My hand seemed like it was moving through syrup, but I brought it up and felt at the wounds. My sense of touch was dulled by my stiff, white undershirt, and I fumbled with the buttons, trying to pull it off. Nishio, who had reappeared from the basement just behind Furuta, was beside me before I could blink (was I blinking slower than normal too?) and undoing the buttons of my shirt, prying it off of me to hang around my waist with my outer, neon-colored one. The colors seemed to swim before my eyes, but I forced myself to blink and look down to my shoulder, bare skin now evident. Three bullet wounds, the closest located roughly five centimeters from my heart. I was bleeding out like a human, my regeneration not working in the slightest.

"I... I'm not sure," I admitted, brows furrowing. It was difficult to breath, but not unbearably so, and my struggled words were caused by the fogginess in my thoughts. It seemed to cause a lag between my brain and my mouth. "I've eaten... recently..."

Then the metallic smell that definitely wasn't blood registered in my brain, and I cursed. "Give me the gun... Souta..."

Furuta did, looking pleasantly amused, in a surprised fashion. My hands fumbled, but I managed to empty one of the bullets into my hand. I tried to put pressure on the bullet, enough to crush it, but found myself unable to. It was distinctly frightening.

"Raven... crush this for me..."

Yomo took the bullet from me, his hands gentle, and just in front of me he crushed it with ease. The bullet was hollow and fragmented with the pressure, into sharp little bits of shrapnel, and a thick, clear-but-cloudy liquid spilled over Yomo's fingers. I laughed weakly.

"Damn him, Kanou... Those are... RC Suppressants. Stronger ones than I've ever... seen..." My vision blurred further, and I blinked furiously, trying to clear it. "I won't stay conscious much longer... So listen close... okay?"

I received serious nods, and dark eyes.

"Call the other raids. Tell 'm to meet you at this address... Gimme a piece of paper..."

There was rustling, and a sheet of blank computer paper was placed in front of me, with a pen. I took the pen, cursing my fingers for not working right, and scribbled down the address of the apartment building in the Fifth Ward.

"Ask for... Nashiro and Kurona... they'll... patch me up..." I coughed, and my eyes drooped, like I was tired. And boy, was I tired. "Bring 'm... the gun 'n bullets... and hurry, 'cause if not... I might...
actually die this time."

I've got Haise and the kids at home. I can't die.

With a laugh, I closed my eyes and let myself fall asleep, trusting myself in the hands of my friends. At least, Touka and Nishio were. Yomo was family. Furuta was... an ally.

I trust you guys, so make sure I wake up again.

Saiko watched the clinic carefully from the roof of the building just next to it, from behind a generator on the roof. It was just a little higher than the clinic’s roof was, giving her the perfect viewpoint. It had been almost thirty minutes now, and nobody had emerged from the building. But she wasn't about to give up-- Papa, her Papa, was in there, and he was probably doing something very important. Also, probably very illegal. But that wasn't important. What was important was the fact that she had been waiting, watching, just in case, and was ready to bring her kagune out and cause mass chaos at the drop of a hat, should the need arise. She was waiting to support him, should the time come.

The place where the door had been-- and Saiko wasn't going to say anything to compliment Serpent, because he had fought and hurt the people she cared about, but that was really damn cool when he kicked the door down-- was suddenly filled with people. No, ghouls, for as fast as they moved. In the hands of the ghoul known as Raven (Saiko knew, she had read his profile) was her Papa, torso bared to the cold winter air and three bloody holes in his shoulder that were bleeding an obscene amount of blood. A coat that was much too long had been thrown over him, but nothing covered his shoulders upward, probably for fear of disturbing his gory wounds.

Saiko felt frozen in ice. He wasn't moving, Papa wasn't moving, was he dead, no, he can't be dead he's Pierrot--

A hand caught her by the back of her hoodie, making her squeak in alarm and kick out, concentration lost. Her abruptly terrible thoughts had dissipated any chance she had of bringing out her kagune, and Saiko thrashed around with one of the knives she had pocketed from Mutsuki's room (sorry, Mucchan), succeeding in making a short slash along her assailant's arm that healed in a matter of seconds. Saiko, still in the grasp of her unseen assailant, was taken over the roof in a seemingly-effortless bound.

"Yoo-hoo, lookie what I found!" The voice announced cheerily. "A sur~vi~vor~!"

Rabbit didn't move from her place beside Raven, turning her masked face just slightly to look towards Saiko and her assailant. "Well, hurry up and kill it, beca-- shit, wait, don't kill her, Souta!"

Saiko knew that voice. Where did she know that voice from? In fact, her assailant's voice sounded familiar, too. It was hard to tell how she knew them, too hard, with the voices being muffled by masks.

"Oh, come the fuck on," Serpent declared angrily, a hand slapping down on his mask like he was
attempting to facepalm and had forgotten he was wearing a mask. "The bastard's bleeding out! We don't have time for this shit!"

"I know that, Serpent," Rabbit snapped. "But we can't kill her!"

"Why not?" Her assailant asked, and his tone was terrifyingly disappointed. "I want to, Rabbit!"

"Take off her mask, you idiot," Rabbit hissed. "Do it, Souta."

Saiko's heart beat faster. Why were they taking her mask off? Did they-- did they know she was a CCG Investigator? No, that wouldn't explain the reason they couldn't kill her. So why?

The ghoul called Souta took her mask off, peering at her face, and Saiko's heart thudded louder. He was a Clown, so he was one of Papa's allies, but it also meant he was at least almost S-rated. His mask didn't ring any bells, but Saiko had read so many files that her head was chock-full of them, and it was impossible to keep them all straight, hard as she tried. The cool air of wintertime nights hit her face, cooling her enough so that she didn't sweat (don't show fear, don't let them see you're afraid). What had Maman and Papa had always drilled into her?

The memory of Papa, ruffling her hair and smiling after a training match, when she hadn't even had a chance to bring her kagune out.

"It's okay, Saiko. You're attacks are freaky-powerful, so they take a long charge-up time, like an ultimate attack or a trump card. Your mother and I, we'll guard you until you're done charging up, but there will come a time when we aren't there. That's why you work in a team, Saiko-- Urie, Shirazu, Mutsuki, they'll protect you until you can fight." His eyes had turned a little darker, a little more serious. "But when you don't have anyone else there to protect you, Saiko, I want you to do a few things. Stay calm, don't lose your head, because foolishness will get you killed. Take in all the factors of the situation, and analyse them."

"I can't do that, Papa," Saiko protested. "Did you see my Academy grades? I'm not smart enough!"

His eyes had been furiously adamant. "Don't ever say you aren't smart enough. I don't care what your Academy grades were, because you weren't giving it your all then, you weren't even trying. You know the stats on all your favorite anime characters, don't you?"

"Well, yeah--"

"It's the same thing," He said firmly. "The profiles tell you all you'd ever want to know about a ghoul. So Saiko, take in everything. Your enemies, yourself, your surroundings; every last detail. Then you form a strategy to achieve your goal. Not one, but many. Make it as if the worst-case scenario would happen, and decide: what is the best course of action? Then you execute it, and don't look back."

Saiko tried to calm her rapid heartbeat and closed her eyes briefly. Things seemed to slow down, and her heartbeat was slow and impossibly loud in her ears. She was alone, with only a dagger to defend herself. She was calm. The facts of the situation were simple: Papa was bleeding out, being held gingerly by Raven, with regeneration that didn't seem to be working; she was being held by Souta, who desired to kill her; her weapon was essentially useless; and all of her enemies were S-ranked or possibly above.

Rabbit, S-ranked, ukaku. Serpent, S-ranked, binkaku. Raven, exact ranking unknown, set at S~ but liable to change, ukaku. Souta, ranking unknown but factoring in status as a Clown is probably also S~ ranked and liable to change.
Saiko wanted to laugh. None of her strategies were good ones. At worst-case scenario, she'd be dead, and so would Papa, probably. At the rate he was bleeding out... definitely.

*I think I'm crazy,* Saiko thought, opening her eyes. *But screw it. I'm going to try it.*

"Oh," Souta was saying. "She's--"

Saiko twisted, which was painful but not unbearably so, grabbing Souta's wrist and slashed her dagger along his wrist until it hit bone, then she forced it with all of her strength and gave it a powerful turn. A sickening *crack* resounded through the air, and Saiko was dropped as the tendons and ligaments in Souta's wrist were cut through, like a marionette's strings. He howled when his wrist was broken, and Saiko drove her heel down, smashing into his foot before leaping up and dragging the ghoul down, pressing her dagger into his neck, deep enough to cut him and to make blood bubble up around her dagger's blade. He made a pained, panting noise as she forced him to his knees and stood behind him, her eyes shifting to the other ghouls, who had frozen stiff.

"Nobody move," Saiko growled, her kakugan flickering to life in her left eye. "Your friend dies if you do. I'll decapitate him." She grasped a fistful of the dark hair of her captor-turned-captive, holding his head still and pressing the knife deeper into his neck. Souta made a high-pitched noise of protest. "And I *will* do it."

Serpent *laughed,* of all things. "God, of course. It's to be expected, from one of Pierrot's brats, that she'd pull a stunt like this."

Rabbit smacked him upside the back of his head. "Serpent! This is *serious!* Act your age, damn it!"

"*Both* of you, stop fighting and *answer my questions!*" Saiko declared, shifting her dagger and making Souta's whine become even further higher-pitched. "I don't care if he's a Clown, he'll die if I cut his head off! Don't you care about your friend?!"

"He's not really our friend," Serpent shrugged. "More of an ally. But he'd be a shame to lose, when it comes to fighting power."

"What are your questions?" Raven rumbled, and the other two fell silent.

"Why isn't Papa's regeneration working?" Saiko asked, and tried her best to suppress the hysteria in her voice. It wasn't working. "Why is he *bleeding like that?* He's going to be okay, won't he? *Won't he?*

Nobody answered her right away. Finally, Raven spoke, in that deep, rumbling voice of his. "We aren't very sure why exactly, either, but he said something about the bullets he was shot with being filled with RC Suppressants, and stronger ones than he'd ever seen. He might die."

"Raven!" Rabbit protested. "Don't tell her that! He's practically her father!"

*How does she know...? Was it because I called him Papa...? No, surely not...*

"It's better she knows the truth... Rabbit," Raven said. "As for your question, girl, he may not die. We're trying to get him medical assistance, but you stopped us."

"I'll release your... ally," Saiko declared. "Just... Just take me with you! So I know you aren't going to hurt him!"

Rabbit shook her head. *Absolutely* not. I am not going to bring one of the Doves into Pierrot's ward and tear down all of the stability, the security he's built! Go on, girl, so that we can save him!"
"I don't know that your going to help him, not hurt him!" Saiko shrieked. "I'm coming with you, or I'll cut his head off!"

"Girl," Serpent said, and it was surprisingly calm. "We're not his allies. We're his friends, and he trusted us to get him to medical assistance before he dies. I'd rather not betray that trust, because knowing that shit he'd come back from the dead to haunt me and make my life hell. So go home to your mother and siblings, girl, and let us save the man you call 'Papa'."

Mother and siblings...? They know about Maman...? And Uribo, Mucchan, and Shiragin...?

It clicked, and she was saying the words before she even registered them.

"You're... the people from :re... Kirishima-san, Nishio-san, and Yomo-san?" It was incredulous, but Saiko's ears were even better than Shirazu's were, and there was no mistaking it. The voices were muffled, but they were theirs. "You're Papa's..."

"Who are they, girl? I don't know wh--" Rabbit began, her voice a little too sharp, but Serpent sighed.

"Touka. She's got us figured out already." He reached up and lifted his mask up, to reveal the orange-brown hair of Nishio Nishiki, the waiter at :re cafe. "You're just like Nagachika. Too smart for your own good."

"Yonebayashi-chan," Raven, who was really Yomo but apparently wasn't going to remove his mask because of the bleeding body in his arms, announced. "We'll take you with us. We can't very well kill you, so please release our ally there."

Saiko did as asked, after a brief moment's hesitation. Souta darted away from her, rubbing at his neck and whining.

"Meanie. That hurt, you know."

Kirishima smacked him upside the head, as well. "Shut it, Souta. We need to get moving." Her eyes, the same soft blue gaze that had always greeted Saiko at :re with a warm smile, was as stony as her lips, which were pressed into a thin line. "Yonebayashi-chan. Keep up with us. We can't very well kill you, so please release our ally there."

And then, off with the speed of an ukaku ghoul, Kirishima was flying across the rooftops, with the towering giant Yomo keeping pace with her easily. Souta was just behind them, practically dancing across the rooftops.

Nishio was slower, deliberately matching her pace that was a good fourth slower than Kirishima, Yomo, and Souta.

"Listen, Yonebayashi-chan. Touka... she isn't normally like that. But you've got to understand, she's under a lot of stress right now," Nishio said, just loud enough to be heard over the whistling of the wind as they ran. Saiko was grateful, for once, that Maman and Papa had made her run those laps. "Nagachika could be dying for every second she slows down, and you've literally just discovered our biggest secret-- you, a Dove. Essentially, you've just begun our worst nightmare. Our lives will go to shit now. We'll have to move, change out names, break all the ties we have with loved ones--all because a Dove figured out we're ghouls. And that's if we even survive being hunted down like animals."

"I won't."
"What?" Nishio said, his voice muffled by his replaced mask. Saiko had picked up her own mask and replaced it before she left-- somehow, it was very sentimental object.

"I said, I won't. Turn you in. You're Papa's allies, his friends. So I won't turn you in."

Nishio laughed again. "You know, somehow, I actually believe you, however stupid the idea of a human being loyal to a ghoul is. In fact... you kind of remind me of someone I used to know."

Saiko didn't miss the way his hand went to the bangles on his wrist.

She didn't mention it.
When she asked Nishio where they were going and he responded with 'apparently a safe house, I don't actually know', Saiko expected a dilapidated building that lots of ghouls were hiding out in.

She didn't expect a well-kept, nice-looking, upper-middle-class apartment building. Apparently the others weren't either, because Kirishima stopped for a brief second to check a sheet of paper that, despite being slightly bloodstained, had only an address written on it. Yomo seemed to have no such qualms and strode right in.

There was a secretary at the desk and three small children, looking drowsy and watching some sort of cartoon on a phone, seated on one of the lobby couches with a pile of fluffy blankets to protect them from the chill of winter-- although, the apartment building was the perfect temperature. The secretary's eyes widened at the the sight of Papa, bleeding and unconscious.

"We're supposed to ask for a Kurona and Nashiro?" Touka said, but the secretary didn't need the incentive.

She hit a button on her desk phone and said urgently, "Code Red. It's Pierrot-san."

It was like a switch had been flipped. Saiko had no idea what 'Code Red' meant, but the change was as evident as night-and-day. Within seconds, a man in what appeared to be the staff uniform for the apartments was in the lobby and had gone to lock the darkly-tinted glass door, giving it a harsh tug to ensure it was thoroughly locked. Then there was people everywhere, moving and shuffling around, as if they had magically appeared out of nowhere.

Then the elevator opened, and two young women (twins?) only differentiated by their hair-- one had white tips to her black hair. Like Maman's used to be, before it had grown back in all-black-- walked out, in--

--was that hospital scrubs?

The others were just as baffled as Saiko was when the twins strode towards them-- eerily in sync-- and paused just before them.

"I'm Yasuhisa Kurona. That's my twin, Nashiro," said the one with the all-black hair. "Bring Hide-nii this way."

"Only him," Nashiro corrected, gesturing to Yomo. "The rest of you will get in the way as we operate." Her eyes, a strange shade between grey and black, focused on Saiko. "Oh. It's you."

"You can come too," Kurona said, then the two turned and walked away.

Yomo, apparently unbothered by the bizarre events occurring around them, followed the two creepy twins. Saiko was given a somewhat-gentle shove forward by Nishio, and she moved automatically, following Yomo's retreating form. There were people blotting at the carpet, where there were bloodstains, with a goopy-looking paste, and others with what looked like salt and hydrogen peroxide, as if this was a casual occurrence they were trained for.

Were they?
Saiko shuddered and followed the twins and Yomo to an elevator, and the ride upwards was surprisingly mundane. Or at the very least, it would have been, if she wasn't at the edge of hysteria and Hide wasn't still bleeding out. The elevator music almost sent her over the edge, and the ding of the doors opening had never sounded better.

"Quick, now. Come on," Nashiro urged, ushering them into one of the apartment buildings. A white sheet had been stretched skin-tight over a table inside, and Nashiro pointed to it. "Set Hide-nii down there."

Inside, there was also a young woman with brown hair cut short, to fall around her chin. Her eyes were the same color, and she was dressed in the same hospital-scrub like garb, and a set of latex rubber gloves were on her hands. A set of oddly familiar bangles hung on her wrists, and Saiko wondered why they seemed so familiar as they stripped her Papa completely of the two bloodstained shirts that lay half-unbuttoned around his waist, and the two twins began to examine his wounds.

"Distance from the heart?" The woman asked, prepping what looked to be a blood bag and an IV tube.

"The closest is five and a half... no, five centimeters from his heart," Kurona declared, her gloved hands gently prodding at his wound. It seemed like a frighteningly small distance to Saiko, but in contrast, the women looked relieved. "The blood is clotting, but just barely. We don't have much time."

Nashiro left Hide at the table and approached Saiko and Yomo, who had stood like a silent giant, observing everything with a cool expression that was just faintly worried, compared to Saiko's near-hysteria. "One of you. Tell me, what happened?"

"He was shot extremely close range with this gun," Yomo said, pulling said gun from his pocket and discarding his mask. "He didn't stay conscious for too long afterwards, so he didn't explain much. He said something about RC Suppressants, ones stronger than he'd ever seen before."

"Let me see it," Nashiro said, taking the gun and inspecting it. She unloaded a bullet into her hand and physically twisted it in half, grimacing when it shattered (it shouldn't shatter that easy, should it?) and a foully metallic-smelling clear liquid spilled out onto her fingers. She brought it to her nose and smelled it, looking like she nearly gagged. "Hide-nii was right-- or course he was. These bullets shatter and fragment far too easy, but they are made of quinque steel. It looks like the insides are filled with an insanely strong RC Cell Suppressant, which is why Hide-nii's healing isn't working."

"It's brought him down to human levels, Shiro," Kuro warned. "I need your help. We'll have to do a textbook surgical operation-- one to repair as much damage as we can, remove fragments, and stitch up the entry wounds. Kimi-chan, how is the transfusion going?"

The brown-haired woman was inserting a needled tube into her Papa's arm, something that made Saiko feel faintly nauseous. "Well. We'll need to transfuse a bigger number than originally planned, because he's bleeding out much faster than we'd estimated."

Kuron grimaced. "How many bags do we have?"

"Twelve. Eleven, now," the woman informed, setting the IV beside the bedside. "Do you have an estimation on how far the fragments went?"

"Not far. It seems like his regeneration had a chance to stop the fragments from scattering, so they're all located close to the wound," Nashiro said, and they were cutting the skin of the wound now, and Saiko had to look away, a hand pressed to her mouth. "I'm working on removing the fragments near
his shoulder bone. Kuro, you're hand is steadier, get the ones closer to his heart."

"Already on it, Shiro."

The sound of cutting skin was too much, and Saiko grimaced, hot tears welling up involuntarily behind her eyes. Her hearing was too good, she didn't want to hear the sound of skin and muscle being cut into--

A set of large hands descended to cover her ears, and Saiko blinked through her tears to stare at the stony-faced barista from :re. With Yomo covering her ears, it was blissfully silent, all of the voices and the noises muffled.

_It's okay_, the large man mouthed.

_It's okay_, Saiko thought, and she closed her eyes too. She didn't sleep, but behind her closed eyes and covered ears, it was easy to not think. _Better not to think._

_It's okay. It has to be okay._

The group downstairs had significantly increased in size by the time Kurona and Nashiro exited the makeshift operation room, no longer in hospital scrubs, and made their way downstairs. They knew the names of each of the group, familiar with them from Hide-nii's plans and plots that he had shared.

Banjou stood surrounded by his three followers; Hinami sat on one of the lobby couches while the group of three young children babbled on about something to her, Ayato looking faintly uncomfortable next to her with the youngest, barely more than a baby, sleeping like a cat on his lap; Amon stood quietly in the corner of the lobby, observing the scene quietly in his robes and staff, somehow blending into the background-- he had come with Uta and Itori; Uta and Itori stood with Nico, Roma, and Souta, and the group was strangely solemn, excluding Souta, maybe for the first time; the volunteers from the apartment building stood around the lobby in various other places. All of them, excluding the Clown group, which was just a bit subdued, were very serious and saddened. A handful of them had wounds, which had been patched up in a mundane fashion, with bandages and gauze.

"We removed the bullet fragments and did our best to reduce internal damage," Kurona informed the group, which included a good portion of the apartment's child occupants, eager for news. "The worst of the damage is the damage to his subscapularis muscle, and the fragments of the bullet that fractured a rib of his. We've stitched him up and set his shoulder in place with a bandage binding to make up for the stability he's lost from the muscle damage. Also, to keep his rib aligned. It comes with the risk of hypopnea, but we'll monitor him to make sure his breathing doesn't get that shallow."

"He went into cardiac arrest a few times, but we brought him out of it," Nashiro added. "Hide-nii is stable now, so don't worry about it. Kimi-chan will watch over him through the night and make sure he stays that way."

Nishio frowned at the name, hand going to the bangles around his wrist for a brief second.
Everybody else pretended not to notice.

"Has his healing begun again?" Touka asked, and the twins gave identical grimaces. Kurona spoke first.

"No. The bullets Hide-nii was shot with appear to be specially designed by Kanou. They fragment upon impact to do the utmost damage, and are hollow inside, filled with an RC Suppressant. Normally they wouldn't impact his healing to this degree, since he's built up a bit of a tolerance to them, but these are stronger ones than any of us have seen before. The quinque steel the bullets are made of are unusually dense and strong, too."

"Strong enough that we suspect it came from a ghoul ranked above SS, in accordance to the Dove's rating system," Nashiro said seriously. "You're all familiar with it, correct? The only know SSS rated ghouls are the One-Eyed Owl, and the Non-Killing Owl."

_Eto and Yoshimura._

"Pierrot-san... will be okay, won't he?" One of the children on Hinami's lap asked, scrambling up onto Ayato's shoulders for a better vantage point to ask the question, and Ayato didn't look pleased about the child leaning against his head, small hands gripping his face. "He won't... die?"

"No, he won't," Kurona said firmly. "Hide-nii will be fine. He just needs time to heal like a human would, until the RC Suppressants wear out of his system."

"And how long will that take?" Saiko asked, from where she had been standing behind the twin half-ghouls. She looked rather beaten-up emotionally, but holding together better than most would have. Yomo's hand was on her shoulder, a firm support, and Touka could recall times when he'd done the same thing for her. "Till he can heal again?"

Nashiro hesitated. "We think... anywhere between a day and three days."

"Think?" Touka asked, eyes dark. "What do you mean, think?"

"We're studying to get our Bachelor's degree in Science of Biology, not in Pharmaceutical Sciences," Kurona said defensively. "We don't know much about medical toxicology or medical chemistry, so even if we have the proper lab equipment to diagnose the strength of the RC Suppressants-- which we don't-- we wouldn't have any way to do so!"

"Don't you think we want to help Hide-nii in every way we can?" Nashiro asked, sounding hurt.

Nishio gritted his teeth. "I know how to do toxicology testing, and I have a wide knowledge of medical chemistry. More than just the basics, anyways. But a diagnosis on the exact strength of the poison, in this case, RC Cell Suppressants, would take anywhere from four to six weeks. I'd need a proper lab, and regular-strength RC Suppressants to test the strength against..." Nishio sighed. "My point is, it'd be a waste of time."

"So we can't do anything besides wait," Saiko said, smiling and laughing, but it was bitter and near-tears. "Some support I am!"

Uta seemed to notice her for the first time. Her mask hung from her hand limply, and he looked genuinely surprised and concerned. "Oh dear. Itori, one of our grandchildren is here."

"I noticed," Itori said dryly, sighing. Then her serious demeanor changed with the flip of a switch and she was standing behind Saiko, taking Yomo's place and guiding her to one of the couches. "Now then, dear, why don't you sit down and tell us why you came here? More specifically, how
you came here?"

Saiko complied, and Uta sat on the edge of the coffee table across from the couch. Hinami shuffled over, dragging Ayato with her, being careful not to disturb the baby sleeping in his lap. Saiko sat beside them, and Itori across from her, on one of the armchairs to Saiko’s left.

"Let's start from the beginning, okay, Saiko-chan?" Itori asked cheerfully. "When did you figure out Hide was Pierrot? And how?"

Saiko sniffed, wiping at her eyes furiously, like she was forcing composure on herself. "I figured it out... a week ago? Maybe two? No, less than two. I went to visit the little girl he saved, and she sort of... let it slip..." Saiko hesitated. "But I made sure that she wouldn't tell anyone else. Anne is... very loyal to Papa. So long as his secret endangers him, she won't let it slip. And she hadn't told anyone else besides me."

"I see," Uta mused, blinking his eerie black-and-red eyes that had stopped being eerie to Saiko a long time ago. "How do you know she hasn't told anyone else before you?"

"Because Anne only speaks French," Saiko said, and her smile was bitter. "None of the staff at the orphanage have bothered to find a permanent translator, because they'd have to fly one in. They've been using a tablet app to communicate with her, when they need to. Which is very rare."

"The CCG is as full of messed-up fuckers as Aogiri is," Ayato snorted, and Hinami glared at him.

"Ayato-kun, language. There are children here!"

Saiko blinked, like she hadn't quite realized who everyone was. Then her eyes widened, and she looked around the room, looking like she was suddenly very overwhelmed.

"Hinami-chan, Kirishima-kun, Kirishima-san, Yomo-san, Nishio-san, Itori-san, Uta-san... There's so many of you... Are you all... ghouls...?"

Hinami exchanged worried looks with Ayato, who had directed his gaze down at the small children who had settled back into a sleepy-looking bunch, only one of them managing to stay barely awake.

"What do you think, Yonebayashi-chan?"

"Everyone here is... a ghoul?"

"Not everyone," the secretary corrected. "There is a human among us. Two now, if you count yourself. She's on the CCG’s Wanted List for assisting ghouls, the sentence for which is death. She was studying to be a doctor. Pierrot-san took her in because he thought she would be an asset, and she's more than proved her worth. Even if she is a little... unhappy about having to leave her old life behind. She's saved lots of our lives by treating our injuries, like Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan have."

Saiko put her head in her hands, and her voice was muffled when she spoke. "But everyone else. You're all ghouls, aren't you?"

Itori blinked, and her eyes flickered for a brief second, going from a pale peachy color to a bloody red-and-black that was gone in an instant.

"We are."
I'm in an apartment building full of ghouls, Saiko thought bleakly. I'm alone, in an apartment building full of ghouls, armed with a dagger. I'm stupid, aren't I?

"Why are you being honest with me?" Saiko asked, dreading the answer. Please don't be what I think.

The little boy, barely awake on Hinami's lap, rubbed his eyes and stared at her hazily.

"'Cause Pierrot-san's your Papa, right? You won't 'e... 'etra..."

"Betray," the secretary that must have been the children's mother supplied, and the boy nodded. Saiko noted, for the first time, that his eyes gleamed a black and red. He couldn't have been very old- was he like Mucchan was, unable to control them yet?

Why didn't I notice that his eyes were like that?

"'etray us, will you?"

His eyes have kakugan. He's a ghoul. He kills humans and eats them. It's my job to kill him. It's my job to kill everyone here.

Saiko didn't see ghouls. She saw people, families, as she looked around the lobby.

I can't kill them.

She smiled at the little boy, and he smiled sleepily back at her.

I'm betraying my comrades. Mucchan, Shiragin, Uribo, Maman, Akira-san, Arima-san... forgive me.

"I won't betray you."

I don't think I'll regret it.

Chapter End Notes

*The secretary's 'Code Red' is in reference to the Mass Casualty Triage codes, in which victims are sorted in order of urgency for treatment. This isn't the case here, and the codes are used to alert Kurona, Nashiro, and Kimi (the personal on-call medics) about the severity of the wounded to know how to respond. In this case, 'Code Red' is implying a serious but salvageable life-threatening wound. In descending order, the others would be 'Code Yellow', implying moderate to serious injury that isn't life-threatening, and 'Code Green', or 'Walking-Wounded', implying light wounds that aren't serious. Also called 'Priority 1, 2, and 3', with 1 being the most severe (red). There are instances where patients would be marked 'Blue', because their wounds would be fatal no matter the care received, or 'Black', when the wounded is already deceased.
*Yes, that is the Kimi you're thinking of. No, she isn't happy about being one of Pierrot's gang. She didn't chose to be so, she did it because it was her last resort and the CCG was hunting her down because she aided and abetting ghouls. Not everyone comes to Pierrot (or he finds them) because they want to, and Kimi is one of those.

*Saiko thought they were revealing the information to her because they would kill her later, when she was panicking in the last bit. They weren't, as she found out.
I opened my eyes and found myself staring at the ceiling. There was nothing like in the movies or books, when there was a blissful moment of ignorance, with no pain and no recollection of what had happened.

There was an excruciating pain in my left shoulder, and I knew exactly how it had happened. That bastard Kanou, going and designing *new bullets and stronger RC Suppressants*, of all things.

I looked down to my shoulder, and found that it was mostly immobile, held in place by tight bandages that crossed my chest and upper arm. They were stained in red, but not an overwhelming amount, and I realized that they must have been stitched up. The fragments had been removed, probably, too.

*Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan really do have what it takes to be good doctors.*

There was a flash of brown in my peripheral vision, and I turned my head to find Nishino Kimi, removing an IV tube from my right arm and disposing of a red-stained but empty blood bag.

"Go back to sleep, Nagachika-kun."

"Can I have some water?"

"You can try orange juice. You need sugar," Kimi answered, placing an a bandage over the spot where the IV had been. "Don't sit up on your own. Give me a minute and I'll help you."

"I don't nee--" I paused as the room began to spin when I moved. "I'll wait."

"Yes you will," was all Kimi said, going to the fridge of the designated 'operation apartment' and retrieving a carton of the juice. She poured a glass and stuck a bendy straw in it, then helped me sit up and drink from it. I ignored my shoulder screaming in protest, resting my good hand on it and testing my flexibility. Kimi smacked my hand away. "Don't move your shoulder. You'll end up tearing out your stitches if you move excessively. Your shoulder's got to stay steady to reduce the damage done to your subscapularis muscle. The bandages need to stay like that to make up for the stability your arm's lost because of the muscle damage, and to bind your ribs. The ones around your ribs aren't tight, though, just to keep your torso straight and your bones aligned, 'till you're healing kicks back up."

"Okay," I answered, feeling at the very painful and very bruised portion of my upper chest where the injured rib was. "Fractured or broken?"

"Fractured, almost broken," Kimi responded, releasing me but observing me cautiously. "I'll make
the assumption that you know why you feel so terrible right now and are healing like a human?"

"Yeah. I figured out what Kanou was doing, with the easy-shatter bullets and super-strong RC Suppressants," I said, gently fingering the bandages just over the bullet wounds, forcing my face to remain even and cementing the pleasant smile on my face as pain, like little bolts of electricity, shot through me with every gentle touch. "He's very inventive, I'll give the old bastard that."

Kimi raised an eyebrow. "You want some painkillers? We do have some tramadol and buprenorphine."

"Nah, save those for the serious injuries," I said, trying to take a deeper inhale. I was halted by the bandages from inhaling completely, and was grateful, because pain lanced through my chest. "Opioids are too hard to get a hold of to use them for something little like this. Mind over matter, right? Pain is all in the mind, even if it's physical. It's all about your endurance to it. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?"

Kimi's look was flat. "I don't care how high your pain threshold is, that statement is seriously messed up. This isn't a little injury, Nagachika-kun. You could have died last night."

"Yeah, I know--" Her statement fully registered, and I broke off. "Wait a second, last night? What time is it?"

"It's..." Kimi reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out her cellphone. "Five in the morning. I've got to get changed into a new set of scrubs, because my team's on-call today and I need to be at the hospital by six fifteen. I'd like to take a shower, too, but that isn't going to happen because traffic is horrendous and I need to leave here by five forty to get to the hospital on time, and that's cutting it short."

"Have you slept any?"

"No," Kimi said, and shrugged. "But that's the life of a medical intern for you. I've done my rotation on sleepless nights before, and I can do it now. With coffee. You ghouls aren't the only ones that drink it like it's water."

I laughed, then cut it short as it turned into a semi-cough to hold back a wince and a wheeze. Kimi observed me briefly for another moment, then added, "By the way, your daughter's downstairs. She knows everything. Literally, everything. And she did it on her own."

"What?" The shocked exclamation left my lips before I even comprehended her statement. "Saiko is... downstairs? She knows? How? Is she alright?"

"She's fine. In fact, I think she's napping on one of the lobby couches. Uta-san and Itori-san are taking care of her. Hinami-chan and Ayato-kun are looking out for her, too, but don't tell Ayato-kun I said that. The new guy has a soft spot for her too. Amon-san." Kimi paused. "This is all by word of mouth, courtesy of Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan. I haven't been down yet."

"They're all... downstairs still...?" I asked, confused. "Why are they all still there? I told Yomo to call the other teams and inform them to come here so that I could make sure there were no more... incidents, but I thought they'd leave afterwards. Isn't the crowd going to attract unwanted attention?"

Kimi shook her head. "They arrived in pairs or alone, and the ones that had sustained minor injuries came through the second-floor fire escape in my room. Don't worry about it. You should know by now that we're good at avoiding CCG attention. I mean, I'm a wanted fugitive sentenced to death should I be found and the others are 'criminals against humanity', sentenced to the same fate." Kimi
shook her head, with a bitter laugh. "Criminals against humanity. Yep. The itty-bitty baby downstairs who can barely walk and has a grand total of three teeth is a major threat to the world. Shimizu-chan, who's five and can't stand the sight of blood, is a criminal with a death sentence."

"This world is wrong," I responded quietly. "It's full of bad people, human and ghoul alike. Species doesn't matter when it comes to the type of person you are. But people are afraid of what they don't understand, Kimi-chan, and nobody really understands ghouls or where we came from. I've studied ghoul biology and medical sciences to further improve my understanding of what I am since I could toddle, and I still don't understand what I am, Kimi-chan. I'm a monster, that's a fact. But that's not because I'm a ghoul. It's because I've done lots of bad things, because I chose to." I sighed. "There isn't a clear right or wrong, Kimi-chan, because this isn't a black-and-white world. Everything is in shades of grey."

*I still like the grey of dove-feathers the best. To the dark me, it seems almost white.*

"That was probably the most adequate description of the world that I have ever heard," Kimi allowed, inclining her head a little. "But it's too early for all of this talk of right or wrong. Let me get dressed, then I'll help you do the same and I'll help you downstairs."

I nodded, offering her a smile. "Thanks, Kimi-chan!"

*I'm not ready to face Saiko.*

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Kimi found me fresh clothes, free of bloodstains. A plain, button-down grey shirt and black tie, with black slacks and shoes, and she helped me put the shirt on. I wondered where she had gotten the clothes, because they fit me perfectly, but I didn't ask. She let me use her bathroom to wash my face and run wet hands through my hair to free it of the I've-been-laying-on-an-operation-table-all-night look, and then she slung my good arm around her scrub-clothed shoulders and lead me into the elevator.

*Oh god I am not ready for this. I can't do this.*

Kimi hit the 'Lobby' button, and the elevator doors slid shut with a pleasant ding. I schooled my expression into a cheerful smile, gently working on rotating my shoulder so that it didn't look so forcibly immobile. After a few pain-filled attempts, I loosened the bandages enough that my arm was a bit freer but still stable enough that it shouldn't have worsened the muscle damage. Now, at least, I appeared unhurt, all of my bandages hidden by my clothes and my arm hanging naturally.

*I don't know how to face Saiko.*

The elevator music was grating on my nerves. It was irritatingly cheery and upbeat-- was that K-pop?

*Words have never left me before. Words are my forte. But I don't know what I should say to her.*

Kimi's hand descended on my shoulder. "Nagachika-kun. I can see the gears in your head turning as
you think. I'd be careful, you know. I've heard thinking is dangerous."

I gave her a deadpan look. "Not funny, Kimi-chan."

"Pretty funny," Kimi said, her lips quirking up into a smile. "But that wasn't my point. You always craft your statements carefully. It's like words are your knives, and each one is meant to land a fatal blow, so you always come out on top. Like everything's a battle. You're always observing and analyzing, figuring out where the chinks in people's psyche, their armor, are. Words are your first line of offense and defense, even if it's unconsciously." Kimi paused. "You've lied all of your life. If words are your first line of offense and defense, then lying is your second. Lies are like your armor, and nobody has ever been able to breech it before, unless you allowed them to. Your daughter is the first person to ever catch you off-guard like this." Kimi smiled, bigger now. "It looks like genetics don't matter. She inherited your brain."

I laughed, and it was unexpected and raw. *Because Kimi had hit the nail on the head.*

Am I that easy to read? No, surely not. Kimi's different. She saw through Nishio-san. She sees what's really inside people-- maybe that's why she was able to adjust to life here easier than most. The people here, they aren't bad people.

"You're at the darker end of the grey spectrum right now, Nagachika-kun," Kimi commented, her eyes on the floor levels monitor, which was slowly ticking down to the lobby. "But it's not impossible to get to the lighter end of the spectrum." The counter hit 'Lobby', and Kimi removed my arm and released me from her support. I stood on my own. "So go on, and tell her the truth. Take your first step towards the other end."

I stepped out of the elevator.

*Towards the dove-feather grey.*

Saiko was barely asleep, in a light, restless doze, when someone shook her awake. It was Uta, not looking phased in the slightest despite having not slept a wink.

"Oh, granddaughter-mine, time to wake up. You've got a visitor."

"Wha...?" Uncomprehending for a brief moment, Saiko blinked the sleep from her eyes and sat up from where she had been laying against the arm of a sofa. Someone had stretched a blanket over her-no, not a blanket, a long robe, like a cloak. It smelled strangely familiar. The person from the corner of the room was sitting quietly against the wall reading a book. He was cloak-less, in a button-down with a tie and slacks. But the man, although interesting in his enormous stature and unusually broad shoulders, wasn't the focus of her attention.

"Papa!"

Off like a shot, Saiko threw the cloak off and chucked herself at the approaching figure. Papa, her Papa, was safe and whole, and Saiko threw her arms around his abdomen in a vise-like hug.
He patted her sleep-rumpled pigtails gently. "Hi, Saiko. Sorry for making you worry."

Saiko opened her mouth, to question him, ask one of her many, many questions, but was cut off by a voice that was soft but incredulous, full of wonder.

"Kimi?"

The woman who had operated on her surrogate father (Nishino Kimi, some distant part of her recalled from their earlier introduction) stopped, her clean hospital scrubs rustling. "...Nishiki?"

Nishio, the stony, snarky waiter from the cafe that always had a shit joke (no matter how many times Kirishima-san had reprimanded him for it) up his sleeve, was wide-eyed and looked much younger than Saiko had ever seen him appear. It was like the clock had rewound for him-- in fact, how old was everyone here? She hadn't ever asked. Surely no older than twenty-two? No, even younger?

"What are you doing here, Kimi?" Nishio's voice was as soft as a whisper, like he couldn't believe his eyes. "You're supposed to be in the Twentieth Ward, in Kamii, becoming a doctor..."

Nishino smiled, and it was sad. "The CCG tracked me down. I wasn't as careful as I thought I was, hiding my association with you. I'm a fugitive, don't you know? My sentence is for associating with the 'enemies of humanity' is death on sight."

Nishio's expression turned stormy, and his voice was dangerously low as he gripped her hands tightly. "Did they hurt you, Kimi? I'll kill them if they laid a finger on you."

Nishino smiled, and it was faintly dulled. "No, they didn't hurt me. They tried to, though; they raided my apartment with the intent of killing me. But I escaped, and not a day later Nagachika-kun, or rather, Pierrot, had tracked me down and offered me a deal: provide my medical knowledge to him and other ghouls, and receive a new identity. I accepted it. He gave me a new family registry, an apartment, protection from the CCG, and the opportunity to go back to medical school. I've got a good job now as a medical intern, since this is my last year of medical school, and a residency position at the hospital my internship is at, after my internship is over."

"Nagachika... did that?" Nishio said, and his tone was strained, but full of relief. "I see. So you stand with him too."

Nishino nodded, and it was only then that Saiko noticed the bangles on their wrists matched perfectly. A couple's symbol, she supposed.

"I do." She kissed him briefly, barely a touch of her lips on his. "But I need to go now. My shift starts soon."

"Wait," Nishio said, and it looked like his hands had tightened around hers. "You live here, right? I can see you again?"

Nishino smiled, brown eyes soft. "Anytime, Nishiki. We've got a lot of catching up to do, after all." At his relieved look, she laughed. "Did you really think I'd say no, silly?"

"Of course not," Nishio said gruffly. "Who could resist me?"

Nishino just laughed again, then released his hands with a forlorn smile. "I really do need to go now. I'll see you later, Nishiki." For a moment, Saiko saw the same desperation in her eyes that lingered in the ghoul known as Serpent's. "I promise."

Nishio nodded, and watched her go with a sad, forlorn expression. Then he composed himself, back
"Well, I hadn't expected that," he admitted. "I had always assumed that they had a bad break-up when Nishio-san didn't mention her, and when Kimi-chan never mentioned him. Especially when he didn't aide in her escape from the CCG... Apparently I was wrong."

"You don't know much about romance," Saiko said, unable to hold back a small laugh. She felt rather like she had been emotionally stretched to the limit earlier, like a string pulled tight, and now her relief was so strong it was as if someone had cut the string and all of the tension released.

"Hey, I'm great at your romance sims," He protested, looking offended and propping his arm on his waist. "And what about Haise, huh? I wooed your mother, didn't I?"

"Maman is essentially a helpless romantic, so that wouldn't be very hard," Saiko giggled. "He even cries during movies, Papa."

He just smiled. "I guess he is, isn't he?" Then he glanced to the clock that was ticking away on the wall. "I want to talk to you. About... well, everything. But we need to get on the train before it leaves or we won't make it home by six thirty, when we're supposed to leave. We're on call for ghoul attacks and we need to leave for patrols then, remember?"

Saiko nodded. "I know. I remember, Papa. It's okay. I won't tell anyone about your secret." She offered him a smile that was supposed to be an imitation of his own. "We can talk at lunchtime."

Hide smiled, and he looked relieved. "Okay. Okay, we'll talk then." Then, turning to the rest of the group, he hesitated. "I'll be back tomorrow. That's three days before the CCG's raid is supposed to take place, and probably the last time that I'll be able to see you all before then."

Kirishima smiled, her calm demeanor back again now that it was known Papa would be okay. "I'll have a pot of coffee waiting. Bring everybody, okay? It'll be on the house. I'll even have Yoriko bring some sweets over."

Hide smiled. "Thank you, Touka-chan."

Hinami hugged him before they left. Saiko noted, amused, that the two oldest children that had slept soundly on her lap remained around her ankles, like little followers. The baby was still sleeping soundly in the younger Kirishima's arms (his name was Ayato, wasn't it?), though the younger Kirishima's irritated discomfort about it was gone now, replaced with an absentmindedness that was sweet, considering how indifferent to everything he had appeared the night before.

"Be careful, Niichan."

"I will, Hinami-chan," he assured her. "Don't worry about me. I heal up fast-- I'm already almost back to one-hundred-percent!"

Hinami smiled sadly, like she thought he was lying. Was he? Saiko thought he might have been, but surely the RC Suppressants had worn off by now, right? Because surely Nashiro-san and Kurona-san were wrong. Papa was Pierrot, he had incredible regeneration.

And then it was like there was a flood of people, ordinary-looking people that wasn't ordinary in the slightest because they were ghouls, but Saiko didn't see them as ghouls. She saw teenagers and children, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. Ordinary people. They were around them in an instant, like they had magically appeared there, and there were bright smiles and well-wishes coming from every angle. Like an overwhelming wave.
"You won't need it, but good luck anyways!"

"You'll crush 'em, Pierrot-san!"

"Hurry back and visit us soon!"

"Yeah! Make sure you come see us again real soon!"

"Come back soon!"

*Saiko thought she heard, "Come back home safely." Maybe it was her imagination.*

*She didn't think it was.*

It was like I could breath easy again as we walked towards the train station. My body ached, my shoulder hurt, but it didn't matter to me, because *Saiko laughed. She smiled.*

*She wasn't afraid of me.*
Haise's ignorance about Hide's situation comes to an abrupt end.

When Hide and Saiko walked through the door, laughing and perfectly cheery, Haise put down the book he had been reading (he couldn't focus enough to read it) and got up to meet them in the entryway. Hide was dressed in fresh clothes, looking a little bit pale but otherwise completely normal.

But Haise didn't miss the smell, Hide's smell, the scent he knew like his own (no, better). He also didn't miss the fact that he smelled unusually strong. Not in a bad way-- no, not in the slightest. The intoxicatingly sweet smell, like what he assumed the best quality chocolate would smell like to a human, hit him like a truck, or a brick wall. Haise stopped dead in his tracks, blinking in confusion, grey eyes wide. The only time he had ever smelled Hide's scent so strong was when he was injured, bleeding.

But Hide was fine.

Haise didn't hesitate to wrap his arms around the other's neck, as an assurance that Hide was there, was real. He'd had far too many hallucinations before to trust his sense of real and imaginary, but to his relief, Hide was solid and real. Something that Haise did notice, as he buried his face in the crook of Hide's neck, that he didn't smell quite the same. There was a taint to Hide's scent, like someone had dunked him in a bitterly metallic cologne. It brought up a surge of unpleasant feelings, and a sudden pain in his head--

--that vanished in a heartbeat, without any memories surfacing.

"You didn't come home last night," Haise whispered, quiet enough that even Shirazu, who was in the living-room watching the news with the others, and Saiko, who stood beside them, would be unable to hear. "You didn't answer any of my phone calls. Or my texts. I thought something bad happened to you."

Hide's hands came up and he returned the hug. His hands were gentle.

"Sorry, Haise. I wasn't ignoring you, I promise. My phone died, and I was all the way in the Fifth Ward. I've got these two girls I know there, they look up to me like an older brother, and they needed some help studying for their medical exams, so I was helping them. And Saiko met me at a coffee shop this morning and I bought her sweets for breakfast, because I kind of lost a video game bet with her." The hands on Haise's back tightened, pulling him closer. "I really am sorry, Haise. If I would have known you were so worried, I would have come straight home."

Haise wasn't really mad. If he was, it was out of concern, and maybe a little bit of fear.

What if I lost him too? What if something happened and Hide got hurt, because I wasn't there, or because I wasn't strong enough?

Haise didn't like to think about that road (being a ghoul investigator is dangerous, people die all the
time) but the thoughts tended to creep up on him when he least expected it. (When he was most vulnerable. When he was alone.)

"Are you mad at me?" Hide asked, and a hand came up to run through Haise's hair gently, messing it up, but Haise didn't mind. His hair was completely black now, and had been for what had to have been weeks. (Months, maybe?)

Haise pulled back, just a little, and kissed him. The Quinx were watching their exchange from the living room, but Haise couldn't care less.

"I'm not mad. I was just worried."

I can't lose you.

Hide smiled, as if he could read Haise's thoughts, and sometimes Haise could swear that Hide could read his thoughts. Especially when he leaned his head forward, just a little, so their foreheads brushed.

"Silly. I won't ever leave you alone."

Mutsuki had looked away, tomato-red. Urie had turned his gaze elsewhere, but for all his composure, Haise thought his cheeks were tinted pink. Saiko was the only one that seemed truly unfazed.

Shirazu, crimson-faced, cleared his throat. "Um, we're gonna be late. For our patrols."

Hide, with an unfazed, bright smile, drew away from the embrace. "Of course. Into the car we go, then!"

He dragged Haise out of the house by his hand, and Haise tried to conceal his amused laughter.

It didn't work.

They weren't patrolling their assigned district of the First Ward-- the north-west quarter-- for five minutes when they had gotten a call to the north-west boarder, where Chiyoda met Shinjuku. It was shockingly soon, and the First Ward was normally a quiet ward. It could be months before a call came in, so what was the odds that it was just after their shift started, the day they were on call, when one did?

But Haise nor the kids hesitated, running towards the boarder. But there was no way to hurry towards the scene, with the sheer crowd of people going in every direction. They were barely moving at a human's pace-- not even that. By the time they reached the scene, there would be nobody to save--

"Wait!" Hide announced, stopping on a dime perfectly next to the cub of the street. "We'll never make it to the Shinjuku boarder at this rate! Urie, you remember the Academy hand-signs, don't you? Give me a hand and help me signal down the cop car there!"
Urie blinked, like he was surprised at the ask for assistance, but as if he could read Urie's thought's Hide smiled and said, "You're taller than I am, unfortunately. And two people are more noticeable than one, after all."

Together, they made a string of hand-signals in a neat synchrony, and Haise sheepishly realized he only recognized a few.

Assistance... and Pursuit? Then... Kagune, which means that the target is a ghoul, right...?

Although Haise didn't recognize enough of the hand-signals to decipher the exact message, it definitely caught the attention of the policemen in the car, and with a screech it stopped beside them.

"You're all Ghoul Investigators?" The policeman driving asked them curiously. "Here. It'll be a tight squeeze, but we can take three of you, and we've radioed for another car to come pick up the rest of you."

Haise made the decision in a split-second. "Shirazu. I'm leaving you here. As Squad Leader, take charge. I'm leaving Urie and Saiko here with you. Mutsuki, you're the smallest, so we should be able to fit in the backseat without too much trouble."

Looking surprised, Mutsuki complied, climbing into the car. Haise ushered Hide into the car, then slipped in next to them. As they drove off, the other car pulled up, and the remaining three Quinx hurried to get into it. Then the two cop cars, sirens blaring, raced off at a much faster speed than their previous walk-running would have gotten them to the scene. Haise turned his head, to praise Hide for the genius decision, but the words died on his lips.

Hide was breathing strangely heavily, but in the dark shadows of the police car, that was all Haise could tell about him. The run hadn't even made Haise go near the threshold of breathing heavily—they (half-ghouls, not human) could run miles without even feeling bothered. And that was with the Quinx matching pace with them.

*Is he sick? No, Hide hasn't coughed any, and he wasn't hot when I hugged him, so no fever. Is he in pain? But from what?*

*...is he hungry? No, we haven't sustained any serious injuries to make the healing spike our hunger. The hunger shouldn't be that bad yet. It's still easily bearable.*

Haise's eyes darkened, but in the covering of the cop car's shadows, he didn't worry about his frown being seen.

*Why don't you tell me something's wrong, Hide?*

As it turned out, the call was for a gang of half-starved ghouls that had probably been forced out of Shinjuku because of Aogiri Tree's growing influence there. Haise was distantly familiar with the ghoul gang, called the Crows, because of their crow-motifed masks and almost-uniform dark blue hoodies and athletic pants that had an orange stripe on either side. It consisted solely of ukaku...
ghouls, and normally that would have meant that all they needed to do was to wait the ghoul gang out until their stamina ran out.

But Haise knew of the ghoul gang because they used serious strategy in their attacks, carefully planned ones, and focused on rotation-like attacks so as to not run out of stamina. The battle could drag on all day, and the Crows would only get as tired as Haise, Hide, and their squad would. There were fourteen of the Crows in total, and the tires of the police car were blown out by ukaku shards upon arrival at the scene.

Mutsuki, though looking faintly terrified, leapt out of the car before it made impact, and Hide followed his lead, Haise just at their heels. Mutsuki landed with a surprising amount of grace, taking a few steps to steady himself, but Hide (equally surprisingly) did not. Haise had been half-expecting it, and he discreetly grabbed the back of Hide's shirt, tugging him backwards to steady him.

"Thanks," Hide gasped out, and Haise was frightened to realize just how out-of-breath Hide was, like a fish out of water.

"Don't mention it," Haise replied, wondering if his worry had seeped into his tone. He really hoped it had.

But even out of breath, Hide hadn't hesitated to open his quinque and grasp the long, sword-like weapon, holding it up defensively to block the next round of quinque shards. His reaction time was too slow, and Mutsuki and Haise covered him, deflecting the shards Hide missed.

Then Saiko came in swinging—literally, she seemed to appear out of nowhere, batting a ghoul to the ground with a swing of her hammer-like quinque. Brain matter and blood splattered, and the ghoul didn't move again.

One of his—no, her, there was long black hair that was splattered in gore—comrades let out a pained scream at the death of his friend (family?) and charged the group. Urie engaged it.

Haise thought his jaw might drop. Saiko had just made the first kill of the day, without his urging to get in the fight. She had done it of her own free will, which Haise had been sure had the same odds of happening that an ice cube had a chance in hell.

Which was nonexistent.

It wasn't like he didn't believe in her, because Haise did. If she wanted to fight, Saiko could be a monster. But she needed motivation.

What had motivated her enough that she had leapt right into battle like that...?

He didn't have time to think any longer, however, because he was needed in the fight and Hide wasn't slowing down in the slightest, despite whatever ailment was affecting him.

I don't have time to be baffled. I need to protect him.

I will protect him.
Afterwards, when they had been relieved of their shift just after the battle, as the policemen-- scraped up but otherwise fine-- began the task of calling the clean-up crew, Haise watched Hide carefully. There was a slight stagger in his steps, a heaviness to his breathing, a paleness to his skin that wasn't normal. He sat down on the curb, ignoring the gore around him, and offered a breathless laugh to Haise and the kids.

"Wow, was that a fight! What do you say we head to :re? Touka-chan said to invite you all over for lunch, on the house! And she was getting Kosaka-chan to bring sweets, too!"

"Sweets?" Saiko asked hopefully, matching his smile. "That sounds awesome!"

"I'm thirsty, and it isn't too far," Urie agreed grudgingly. "It wouldn't be a bad idea."

"I wanna go, too," Shirazu chimed. "Whaddya say, Tooru?"

Mutsuki smiled. "It sounds nice."

"It looks like it's settled, then," Haise said, distinctly cheerful-sounding despite his worries. "We'll all walk to :re!"

In a gesture that was more concerned than romantic, Haise offered his hand to Hide. With a smile that was just a little dampened by his hard breathing, Hide accepted his hand, and Haise gingerly pulled him to his feet.

Isn't that his non-dominant hand? Why isn't he using his left hand?

Haise shrugged the matter off as Hide took a few steps after the kids, who had already begun to walk towards :re--

--and then staggered, one of his legs giving way underneath him.

Haise was next to him before Hide could even topple to the side, wrapping his arm around Hide's torso like he'd seen couples in the park do, tugging Hide back upright and walking forward in a smooth motion, never releasing his hold. They settled into a steady, slow pace, and Haise thought he saw Saiko glance back at them a few times. But he paid her no mind, making sure they walked just behind the rest of their squad, and Hide gradually regained his footing. But he fell into the facade of the happy-normal-couple without prompt, slipping an arm around Haise's torso and matching their steps with an absentminded sort of ease.

"Hide, what's wrong?" Haise asked lowly, bending his head closer to Hide's in order to avoid his voice carrying.

"It's nothing, Haise," Hide assured, but Haise was skeptical and let it show in his expression. Hide's smile dampened a little, and he cast his gaze downward. "I just... haven't been feeling very well today. A little sick, but it shouldn't be anything to worry about. Our immune systems are much stronger than a humans. I'll get over it by tomorrow and be back at tip-top shape."

"Do you want me to take you home?" Haise asked, but Hide shook his head.

"Nah, I'll be okay, especially after I get some caffeine in me. My family's waiting for us at :re, see. It'll be the last time I see them before the raid, so I want to make sure I get to see them."

"Oh," Haise said, then remained silent for a moment. Then he gently adjusted his grip on Hide's
A bug...?

"I'll help you walk until we get there, okay?"

Hide smiled at him, the charming smile that was as bright as the sun and seemed to light up everything around them.

"Thank you, Haise."

Haise smiled back at him. "It isn't a problem, Hide."

Are you... lying to me, Hide?

When we got to :re, I waited until Haise had been distracted by Hinami before I excused myself to the bathroom and proceeded to cough violently enough that I dry-heaved, a very painful experience considering that the RC Cell Suppressants hadn't worn off yet and my ribs burned like fire. Though, I was able to think more clearly now, and I leaned my head against the bathroom wall, the cool tiles feeling good against my pounding head. My breathing was rough, ragged, and I swallowed against my painfully dry throat.

What a mess I am...

The door to the bathroom opened, and Saiko darted inside, balancing two cups of coffee in her hands and a water bottle under her arm. There was also a plate of sweet-looking pastries of various sorts.

She locked the bathroom door behind her and placed one of the coffees in front of me, along with the water bottle, which I opened eagerly and drank cautiously. I choked on it, and gave another painful, violent coughing fit in which I tasted something sickeningly sweet in my mouth. With my mental anticipations in place, I swiped a finger along the roof of my mouth and withdrew it to find it stained a watery red.

"Is that... blood...?" Saiko asked, looking horrified. "Are you coughing up blood, Papa?"

I sighed. "I am, but it's not as bad as it seems. It looks like the fractured rib punctured one of my lungs, but there isn't any rattling in my breathing, so it's just a surface puncture. It'll self-heal without treatment, even for a human."

I still shouldn't be coughing it up. But my regeneration will be back online soon, so it's nothing to worry about.

(Right?)

"Oh," Saiko said quietly, then she picked up one of the pasties and settled into a more comfortable position. "So... You were going to explain...?"
I nodded, taking a smaller sip of water and finding that it went down without issues now. "I'm going
to give you my life story. Which may sound odd, but it's actually going to answer most of your
questions."

Saiko nodded. "I trust you. But we might not have a lot of time."

"I know. I'll make it as short as I can," I promised, then began. "I was born a half-ghoul, the son of
Doctor Kanou Akihiro..."

Hide changed out of his clothes and into sleepwear before Haise even entered the bedroom,
something Haise found strange.

_Had Hide come up here earlier than normal to change just before I got here?_

The thought hurt, but Haise dismissed it as paranoia, despite the ache. Hide was already fast asleep,
which was also odd, but Haise wondered if he had gotten any sleep at all the night before. Probably
not, by the dark circles underneath Hide's eyes, frighteningly prominent on unusually parchment-pale
skin. Everything about him seemed _wrong_ at the moment-- his breathing was uneven and shallow,
his skin sickeningly pale, he was slower than normal by a landslide, he was unsteady on his feet, and
during the entire day Haise had noted that Hide's left arm had been strangely stiff. The smell of blood
this morning, tainted by the acidic metallic smell. The sweetness on Hide's lips when they had kissed
at :re that was definitely _not_ coffee and almost certainly blood, Hide's own blood.

The list of symptoms just went on and on, but Haise had no idea to their cause. It wasn't something
as simple as a _bug_, that was for sure.

The thought hit him so fast that if he was in an anime, a light-bulb would have flashed above his
head, and Haise sat down at the laptop, waiting while it powered up and going through the mental
list of symptoms again.

Then he typed them into a search engine and waited. When the results popped up (and there were
dozens of them, different ailments that could have caused the listed symptoms), Haise grabbed his
glasses from the nightstand where he had sat them when he was about to get into bed. Then, he
began.

He had reading to do.

Haise hadn't been reading long when it happened.
The Chateau was silent, besides the breathing of six people, four of them sleeping deeply, one of them sleeping fitfully, and the last, Haise, wide awake. Then Hide's breathing became ragged and he coughed, a dreadfully hard cough that made Haise's eyes a little wide and he turned, expecting Hide to wake up.

He didn't, but Hide's face contorted in a pain-wracked expression, and Haise stood and went to stand beside him in alarm. One of Hide's hands-- his right, Haise noted-- clutched at his left shoulder and his teeth ground together, like even in sleep he was fighting showing his true emotions.

*What's wrong with his shoulder?*

The fit of pain passed, but a sheen of sweat remained on Hide's forehead, and his breathing remained ragged. Worriedly, Haise went to set him higher up, hopefully to avoid having another coughing episode, but he froze as he was settling Hide into the more upright position. There was an odd feeling to his left shoulder, like there was padding or something of the sort there...

*Please don't be too angry with me, Hide.*

After a moment of hesitation, Haise grimaced and set himself to the intrusive task of unbuttoning the flannel pajama shirt Hide wore. He thought about muttering an apology, but decided against it, afraid the action might wake Hide.

When he reached the last button, Haise gently moved the left portion of the shirt away, then froze. He stared at Hide's chest, uncomprehending.

*Why...?*

A cloth bandage was wrapped around Hide's upper torso, and it encased the upper section of his left arm as well, rendering it mostly immobile. There were bloodstains on the bandages that made Haise internally panic (*isn't that where his heart is, is he dying?*), and he skimmed a hand lightly across the bandage. Whatever the wound-- wounds?-- was, it hadn't bleed through the bandages yet.

*Why aren't you healing...? Is this what you were hiding, Hide...?*

Haise felt rather numb, like his entire body had gone cold. Mechanically, fumbling a little, his fingers found Hide's pulse. It was steady and strong, and now that Hide had been propped up a little, his breathing was eased a bit and not so ragged. Next, Haise pressed the back of his hand to Hide's forehead, swallowing. Hide was definitely running a fever, though it seemed like it had just broken and his skin was cooling down.

It was like a switch had been flipped. Gradually, color returned to Hide's skin, and his breathing eased completely. His fever vanished, and he appeared to be sleeping normally. By all means, he appeared to have made a sudden full recovery.

*Regeneration...? Why did it only start now...?*

Haise felt rather terrible about it, but he let his fingers hover over the bloodstains on the bandages and gave them a light press. Hide had almost cried out when Haise's fingers had barely skimmed the bandages before, but now the touch didn't even denote a twitch in response.

With the same cold numbness that had seemed to seep into his bones and grip his heart, Haise re-did the buttons of Hide's shirt, clearing the browser history on the laptop and shutting it down. Mechanically, he removed his glasses and lay down, staring at the ceiling blankly, unsure how to process the new information. Haise wasn't sure how to begin interpreting it, let alone understand it.
Hide... you helped me through nightmares and breakdowns and emotional instability... So why can’t you talk to me so I can help you too?

Why are you lying to me?

Why don’t you trust me?
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

In which Hide lies, Haise cries, and Hide takes a step into the darker part of the grey spectrum.

Chapter Notes

I'm rather late again, but man, this chapter got looong. I'm talking, over 6k words long, and eventually I split it up. I try to keep my chapters around 2.5-3k, and this chapter's around 3.5k-ish. The next one (I'm just editing it, since it was all originally written as one huge chapter that I ended up breaking up, then it'll be posted) is even longer-- I'm talking 5k words long. But it all needs to stay together, so. Yeah, expect that.

Also! nm@dA drew more amazing fanart-- this time of Hide! Go check it out, please!

Link: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=787262621408453&id=656446584490058

When I woke up the next morning, I felt great. Better than great, even, fantastic. I grinned, thinking to myself that the RC Cell Suppressants had finally worn off and my wounds healed. I shifted, sitting up and glancing at the clock. It's fifteen minutes before six, when my alarm would have gone off, but I'm not going to go back to sleep for a lousy fifteen minutes. So I moved to get out of bed, quietly so as to not disturb Haise, when I pause.

Haise wasn't in bed. Nor was he in the bedroom.

That was... odd. Normally if Haise couldn't sleep, he'd wake me up. Or read, with the lamp on the nightstand turned on for light, because eventually he'd nod off reading and in the morning I'd find him still holding his book and have to pry it from his fingers.

Deciding to check on the bandages later, I exited the bedroom and climbed down the stairs to the living room. Haise was already dressed, but it didn't look like he'd slept a wink, based on the dark shadows underneath his eyes. He was wearing his glasses, too, his legs tucked under him on the armchair as he stared blankly at the book opened on his lap that I didn't think he was reading. There wasn't any coffee going, and it was rather... dim, with just the watery early-morning December light coming through the windows to read by.

I clicked on the overhead lights, illuminating the room with the glow, and Haise didn't even flinch. So he did know I was there, then?

"Geez, you've already got poor eyesight," I chided him, huffing a sigh despite my growing unease. "Was Haise... ignoring me? "'Don't read in the dark, you'll ruin your eyesight,' isn't that what you always tell Mutsuki?" I reached over to ruffle his hair, the gesture familiar and almost unconscious, but froze.
Did Haise... flinch... away from me?

"Haise...?"

He hadn't looked up from his book, not even when he avoided my touch.

"Hide. Do you... trust me?"

Where did that come from?

"Of course I do. I already told you, Haise," I said earnestly, confused. "I trust you with my life."

He still wasn't looking at me, staring blankly at his open book, the pages never been turned. "You trust me with your life, you said...? So you trust me to have your back when we fight, but is that it?"

"What do you mean, Haise?" I frowned. Why wasn't he looking at me? What's up with all of the questions, suddenly? Why won't he let me touch him?

Did I do something to hurt him? Did I do something wrong?

"Did I do something wrong, Hide? Did I do something to make you upset, so that you won't talk to me? To make you not trust me?"

"Of course you didn't!" I protested, utterly lost and confused. "Haise, what's wrong?"

Haise laughed, like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard, but it wasn't a happy laugh. It was bitter, with an almost hysterical tint to it.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" Haise finally looked up at me, and the dove-feather grey of his eyes had been replaced by the color they turned when he was angry and genuinely upset-- and it had been that way since we were children, the color of thunderclouds, shiny with unshed tears that were a mix between furious and past-the-breaking-point-of-an-emotional-meltdown. "Are you kidding me?"

I could count the number of times I had seen him like this, genuinely angry and so emotionally overwhelmed that he couldn't contain it any longer, on one hand. Not just since he had gone by the alias of 'Haise', but since I had met him, when we were young and everything seemed simple.

"Haise, I--" What do I say to assure him that I trust him, assure him that I love him, to stop a breakdown before it happens? I don't know. I don't know what to say.

I didn't need to say anything, because Haise shook his head and spoke first. The rising note of hysteria in his voice was alarming me.

"Hide, what was wrong with you yesterday?" His voice was a hysterical whisper. "It was something to do with your left shoulder, your arm, wasn't it? And it had to happen on the night you said you visited those girls, right?"

My shoulder? The thought made my muscles freeze and tense. How did he know about my shoulder? The terrifying thoughts made my heart race a little faster, and Haise didn't miss it. His eyes narrowed, and his smile twisted into something darker.

"I know that face. You're thinking about something really hard. An explanation, anything besides the truth, right?" Haise gave another bitter laugh. "Don't bother. I can hear your heart speed up when you panic. Don't lie to me. Again. Just tell me the truth, Hide."
It seemed to turn from a cold accusation to a plea, and I swallowed, unsure how to proceed.

_The truth? I'll do anything to stop you from figuring out the truth, Haise. If it means lying to you, I'll do it._

"You're right," I admitted carefully. "I have been lying to you. You recall Doctor Kanou from the Pierrot case, right?"

_Haise doesn't know Kanou is the one that turned him into a half-ghoul. He only knows that Kanou is involved in human experimentation and has close ties with Aogiri Tree. I should be okay, using his name in my lie._

Haise nodded, a short incline of his head, and I sat down on the couch that was just to the side of the armchair, though at a different angle. _I'll respect his personal space. I won't touch him._

It hurt.

"I'm trying to hunt him down."

"Why?"

_Because I am Pierrot. It's time to do what I do best and craft a lie to win Haise over. I need to be like Kanou and manipula-te._

_Sorry, Kimi-chan. I think I just took a step into the darker end of the spectrum._

"Because of the two girls that I was talking about," I lied smoothly. "They really do need my help. They were tricked by Kanou, a few years back. Enough that they started calling him 'Papa', and were completely loyal to him. They fought for him, to defend him, and when one of them almost died and her twin pleaded with the man they called 'Papa' to save her twin, he left them to die." My anger was real, their story true, but the lie left a sick taste in my mouth. "They were essentially children, orphans with no family besides each-other, and he manipulated their emotions, used them and discarded them like tools. I found them, and I saved them, healed their wounds and made sure they had a place to stay. Had the semblance of a normal life. But Kanou won't let them live if he finds out they're still alive, so I need to find him first and make sure he can't do that."

_There's truth in my statement. I'm just omitting my life story from it._

The excuse seemed pitiful._What good would lying to myself do?_

"Why didn't you just report their situation to the CCG?" Haise asked, after a pause. "Why didn't you tell Akira-san, or Arima-san--"

"Because Kanou turned them into monsters, and the CCG would have killed them," I said flatly.

_It's working. Of course it is. I'm just like the old bastard; I know exactly what strings to pull to win someone over._

Haise froze.

"You don't mean...?"

"They're exactly like you and me," I confirmed. "And the CCG wouldn't have mercy on their crimes. They would be dead in an instant, all because he manipulated them like a puppet-master to his marionettes. And I won't let that happen to them."
He looked away. "...I won't say anything to anyone about them. But that doesn't explain how you were injured."

Go on, monster, the darkest part of my mind taunted. Draw out his empathy. His emotions are just instruments to be played, aren't they?

They aren't, I thought. But I'm doing it anyways, aren't I? I am Kanou's son, after all. Even if it's only biologically, his blood runs through my veins. I can make a gamble and I can win.

"I was investigating a clinic where one of Kanou's labs were supposed to be, but it was already massacred. Pierrot had beaten me to it, not long before I had arrived, and everyone that worked there was dead. Everyone except for a scientist with a gun that shot bullets filled with RC Suppressants, that is," I snorted and reached up to tap my shoulder, where the bullet wounds had been. "I took three shots to the shoulder at close range. They shattered inside me, and the quinque shards caused damage to one of the muscles in my shoulder, and fractured one of my ribs."

Haise's expression tightened at the mention of the wounds and their cause-- RC Cell Suppressants. "But why didn't your regeneration start sooner than last night, if you were shot then? The RC Suppressants should have worn off long before then."

"They were really strong ones. Stronger than the ones Akira-san uses," I said. And hers can take down a ghoul for a solid hour. "Much stronger. They knocked me down to human levels of healing, and the girls that I mentioned saved me, then stitched me up and saved my life."

"How did they know how to do that?" Haise frowned, but I was relieved, noting the hysteria was gradually leaving his tone, his expression cooling. "How did you know how to save them?"

Ah, shit. I let that slip.

"My dad wasn't the most conventional person," I shrugged. "When he showed up and actually acknowledged my existence, which was a rare occasion, all he ever talked about was medicine and surgeries, stuff that I didn't understand. So I bought textbooks and read them, memorized them, so that I could talk to him on equal ground. Medicine was the only thing we had in common." I hesitated. "That isn't the reason why the twins know, though. They know because they're in college to be doctors-- surgeons."

Truth. Am I telling the truth? Am I lying? I don't know anymore.

"That's... I'm sorry about your father," Haise said carefully, like he was walking over a minefield. "And I'm glad that you were able to save the twin girls. I can... understand not reporting them to the CCG. But Hide... why didn't you tell me?" His voice dropped down to a whisper now, and when he blinked, the unshed tears fell. I didn't think it was voluntary. Maybe it wasn't even conscious.

"Because I'm breaking the law at the moment, by 'harboring enemies of humanity',' I admitted. "And if I go down for it, I'm not going to endanger you or the kids by knowing about what I'm doing. I won't sugar-coat it; you, more than the kids, are in a precarious position right now. You'll always be, just like I will. We live by a careful set of rules and need to stick by them in order to live." My eyes narrowed. "But I won't abandon them because of those rules, so I won't have you being blamed for my crimes."

I won't abandon any of them. Truth. I will protect Haise and our kids. Truth.

His question, his original question, came back to mind and I sighed. "I trust you with everything, Haise. That's why I needed to lie to you-- because if you knew what I was doing, you wouldn't let
me do it alone." I paused for a moment to let it sink in, leaning forward and finally breaking his personal space, brushing away tears. *He's smiling even while he's crying. Of course he is-- it's Haise.* "Can I ask you a question now?"

Haise nodded, and I continued. "Out of curiosity, how did you know about my shoulder?"

"Last night, you cried out in your sleep. And you started coughing, badly. So I went to prop you up, and I felt the bandages." He flushed scarlet, which would have been funny if the situation weren't so solemn, and if his eyes weren't still shining with tears. "I... looked to make sure you were okay. Please forgive the intrusion."

I couldn't help but laugh. "It's fine, Haise. You've seen it all before, anyways. Here, help me take the bandages off now, won't you? I still can't move my arm very well, with it being held in place by the bandages and all, and I can't tear them off with one hand without disturbing the new skin. I feel healed up, but just in case."

Looking relieved that I wasn't angry *(he'd seen me changing before anyways, it wasn't like it mattered, although it was funny that he thought it did)* Haise got up to stand next to me, bending down to help me undo the buttons of my sleep-shirt. His face was close enough to mine that I could see that the redness had gone from them, and their color seemed to have shifted to something lighter, back to the color of a dove's feathers. Once the buttons were undone, he reached out to hook a finger under one of the bandage layers gently, probably to tear it in half--

"Sasaki? Hide-san?" Mutsuki, the first of the kids to get up and ready, like always, stopped dead where the hallway to the bedrooms met the living-room. His face lit up like a Christmas light, his single visible eye widening, and he whirled around on his heel, disappearing back into the hallways.

Haise seemed confused for a brief moment, then his eyes widened and he called out, "Wait! Mutsuki, it's not what you think, I swear!"

There was the sound of Mutsuki's door shutting, and I laughed. When I caught my breath, I managed,

"In his defense, he couldn't see the bandages," I snickered breathlessly. "We probably looked rather... suggestive."

Haise looked scandalized at my suggestion, and the red flush remained on his face. He stood up and strode away from me, hurrying towards Mutsuki's room.

"Mutsuki! Mutsuki, I swear, it wasn't anything like that!"

"Haise!" I protested, standing up to chase after him. "Haise! At least finish helping me first! I can't get it off on my own!"

From behind his door, Mutsuki made a pained noise.

Seeing the scene settle back into a domestic normality, I smiled, but inside my head, I could almost see Kanou, smiling at me in the warm, caring-doctor way that I knew concealed a cold, twisted man. In my mind, he uttered the words that I had always longed for as a child but never received, words that even now, underneath all of the sickness they brought, made me ache.

"You did well, son."

*False? Truth?*
Furuta passed me in the hallways of the Headquarters, and he slipped a folded piece of paper into my hand with the discreetness of a spy in movies. When I looked at it later, it read:

*Raid Status:* All labs destroyed excluding the one in the Seventh Ward. Kanou has switched apartments again, this time to the Eighteenth. Apartment under heavy guard by Aogiri Members. Three Blades herself has been seen patrolling the area.

*We await your command, Boss.*

---

I'm small, sitting on the bar of Itori's counter and reading. The book in my hands is thick, heavy, and a handful of the kanji it uses is above those found in the Pre-2 Kanji Kentei. It's difficult to read and frustratingly long-winded, and should have been impossible for someone my age to comprehend, but I'm able to understand it. It was the hardest textbook I had read at that point, and in the dim lighting, my head was beginning to ache. The loud music in the bar is making it worse, the cheery techno dance music that Itori loved beginning to grate on my nerves.

A set of headphones clap over my ears, drowning out the noise. Itori is beaming at me, and I blink in wonder for a moment, hands coming up to touch the headphones gently. They're a bright orange-ish, red-ish color, and the smile she gives me is gentle. Uta sat a drink down next to me, and with glee I noted that it was blood. I reached for it with a bright smile but serious eyes, and try to ignore my growing sleepiness.

It doesn't work too well, and the drink seems to make me sleepier, but I don't really mind. The taste of the blood is warm and sweet, but belatedly I realize that I can still hear the muffled conversation that Itori and Uta are having. Yomo is watching everything with solemn, serious eyes, but he doesn't seem to know that I can hear them, either. Their conversation has already reached it's end, and I listen to it as I focus on my textbook. I need to learn the medical terms and procedures faster, so that next time Father visits he'll be pleased with me.

(Deep down I already know that he is only pleased with my desire to please him. Deep down I already know that he is cold and twisted and manipulative, and I am just like he is. His spawn. The apple never fell far from the tree, did it?)

"He may be Kanou's son, but he's still just a little boy."
That was... Uta, I thought, blinking sleepily and trying to focus on a particularly tough kanji that makes my vision swim.

"He just wants to please his 'father'. I know, U-chan. He wants people to love him." Itori's eyes are sad, but I don't comprehend her words, tired as I am. I feel her long-nailed hands comb through my hair, and like a cat I lean into the touch, sighing happily.

Uta didn't respond. Instead his eyes focus on me, where I'm nodding off on the bar-top, the glass of blood emptied beside me, and my small hands are gripping onto the pages of the medical textbook with a vise-like grip. Suddenly the book is plucked from my hands and sat on the counter beside me, my page carefully marked, and I let out a drowsy cry of protest. The headphones are taken off my ears with the same lightning-speed and then I've been scooped up into Uta's arms like a baby.

"Bedtime, squirt."

I want to tell him that I'm old enough to walk on my own, that I don't need his help, but my protest dies on my lips and I lean my head into his shoulder, draping my arms around his neck and sighing. He smells like charcoal pencils, leather, and metal; like he always has, probably always will, and it's a comfort. The bar smells faintly of sweet blood and of alcohol, like Itori always has, and she smiles at me as Uta carries me away from the bar-top. Yomo gives me a wave as Uta and I disappear into the back room of Helter Skelter, which is notably almost silent, the walls soundproofed. It's Itori's loft, sectioned off by walls but no doors, besides the one for the bathroom.

Just as Uta's putting me into bed and tucking the covers around me, kissing my forehead before he left (the rings that pierced his lips were cold), I heard one last bit of conversation before the door shuts. It's Yomo, with his rumbling, deep voice that seemed to catch the attention of anybody and everybody.

"Hideyoshi really is a Clown, isn't he?"

When I awake in cold sweat, the dream is lost from my mind like water running through my fingers, hard as I try to recall it. There is a sudden idea that springs to the forefront of my mind, and with a body that seems numb I carefully climb out of the bed, not waking Haise, who is sleeping like the dead. (He didn't sleep last night, did he? Or much the night before. I'll ruin his health.) I take the laptop with me, still dead quiet. I walk down the hallways as silently as a wraith and emerge into my room, which is as bare an undecorated as it has always been. It looks unlived in-- even all of my clothes are neatly folded or hung up in the bedroom I shared with Haise.

But I'm not here for clothes.

I sit down at the desk and place the laptop down, opening it up and retrieving my personal flash-drive from the very back of my desk. After plugging it into the laptop and entering my password, I infected the laptop with a firewall, to hide my next movements from the CCG's sight.

Then I begin to type.
When I finish typing, the sun is rising and my sight is blurred with sleep, but I print the files and wipe the documents from the computer. I go downstairs and retrieve the documents from the Chateau's printer, and when I return to my room, I unplug my flash-drive and replace it in the drawer of my desk. I fold the papers carefully and tuck them into the correct envelopes, sealing and signing them, before tucking them away in the drawer too.

After I'm done, I return the laptop to it's rightful place at Haise's desk and slip into bed. I close my eyes, falling into a restful sleep for the first time in a long time, as if I had never left.
It's Friday. Including today, there's two days before the Tsukiyama Raid begins, and it's meal day for us.

Meal days are always eventful. Haise and I wake up extra-early to take the train, because we always leave the car for the kids, and travel to the Headquarters before most of the other Investigators are there. Except for the unlucky souls that worked the night shift and the even unluckier ones that had to put in so many hours of overtime to meet paperwork deadlines, they crashed at their desks in order to snag an hour or so of sleep.

But Haise and I walked past them, to Doctor Shiba's office, where Akira was already waiting, patiently. She always seemed to patient, even when she was impatient. That might have been due to her always-monotonous expression, but the fact still remained.

"Nagachika. Haise." She nodded to the two seats in the waiting portion of the room. "You both know the drill."

And we did, so we sat down obediently. Haise always was uncomfortable around this time, and I really couldn't blame him. It was a bit awkward to be eating in front of your superior-- or mother, in Haise's case-- when what you were eating was essentially the same as a corpse. It was just a ghoul that had been melted down into a really, really big cup. Like one of the sixty-four ounce cups they sold soda in at gas stations.

I recalled the synthetic meat experiment, which was much more efficient and much easier to consume than a huge cup of liquid that had to be drank. Another solution sprang to mind-- give us daily or weekly dosages, instead of a huge cup at the end of the month.

That was two simple solutions in a matter of minutes, and I remembered that yes, this was why I had no faith in the CCG's experimental division.

I sighed at the large metal cup-shaped containers were handed to us by a curious-looking Doctor Shiba-- and I wondered briefly how many times he would have to watch us eat for his curiosity to be sated-- before reaching out and prying the metal top off. Quietly, despondently, Haise reached forward and did the same. His miserable air was familiar now, because he always got like this, and I ruffled his hair for a moment, offering him a smile before we were given metal straws and expected to start eating.

I stuck the metal straw (it gave everything a lingering taste of the stuff) into the metal container, waiting until Haise had done the same before cheerily announcing, "Itadakimasu!"

Haise echoed my thanks with much less enthusiasm, and we began to drink.

The liquid had been warmed (at least they gave us some consideration) and it didn't taste bad. It tasted somewhat like blood did, but this had a distinct taste that was difficult to put into words. Blood was more appealing, but this was sustainable, and it did have a higher RC Factor.

Well, I wasn't complaining about it, really. Food was food, and I'd need it for the raid. The Tsukiyama Family had already been whisked off to America, I knew, (the CCG didn't) so there wasn't really anything to worry about. We'd raid the manor and find nothing, and it would be a huge
blow to the CCG, but not one they would never recover from. We would all be okay, and I had nothing to worry about.

We ate quickly, and in silence, until after everything was over and Doctor Shiba came to clear away our containers. Akira hadn’t said a word, either, and although nobody had ever explained her purpose during our meals to me, the quinque case at her feet and the gun loaded with RC Cell Suppressants made it evident.

She was there to control us. To act as a safety net if we lost control, to subdue us. To kill us, if needed.

Which seemed fairly stupid and unnecessary, to me, considering that we were at our most placid when full, by nature. Also our strongest, which I supposed was the reason Akira had been placed here.

"Can I ask you a question, Nagachika-kun?" Doctor Shiba asked, which caught me off-guard, as he’d never asked me a question after a meal before.

But I inclined my head. "Sure, Doctor Shiba."

"What’s it like, to live with a high RC Cell Count? -- or an RC Factor, whichever term you prefer. What is living like a ghoul compared to living like a human? Sasaki-kun wouldn’t know, since he can’t remember being human, but surely you can describe the differences?"

I was startled by his question, and besides me, Haise tensed.

"Doctor Shiba," Akira barked. "That’s--"

"It’s okay, Akira-san," I assured her, smiling. "I can answer his questions."

"Are you sure, Hide?" Haise asked worriedly. Despite the people in the room, his fingers twined through mine.

My smile was brighter when I turned to Haise. "It really is fine, Haise. I promise. How is he going to know what feels normal for the kids, after all, if he doesn’t have a list from patient zero? Or, the non-amnesiac patient zero," I teased playfully.

Haise chuckled, his lips twitching upwards into a smile. "If your sure."

"I am," I assured him, and internally my smile was a little sharp.

*I’ll give you honest answers, Shiba. Or at least, as honest as I can be, since I was never human at all to begin with. But I’ve gone through a good chunk of my life dosed up on so many Suppressants that I can tell you what it feels like to alternate between the two."

*[Hide is referring to the statement "Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back."]

"Looking back on when I was human, everything seems much slower compared to now," I admitted, thinking to the slowing effect RC Cell Suppressants seemed to have. "As a half-ghoul, I’m much stronger, faster, and I heal incredibly fast. I can get a hole punched through me and heal up like it never happened, and the same goes for anything or the sort, like broken bones or something that should be instantly fatal-- it won’t even leave a scar. All of those lethal wounds aren’t lethal anymore. Because of those things, I can protect the people I care about better than I would have been if I were
human."

Shiba was listening intently, scribbling down notes, nodding like he was intrigued. "And the bad things?"

"Well, obviously I can't eat normal food anymore, or drink anything besides coffee or water, because everything tastes terrible and I can't even digest things," Lies. "And then there's the fact that I have to keep an iron grip on my kakugan so that it doesn't activate and freak people out. And people smell really good-- like, really good. Do you know what it's like to be surrounded by the people you love and they smell like food? It's a terrible feeling. And hunger is terrible, but that doesn't happen often-- not unless it's near the end of the month and I have to recover from one of those should-be fatal wounds, because regeneration uses up so much energy and RC Cells that it's as if I didn't even eat in the month." Truth. "Hunger for ghouls is excruciating, because it starts to mess with your head. It makes you see things that aren't really there, hear things. It's always your darkest fears. Imagine facing your inner demons every single time you get peckish, and that's about how hunger for me-- for us," I paused, and Haise's hand twitched in time.

Truth. I told the truth. Are you happy, Doctor Shiba?

Shiba had stopped his writing. His old face was pale, eyes dark behind his glasses. Akira looked ill for a brief second, then she composed herself.

"Sasaki-kun. Does everything Nagachika-kun said also apply to yourself?"

Haise sighed. "I can't remember what it was like to be human, I've already said. But everything he said about being a ghoul... is true."

Shiba nodded. He didn't write it down.

"I see... thank you both for answering my questions. You're... free to go now."

Akira led us out of Doctor Shiba's office, tight-lipped, with her eyes clouded with thoughts.

"Haise. Has the hunger always been like that?"

Looking startled, Haise affirmed the statement. "It has."

"I see." Akira said, then after a moment of hesitation, "If you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to with Arima." She nodded to us both in turn. "Thank you both for the insight."

She left, her heels the only noise in the Headquarters.

Well, Shiba, is your curiosity sated now? Because you looked rather dead to me.

We walk home, rather than take the train. The winter air is cold and crisp, and the sky is cloudy and grey.
"It's been supposed to snow for days," Haise sighed, glancing at the sky. "Every day the weathermen say, 'It'll snow today', and it never actually does."

"Well, maybe it'll snow on Christmas," I said, nudging his arm. His hands were cold, and his cheeks flushed with the bite of the air. "Including today, it's only in fourteen days, you know. And you still haven't told me what you want."

"I already said, though, I don't want anything," Haise protested.


"None of my favorite authors have come out with new books lately. There aren't any that I want, and I don't want anything else, either." Haise shrugged. "I guess that I already have everything that I could have ever wanted."

There was dead silence between us for a moment, and then I burst out laughing.

"And you said I was corny?"

"Hide! I'm being serious," Haise scolded, but his eyes were light.

"I know. That's what makes it even funnier-- it's so sweet that it's unbearably funny!"

Haise rolled his eyes, and they gleamed in the watery winter sunlight. His hair was completely black and neatly kept, and he wore a grey vest over his white dress shirt and black slacks. "Geez, Hide."

He looks exactly like he used to. No, he's more confident now-- more... free, too. I guess old habits just die hard, when it comes to taste in clothes.

We walked on in silence for awhile, then Haise said, "Hide?"

"Hmm?"

"I've... got a bad feeling about the raid," Haise admitted. "I know that I've said that before, but... Something feels really bad this time. I don't like it."

I've got the same feeling. But everything will be fine. The Raid won't even happen-- the Tsukiyama Family is long gone.

I ran a thumb over his hand in circles as we walked. "It'll be okay, Haise. Haven't you seen the kids? They've improved so much since the Auction Raid that it's insane. Looking back at the Torso Case, it's hard to believe they're the same kids. Saiko can release her kagune with less time now, Mutsuki's amazing with his knives and his kagune, Urie's less of a jerk and his dexterity when fighting with his quinque has improved by miles, and Shirazu's stamina is on par with the S-ranked ukaku ghouls. They're all fighting machines, and together, they fight like cogs in a well-oiled machine. Nothing can stop them-- especially when they give it their all, together. We call them kids, but they really can take care of themselves now. One day, they might really be better than Arima-san."

Haise smiled faintly at the statement. "One day, they will be. I have no doubt." He smiled at me, and it was gentle and wider now. "Because I trust them. I trust you, too. If you say they'll be okay, I'll believe it."

I returned his smile, and it was a genuine, smaller one. Not the beaming grin that won people over. A true smile. "They'll be okay. I promise."
"Put the fire out!" Urie was screaming, the minute we walked into the door. It was still early morning, and Haise and I exchanged confused glances before the acrid reek of smoke and something burnt reached us. "Put out the fire before it spreads!"

"I'm tryin', this ain't easy!" Shirazu howled. There was a splashing sound, and then Urie shrieked, "Not on me you dimwit!"

We raced into the kitchen to find a hectic scene of utter chaos.

The oven was on fire. More particularly, the black, crispy, burnt-to-a-crisp lumps on a baking sheet were on fire. Also, what appeared to be something like paper underneath the... burnt things, was also in flames. The Quinx paused, with similarly panicked expressions.

Shirazu was holding an empty cup that appeared to have formally been holding water, Urie was drenched in water from head-to-toe, Saiko was coated in something that looked like eggs, and Mutsuki was as white as a ghost as he tried to beat out the flames with the potholder, covered head-to-toe in flour.

I darted forward and snatched the burning tray, regardless of the flames that licked at my skin, and dumped it into the sink, throwing the water on. It doused the flames, and Haise was beside me in an instant, inspecting my hand. The skin was red and raw, but as we watched it, it healed over and any signs of the burned skin had already vanished. Haise's fingers lingered a moment longer, brushing gently over the newly-grown patch of skin. His expression was worried, soft for a moment, then he dropped my hand and turned to the Quinx. Haise put a hand on his hip, perfectly the picture of the scolding mother.

"What did you all do to my kitchen?"

"I was going to visit Anne," Saiko supplied. "And I said that I'd bring sweets for everybody. So Mucchan said he'd help and he got Shiragin and Uribo to help, but something went wrong. The oven caught on fire, and eggs and flour went everywhere." She pouted, all puppy-dog eyes. "Will you help us, Maman, Papa? Pleeeeeease?"

Haise put a hand to his temple, then he pointed at the door. "All of you. Go outside and hose yourselves off. I won't have you tracking this mess on the carpet."

"Wh--" Urie begin to protest, but Haise gave him a cold glare that sent all four of them skittering out the door, leaving a goopy, flour-egg-water mixture on the floor behind them.

Haise sighed, and I suppressed my laughter excellently. When they came in, soaked to the bone, Haise gave them time to change into new clothes before he began scolding them again.

"It was for a good cause. I'll give you that. But I hope you see why I don't let any of you inside my kitchen to cook now. This happens." His tone was flat and left room for no arguments. "I'm going to
the store to pick up the things we'll need to bake chocolate chip cookies. Clean up the mess you've made before I get back.” Haise turned to me. "Hide. Supervise them, won't you? Make sure they don't touch anything they shouldn't. Oh, and preheat the oven to one-hundred ninety degrees, won't you? Celsius."

I laughed. "I can do it. Don't worry, Haise. By the time you get back, they'll have the kitchen back in ship-shape. Won't you, kids?"

"Yes," Came the chorus of four voices, Urie's just a little later than the others.

But Haise seemed satisfied with the response, and with an abrupt change of demeanor, beamed and leaned over to kiss me before he left.

"Great! I'll be back in fifteen minutes, tops!" Haise's voice was perfectly cheery as he grabbed the car keys and exited. "We've got orphans to make happy!"

When the door shut, there were four audible exhales and four shoulders slumped in relief.

"Sassan is scary like that," Shirazu muttered, but he wasted no time in grabbing a broom and sweeping broken eggs into a dustpan. Mutsuki went to get rags to mop the counters off, Urie fetched a mop and bucket, and Saiko grabbed towels to wipe the water and egg innards off the floor. They got to work with that, and I began the task of prying the burnt, blackened lumps that most certainly were not cookies off the baking sheet. I did a double-take when I saw that they had used wax paper, not parchment paper. No wonder it had caught on fire.

I laughed again. "Haise is very domestic, but don't ever make him mad. He really is scary when he gets mad. It's like when somebody threatens one of you-- he wouldn't mind roughing someone up."

I wouldn't, either. Of course, I'd use blackmail first. But the fact still remains true.

We arrived at the orphanage-- ahem, the CCG First Ward Junior Academy, Kindergarten Division--a few hours later, when it was sometime between late morning and early afternoon. We were armed with dozens of Tupperware containers chock-full of fresh, home-made chocolate chip cookies and a handful of disks Saiko had brought. They were children's movies, on closer inspection, with subtitles in French. And what appeared to be a G-rated anime series, also subtitled in French.

Saiko lead the charge into the orphanage, with a purpose in her stride that made me proud. There was a man smoking a cigarette outside the entrance to the boys dorm (I wanted to point out the 'no smoking' sign literally a foot away on the wall, but I didn't) and he snubbed out his cigarette with a spluttered cough, trying unsuccessfully to hide it when we appeared.

"Ah, who are you bunch?" He asked, tone mostly uncaring and faintly disrespecting when he didn't recognize us. "Bureau Investigators? Oh, are you here to interview the boy from Eighteen that came in the yesterday? Hate to break it to you, but I don't think he'll be much help. Hasn't done anything but bawl since he got here." The man shrugged.

I wouldn't, either. Of course, I'd use blackmail first. But the fact still remains true.
"Actually," Haise said, his tone forced into a cheerful tenor, "I'm First Class Sasaki, of the Mado Squad. This is First Class Nagachika, also of the Mado Squad. These are our subordinates, the Quinx Squad; Rank 1 Urie, Rank 1 Mutsuki, Rank 2 Shirazu, and Rank 2 Yonebayashi. We're all Ghoul Investigators."

His face paled when he realized that we all were technically his superiors, outranking him. Academy staff were given the title of Rank 3, but they didn't fight, just like the other Bureau Investigators.

"A-Ah, I see. What can I help you with, Sasaki-san, Nagachika-san?"

"We're here to visit the kids," Saiko said cheerily, amused by his panic. "We brought treats for them. And movies. You've got a projector, right?"

"We might, somewhere," The man said, after a hesitant moment. "But you can just leave the stuff and I'll make sure they all get a treat and watch a movie."

Liar. I can hear your heartbeat speed up when you lie. You won't do anything for them, will you?

"Would you mind getting that for us now, Rank 3?" I asked in a bright, upbeat tone of voice with an evident undercurrent of threat that said that is an order. "Thanks! We can get them all rounded up and into a room to wait-- do you have a room without windows, so that the sunlight won't interfere with the movie projection?"

"We do," The voice that broke in belonged to an older woman, hair done up in a bun, with an impeccable uniform. She pointed to a door at the bottom of a set of stairs. "It's that one there. It's a storm shelter, and it was supposed to be a 'playroom', but most of them don't ever use it."

Them. She can't even say 'the children'?

I didn't like her either.

"That sounds perfect! Haise, will you get the girls out of the dorm, while I get the boys?" I asked, making a point to remain overwhelmingly cheerful and bright as I stacked my containers on top of Urie's. Haise nodded his affirmation and passed his own containers to Shirazu, who managed to keep his balance.

"Urie, Shirazu, will you guys take the cookies and movies downstairs? Mutsuki, Saiko, will you two help make sure all the kids make it down the stairs okay?"

"Sure, Sassan, Hide-san," Shirazu grunted, as Saiko stacked her containers (a feat that was most impressive, considering the fact she was much shorter than he was. Mutsuki passed his to Urie, and Shirazu started down the steps, arms laden. "C'mon, Cookie!"

Urie looked faintly irritated at the pun on his name, and looked like he was considering tripping Shirazu down the stairs. But I saw him glance at Shirazu's precariously-balanced Tupperware containers, hesitating.

He didn't.
Papa is amazing, Saiko thought to herself, watching as Hide swept into the boy's dormitory and threw his arms open, like he was embracing the air, seeming to physically radiate light and cheerfulness.

"Okay, kiddos! Time to go have some fun!"

The boys dorm wasn't any better than the girls had been, Saiko noted, seeing the rows of blank-eyed and depressed-looking young boys sitting on cots in almost complete silence, despite the hour. A few of them were thumbing through picture books or held crayons and notebooks, but most didn't. Their blankets and sheets were blue and threadbare, but clean, and pictures lined the walls in there, too. Seldom did they feature things like sports and animals-- most of them were of the black-and-red eyed monsters that probably plagued their nightmares, and white-coated superheros.

Saiko swallowed back her sorrow when their heads swiveled around to face Hide with a dull interest, like they weren't sure what fun was supposed to mean.

"C'mon, c'mon! Up and at 'em! We're all going to go down and watch some movies, doesn't that sound fun? So bring your blankets and pillows! And guess what? We brought cookies!"

"...cookies?" One voice, painfully hopeful, asked. Hide focused on the owner of the voice, a short but skinny young boy.

In a flash, Hide had scooped him up and swung him around, doing three full spins on the tip of one foot before he stopped, holding the startled boy high enough that they were eye-level.

"That's right, we brought home-made, chocolate chip cookies! And guess what?" Hide dropped his voice down to a mock-whisper. "They're still warm."

Maybe it was the mention of the sweets, but more likely, Saiko thought, was the mention of something home-made. Cafeteria food was one thing-- a treat made by hand, from scratch, was special in a way that a mother's embrace was. Something from home, made with love and care, something they were probably deprived of.

But it was like a switch had been flipped. Slowly, hesitantly, but then all at once it seemed like little boys were climbing from cots and out the door, stumbling over Junior Academy uniforms that didn't fit quite right, dragging blankets and pillows. Urie had propped the door to the 'playroom'-- which was nothing more than a storm shelter with toys that looked like they'd never even been used put inside-- for the children.

And Maman is doing just as well, even with a different approach, Saiko thought, turning her gaze to the girls dorm, where Haise was guiding a horde of small girls out, coaxed with gentle words and soft smiles, little touches to shoulders for gentle encouragement when one would hesitate.

It was like her surrogate parents had suddenly taken in a lot more children, because they fell into the roles so easily Saiko wanted to laugh as she took the hands of two of the unsteady children-- a boy with his thumb in his mouth and a girl with shaking legs-- and lead them down the stairs to the playroom, settling them down with their blankets and pillows. Urie had propped the door to the 'playroom'-- which was nothing more than a storm shelter with toys that looked like they'd never even been used put inside-- for the children.
absolutely ridiculous but was actually pretty sweet.

She was so surprised, she didn't react when one of the small girls, teetering at the edge of the stairs with wide eyes, tripped down the stairs. Mutsuki, from far across the room, could do nothing but cry out. Shirazu was occupied, Haise was still in the girls dorm, and Hide in the boys.

Saiko could do nothing but watch, frozen, as the painfully tiny girl fell through the air, waiting for the terrible moment when she would strike the stairs--

--which never came, because Urie caught her without his expression ever changing. He held her for a moment, then sat her on the ground with surprising gentleness and picked up her blanket and pillow, handing it to her and, after a brief moment's hesitation, patting her head.

"Be more careful next time."

Still wide-eyed and astonished, the little girl managed a nod, before walking off unsteadily to sit down.

"C'était incroyable!" A voice squeaked, and Saiko found herself looking at Anne, bright-eyed in Hide's arms. She leapt out of them with a wiggle, launching herself at Urie with a delighted expression and happy squeal. He caught her with much less delight. "Vous êtes cool, Monsieur Taupes!"

(*That was amazing! You're cool, Mister Moles!)

Saiko snickered at the nickname, and Urie looked confused enough that Hide took pity on him and translated.

"She was complimenting you. She said you were cool, and that saving the little girl like that was amazing."

Papa left out the 'Mister Moles' part, Saiko thought, and snickered again. *He's nicer than I would have been.*

Anne pulled at his oddly-colored purple hair (and now that she thought about it, odd hair color seemed to be a requirement in the Quinx Squad-- and the Mado Squad, for that matter), to Urie's dismay, and asked earnestly, "Vous avez jolis cheveux! Puis-je vous dessiner?"

(*You have pretty hair! Can I draw you?)

"...what?"

Hide, looking down at Urie with a grin as he and Haise tried to shepherd stragglers down the stairs, said, "She told you that you have pretty hair. And she asked if she could draw you."

Urie let her pull on the strands of his hair for a moment longer before he sat her down and asked, "...how do I tell her, 'I'll bring my paints sometime, and you can paint then'?"

With a growing grin, Hide responded, "Let's see... Saiko, that'd be 'Je apporter mes des peintures un certain temps, et vous pouvez de peinture alors,' right?"

Saiko paused. "I think that's right, Papa."

Urie repeated the statement, and Anne seemed to understand.

*Or she heard Papa say it first. With his terrible accentuation and dictation, she probably didn't
understand a word.

But Uribo tried. I'll give him that.

(We should be training,) Urie mused. (Not sitting in an orphanage surrounded by snot-nosed brats. We did this yesterday. I know I said that I would come back with paints, but I didn't mean the next day.)

(How did I get dragged into this? I can't even remember now.)

He was painting a wall. More specifically, he was painting a mural on a wall, because nobody else in the Mado or the Quinx Squad-- besides Sasaki, who was decent-- could draw anything more than stick-people. Which was disgraceful, because painting was an art and if they couldn't do it well then they shouldn't do it at all.

(And yet I'm letting a bunch of snotty kids paint with me. What the hell was I thinking.)

Some of the orphans weren't half-bad, considering the youngest was barely four and the oldest six-and-a-half. Urie would give them credit for that, and the fact they were mostly well-behaved and docile (depressed, he thought, but wouldn't say a word). Maybe that's why he was letting them paint with him. They brought out his empathy (stupid emotions).

("I'm sorry, Kuki. We couldn't protect... your father, Special Class Investigator Urie.")

(A stiff suit that was too big on him. A coffin with bits of a body that passed as 'remains'. People around him weeping for his father, who was 'so brave' and 'a hero'.)

("It's our responsibility.")

Urie blinked away the unpleasant memories. The stokes of his paintbrush were smooth and methodical.

(Responsibility? Don't give me that shit.)

His paintbrush paused for a moment, mid-stoke. The yellow paint was painfully bright to him, but his reasons for choosing it were solid. It evoked cheerful and warm emotions. For orphans who did nothing but bawl (there were a handful that had only stopped crying after hours of being coddled yesterday. Sasaki and Nagachika seemed perfectly at ease drying tears and giving out hugs like candy) the color seemed like it would do good. His entire color scheme for the mural (blue skies full of clouds, impossibly green grass, flowers of every shape and color, a yellow sun) was focused around that basis. Bright colors that evoked happy emotions.

(None of the monochrome colors, the blacks tiled floors and the white cement walls. The Junior Academy is covered in those already.)

Behind where Urie stood on the ladder, painting with a handful of smock-clothes children around his feet, Sasaki was reading children's books to them, changing the tone of his voice for each of the
characters in a way that Urie thought was ridiculous, but the orphans seemed to love. Nagachika was doing equally ridiculous things, magic tricks that made children squeal with delight. Yonebayashi was sitting against a wall, showing wide-eyed little girls how to braid hair. Shirazu had taken up the task of aiding in the construction of what appeared to be a fortress made of building blocks. Mutsuki was doing juggling acts with shiny round balls of varying shades, gradually adding a new ball every time one was thrown to him and balancing on a single foot.

For a moment, Urie wondered where Mutsuki had learned to juggle. Then he realized that Mutsuki was doing the same thing he did when he fought, except he was juggling balls instead of knives. Which was surprisingly ingenious of him, using his talents like that (bikaku, he has the best balance out of all of us, clever trick).

It was nighttime and they had to be going (I need sleep, there's a raid tomorrow and I have to be at my peak to get a promotion), to the children's despair. They had stayed until dinner and ate cafeteria food (the taste is just like it always was-- terrible), Sasaki and Nagachika herding the boys and girls into their respective dorms and telling them all good-night (sickeningly parent-like, complete with kisses on foreheads and a bedtime story), promising to visit again the following Saturday.

When they left, arms laden with empty cookie containers (sugar, this time) Urie cast one last glance to the mural, now dried. He had painted most of it, and it looked professional, excluding what the orphans had added at the bottom of the mural, in what had been a painfully bright flower field.

Stick-figures of everyone from the Quinx Squad, Sasaki and Nagachika included. With stupid grins and the shaky lines of paint that came from shaky, chubby hands. It was unprofessional (pretty), clearly made by children (sentimental), and not very talented children, at that (touching).

Maybe I'll come next time too, with everyone. To kill time. Saturdays are always slow.

(Lie. Saturdays are busy.)

Chapter End Notes

*The temperature Haise mentioned, 190 degrees Celsius, is 375 Fahrenheit, for anyone in the USA or other countries that don't use Celsius.

Next chapter is the raid! The beginning of it, anyways.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Ayato gets the spotlight for a moment, and Hide plays mind games with Washuu Matsuri.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ayato was never told the true purposes of missions, like most of Aogiri Tree’s Executives. Eto was creepy and mysterious on a good day, and she liked to keep her true motives to herself. And Ayato could respect that, since most of the time he had more than a vague idea of what the mission’s purpose was.

This time, he didn’t. He had virtually no idea why they were all waiting in the dark inside the ritzy mansion, waiting for the CCG to raid. His job was to kill as many of the CCG as possible. And okay, he could do that. A lot of times, when it came to missions like this, that was all he was meant to do. To deliver a severe blow to the CCG and kill off as many of the Doves as possible. Ayato was fine with that. It was a simple job, and he could rack up body counts in the hundreds.

But this job was different. Because every single ghoul in Aogiri Tree was stuffed into this European-style mansion. Every single ghoul, from the weakest, most pitiful ghouls that were normally put on kitchen duty or guard duty, was gathered here. Thousands of them, packed into the multi-story mansion. And Ayato had no fucking clue why.

And he had a bad feeling about this job. Ayato had long since trust the fight-or-flight instinct inside him— it was what had saved his ass many times over, especially during his hot-headed adolescence. Right now it was ringing in his head like bells, and it didn’t help the fact that Eto herself seemed extremely... agitated. Or maybe irritated. Pissed-off, for sure, but also... strangely resigned, like she wanted to rip someone’s head off but couldn’t.

It made Ayato nervous, much as he loathed to admit it. Anything that would make the famed One-Eyed Owl resigned made him absolutely fucking terrified.

"Ayato," Hinami said quietly, from where she was standing next to him. Her mask concealed much of her face, but she held onto his hand so tight that the circulation was beginning to slow. Ayato didn’t say anything about it, because being weak in Aogiri Tree was a death sentence and the tightness of her grip was the only safe way to convey her nervousness. Until Hinami broke the big rule (never admit fear, you’ll be torn apart). "I'm afraid."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "Don’t be, Hina. It’s just another extermination mission."

*I'm afraid too. But I'll be damned if I say it."

Then Eto leapt on top of one of the tables, looking far too young behind wraps of bandages and a tattered pink cloak and the ragged, pink, flower-printed bandanna.

"I'm sure you're all very confused," She chimed, in that little-kid, cheery way of hers. "I'll clear up
some of that confusion, kay~?"

*Things never end up well when she makes cheerful announcements.*

Eto tilted her head to the side, like a small child would to seem cute. "We're going to wipe out the Doves today!"

*What. The. Fuck.*

She held a bandaged finger to her lips and the exclamations and the cries of confusion. "Shh~! The Doves will be here soon, and we can't have them hearing how many of us there are! Listen up close, 'cause I'm not done talking yet~!"

*This isn't going to end well. She's too cheerful.*

"This is going to be the day that we bring balance back to the world!" Eto declared. "We're going to take back our place in society today, once and for all! We'll tear down the oppressive birdcage that the humans, that the Doves, have kept us trapped under for ages!" She spread her arms, ghostly white bandages concealing all of her skin, like she was embracing everyone. "We're going to take back our place in society today!"

*She's more charismatic than usual. What's happening? What isn't she telling us?*

"Ayato," Hinami whispered. Her hand, which seemed so small in his, was white-knuckled. "I don't like this. Something isn't right."

"I know it isn't, Hina."

*Eto may be a crazy bitch, but she isn't stupid. It might work. We could wipe out the Doves-- even when they call in more manpower, we can slaughter them in close confines. They aren't expecting us. We have all of the advantages in the dark-- better eyesight, speed, strength. We could win.*

Ayato's gaze drifted to Hinami.

*But how many of us would die? Nobody among us isn't expendable to Eto and Tatara. We're all just pawns in their game.*

He saw, in his mind's eye, the weeping girl that seemed so much younger than him, so native and juvenile and innocent, so unlike him despite being just two years his junior. The little girl in the bright colors with the flower prints, with the clover headband, who only saw the best in people-- even in him. When had Hinami stopped wearing bright, happy colors? When had she stopped smiling so brightly?

*Aogiri Tree will take the best of you and shatter it. There's no room for seeing the best in people, because that's how you end up dead and betrayed and alone. It's better to see the worst, wasn't that what I always thought? But Hinami still sees the best in people, doesn't she?*

The decision was hovering in his mind, heavily. He knew something the other ghouls, who were celebrating at Eto's charismatic and uplifting speech, didn't. Pierrot was with the Doves. If he fought, full-out, it didn't matter how many thousands of B- or A-ranked ghouls they had. Pierrot would crush them all like ants under his feet, to protect the people that were important to him.

*Nobody is just a pawn to him, are they? I see now.*

Ayato draped his arms around the shorter girl's shoulders, drawing her into a hug. Hinami stiffened,
surprised, but he didn't blame her— he (pre)tended to loathe most gestures like this, and never initiated them. But this wasn't just a show of affection, no. It served a greater purpose, as he drew her close and brought his lips to her ear.

"Listen, Hina. We're going to run, okay? We're going to run and find Pierrot's allies, because he's going to win this fight with or without our help, and we're going to come out of this alive."

Hinami's eyes were wide behind her mask, but as he pulled away, she nodded. He took her hand and they subtly made their way to the window, which Ayato pried open with a careful silence. The other Aogiri Tree ghouls were still celebrating, as Eto tried to quiet them, because the Doves would be here soon.

They stood at the ridiculously large, open window, and he gripped her hand a little tighter. They were three stories up. The fall would be nothing to them, but that wasn't what caused Ayato's hesitation. If they jumped, it would be the end of their time at Aogiri. They would be traitors.

But we'll be alive. I won't let anything else be taken from me. We'll be alive and together, and isn't that all that matters?

They jumped, and Ayato's heart was racing as they started running, at breakneck speeds, towards the cafe that his sister owned. He felt oddly free, like a burden had just been taken off his shoulders. But he didn't have time to stop and think about it, because stopping would mean death, be it from Eto or the Doves that would be there doubtlessly soon.

Of all things to come to his mind, a song from his childhood surfaced. He recalled his father, sitting at the table and showing them how to ice gingerbread cookies that were shaped like bunnies and smelled terrible, but the memory was fond. He and Touka were singing and competing to see who could ice their cookie the best, as their father told them the story of a cookie that had come to life.

It had seemed funny, as a child, but now it seemed morbid. Because in the end, he died, didn't he?

"Run, run, run as fast as you can!"

It's nine thirty, according to my wristwatch. I'm standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Haise, the cold winter air the last thing on my mind. Although I know the expansive, European-style mansion that looms in front of us is empty, it's still eerie to see this many Ghoul Investigators gathered in one place. Our white coats flutter in the faint, chilling breeze, and the sight is beautiful in a strange way.

Like a field of peristeria elata. Or maybe diphylleia grayi.

"Five minutes," Shirazu announced, in a whisper.

Mutsuki flexed his fingers. His knives were tucked into their sheathes at his waist, and I could understand his nervousness, if I hadn't known that the raid wouldn't actually be taking place. Saiko looks almost scared, but determined, and Urie is as stone-faced as ever, but there's a fire burning behind his eyes that makes me want to grin.
I do, offering them all a bright smile.

"It'll be fine. Just think about how much you've all improved since the Torso case."

They've all come a long way. It's almost a shame that they don't get to fight in a real battle. My wristwatch clicked down another minute. Four left.

"Make sure that you remember the formation," Haise said firmly. "It's designed to use all of your abilities to the fullest, and when you're at your peak ability, you're safety will be higher. Hide and I don't plan on leaving you, but in case we do, remember to take charge, Shirazu." Haise met his eyes, and both of them were as serious and solemn as I had ever seen them. "Remember why I chose you to be the Squad Leader. Not because you're the strongest or fastest: because you'll make decisions based on what is best for the team."

Three minutes.

Haise paused, and then he turned his gaze on everyone. "I trust you all to fight well. We're all going back home, okay?"

He received four serious, solemn nods.

Two minutes.

Haise sighed, and seemed to relax a little. "There is one more thing I want to do, though."

"Haise, we have like a minute and a half left. What could you--" My statement was cut short by Haise pressing his lips to mine before I could blink. It's slower than our others had been, soft. Gentle. Reassuring, but looking for reassurance.

We'll make it home tonight, won't we?

I brought a hand up to caress his face and kissed him back, hoping that he understood my response to his unspoken question.

We will. (I'd make sure you all did, if this was a real fight. But there won't be a fight. We'll all go home a little disappointed but unhurt.)

We pull apart.

One.

"I love you," I told him, my hand brushing his for a moment.

"I love you too," Haise answered me earnestly, without hesitation. His eyes were silvery in the moonlight, and I etched how he looked (unearthly) into my mind.

Zero.

My earpiece crackled, in perfect time with all of the others. Washuu Matsuri's voice came through my ear as clear as day.

"Begin operation. Advance troops, deploy."

Lead by Ui, I picked out a few that I recognized in the advanced troops. There was the air-headed Ihei, the psychopath Kijima, Furuta, and a few other higher-ranked investigators with higher battle prowess. Their job was simple: begin the charge.
There were the sounds of faint static as we waited for our call to approach the building, as subsequent troops. A call that I knew would never come, because the advance troops wouldn't find anything besides an empty building.

"There's something fishy about this, Special Class Washuu," Ui announced, his voice coming through all of our earpieces. "I don't see any servants."

Washuu Matsuri was silent, but the voices in our earpieces weren't. It must have been a malfunction that we were able to hear everything, and I'd have bet money that the tech team was scrambling to fix it.

"Ui-san, I found something-- ack!" The voice that I couldn't put a face to, though it sounded vaguely familiar and I was sure I had heard it around the office at some point or other, cut off in an odd gurgling noise. Then there was screaming, the sound of someone screaming in pain, and then there was silence.

A new voice broke through our earpieces. "What the--" There was the sound of ripping that was probably skin, and I heard a splashing. Blood? There was more agonized screaming, and Ui's voice broke through the static.

"This isn't the Tsukiyama Family at all-- this is Aogiri Tree, I repeat, Aogiri Tree. A full assault. There are-- there are too many of them to count."

Then our earpieces went dead, and I assumed the tech team had fixed the error. But my stomach had done a lurch, and I felt faintly sick and more than faintly confused.

Aogiri Tree? What are they doing here? And what did Ui mean, 'a full assault'? Too many to count? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I didn't have time to ponder the thoughts racing through my mind, fast as lightning, because our earpieces all crackled and Washuu Matsuri's voice came through.

"Subsequent troops, deploy."

Confused though we were, an order was an order, and my feet moved automatically, a half-step faster than Haise so as to be the first into the building. The Ito Squad is already entering the building, and they all stop dead. I do, too, because it's as if my senses had been overwhelmed.

Ghouls. Ghouls everywhere. It looks like they've brought all of Aogiri Tree.

"Subsequent troops, report."

Kuramoto, the senior officer, had report jurisdiction, and I forced myself to remain silent. My brain had gone into overdrive, thinking, assessing, threat level, estimated rankings, analyse, analyse the situation.

Kuramoto is silent, and his closed-eyed smile is gone, replaced with wide-eyes and an expression of utter horror. He can't see what I can see, my more-than-human eyes seeing clearly in the dark, seeing the hundred-or-so ghouls packed into the first floor of the manor, and the sounds of more on the floors to come.

"First Class Ito, report," Washuu Matsuri barks, but I clear my throat and respond instead. My voice is frighteningly calm.

"First Class Nagachika, reporting. The Tsukiyama Family and servants are nowhere to be seen, but
Aogiri Tree is here. Numbers are roughly estimated to be in the thousands. Estimated ranking of majority, B- to A-Rank. This is a personal estimation, but there is doubtlessly S-Ranked and above on higher floors." I paused, to let my earlier statement sink in, then I announced, "This isn't a battle to weaken us, Washuu. This is a Battle of Annihilation."

There are inhales of shock and surprise around me, as the Aogiri Tree ghouls force us into the center of the room, Advance Troops and Subsequent Troops smashed into once circle of people. We've taken up the defensive every time something lashes out at us, and it's a vicious cycle.

I've never been wrong before and you know it, Washuu.

Washuu Matsuri's reply is just as cold and calm as my report had been. Our personalities are frighteningly alike, able to see numbers and not lives, to devise the most efficient strategy in a split-second, to be analytical and indifferent to death.

"Describe your current location and situation."

"There have been a handful of casualties so far, but only light injury to the living, if at all. We've been forced into the center of the room, and are on defense. They've blocked our escape-- and it looks like they don't intend to use something as complicated as divide and conquer. They're current tactic seems to be more akin to encirclement, and it looks like they're forcing all of the new troops that come in to the center, grouping us all together to keep us restrained by the close quarters. Pick us off one by one while keeping the numerical advantage."

"I understand. First Class Nagachika, you're rather well-versed in military strategy, aren't you?" His tone is almost amused.

I was not amused, as one ghoul (braver than his comrades or more foolish) breaks from the current lash-and-wound strategy and flat out charges us. I answered Washuu Matsuri as I stabbed him through the head with my quinque and he died.

"It's a hobby of mine. Also, useful when making battle decisions. History tends to repeat itself, as the saying goes." I cut a ghoul in half that had made a lunge at Shirazu, knocking the severed remains back into the crowed of Aogiri Tree ghouls. "So, Washuu. What'll you do?"

"Are you familiar with the principles of war, First Class Nagachika?"

"I am," I responded, as Haise drove his quinque down into the kagune of a ghoul that had lashed out at me, pinning it, and in a perfect synchrony I drove my quinque through the ghoul's torso, ripping through it's heart mercilessly. The corpse fell to the ground, and I deflected the next lash of a tentacle. Rinkaku?

"I'm making you a temporary commander, but don't let the promotion get to your head. Your new objective is this: minimize the number of Aogiri Tree members on the ground floor to a manageable level, and do it with the manpower you have now. Try to minimize the casualties, but don't place an importance on individual lives. Division II has our hands full trying to counter Aogiri's attack, so unfortunately I'll have to leave it in your hands for now." Washuu Matsuri's voice is taunting, almost. As if he's asking me if I'm up to the challenge. "Don't make me regret my choice, Nagachika Hideyoshi."

"You won't regret it, Washuu Matsuri," I said, with a wolfish grin, then my earpiece went dead.

Chapter End Notes
*Peristeria elata is also known as the 'Dove Orchid' and diphyllleia grayi is also known as the 'Skeleton Flower'. 
"Done having a chat with the Commander?" Kuramoto called from where he stood, a few feet away, gritting his teeth as he braced himself against a blow from what looked like a bikaku. "Because I could really use an order, Taichou."

*Was that transmitted to all of the earpieces? That makes this easier.*

"Investigators with ukaku quinque, to the middle of the group! Work on long-ranged attacks, and focus on picking off ukaku and koukaku ghouls!" I called, slashing and stabbing out at the ghouls that got too close to where I stood. *(...those masks and cloaks make it impossible to tell gender)* shrieked, pulling back and holding the place where it's shoulder now ended in a bloody stump. "Koukaku quinque, to the outside! Focus on defense, and only defense! Watch out for rinkaku ghouls! Bikaku quinques and rinkaku quinques, attack from behind the defense line! Make sure to defend the koukaku quinques! So far, the ghouls are no stronger than B- and A-Rank, but do *not* let your guard down!"

When it became apparent that I was the one giving the orders, a barrage of attacks of all shapes and sizes were targeted at me. One foolish ghoul had the audacity to launch themselves from the chandelier at me, which was a particularly offending act. It was shot through enough times to render it looking like Swiss cheese, pinned to a wall until the ukaku shards shattered and the corpse fell to the ground. Courtesy of Shirazu, who beamed at me, with his sharked-tooth grin.

"We got yer back, Hide-san."

*Got my back... It's a nice feeling.*

"Thank you. All of you," I said, offering them a bright smile. Then we moved, all shifting, into our respective positions, and I rolled my shoulders with a sigh. I ducked and wove my way through the circle, to Ui, who looked majorly ticked off. Probably because he wasn't entrusted with the command of the fight, but I supposed that his anger only made him fight harder. "Ui-san!"

"What do you want, Nagachika," Ui growled, slashing out viciously with his halberd-shaped quinque *(a koukaku)* and bringing down multiple ghouls. The bodies were piling up now, further limiting our mobility. "I'm a little bit busy."

"I know, but listen up anyways," I said cheerily. "Watch the koukaku quinques. Not all of them are equipped for defense, so if it looks like they're tiring, switch them out. I'm going to take a gamble and trust your judgement, so please don't make me regret it."

Ui's look was flat, as if he was asking me if I was being serious.

"Will do, Taichou." His tone was diminutive, mocking, but I knew that he would do his best. Ui, despite appearances, actually did care for his men, and he would do whatever was in his power to save them. Even if it was an order from me.

Satisfied, I moved on, seeking out Furuta this time. But I never got a chance to get far, because suddenly the crowd of ghouls were pressed against the walls cautiously, with a large chunk parting and disappearing up the stairs as a new figure emerged that made my blood run cold.

*He smells like a rotting corpse. It's him.*
Noro, formerly known as Noroi, according to Itori's digging. Kagune type, unknown. His regeneration capabilities were off the charts.

*He's a mystery, even to the Clowns.*

The order flew from my mouth as soon as I saw him.

"Nobody engage in combat! Remain inside the formation!"

In a sickening, slow-motion way, heads swiveled to look at the ghoul descending the staircase, and I was running towards him, weaving and ducking through people. Noro's mask, the large black lips and grin stark in the dim light, seemed to mock me as his kagune, powerful and as thick around as the trunk of a tree, a mouth gaping at the end of it, emerged from the end of his long black overcoat. It was flying straight towards Nezu and Umeno, of Kuramoto's squad, and I knew that at a running pace I would never make it in time.

So I took a leap, flying over the heads of investigators, and crashed right into the kagune, my quinque held in front of me like a shield. It cut through Noro's kagune, splitting it in half and diverting it around the group, but it would have still struck (and killed) several investigators if Haise and Urie weren't behind me in a split second, bracing themselves and taking the strike. My intervention had made it lose momentum, but it was still a heavy blow. Their efforts yielded fruit, stopping the cut kagune dead in it's tracks, and Mutsuki was there, slicing through the kagune where I had split it, severing a portion of it. Saiko swung her quinque and smashed the end of the kagune still attached to Noro, squishing it against the ground with a sickening squelching noise, and Shirazu had sent a barrage of ukaku shards barreling towards Noro, piercing fist-sized holes through him.

They seemed to relax fractionally for a moment, and I shouted, *"He's not dead yet!"*

I would have given anything to have avoided the kids fighting Noro (*he's too strong they aren't ready yet*) but now it was unavoidable, and I announced, *"That ghoul is Noro, Rank SS~. I need to know right here and now, what squads are available and ready to fight?"*

Think of them as people, not my family. Be cold, be professional. Or else I'll never be able to send them into a fight like this.

"The Itou Squad will engage," Kuramoto declared, and he was followed by four solemn-faced men, with no objections.

"I'll fight," Kijima volunteered happily. Furuta stayed silent.

"Coward."

"The Quinx Squad will fight," Shirazu said, calmly, and for a moment I saw what Haise had seen in him when he chose Shirazu as Squad Leader.

"I'll fight, as well," Haise said, firmly.

I held up a hand, cautious of my time limit. *Noro will get back up soon. "That's as many volunteers as I need. The rest of you, clear the northwest corner! I want you all as far away from the main combat zone as possible! Clear the corner to eliminate the threat of attack from two sides-- it'll make defense easier! Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

The cry came just as Noro's kagune regenerated and he stood back up, healed like it was nothing.
"Associate Special Class Kijima, First Class Sasaki, Itou Squad, Quinx Squad," I narrowed my eyes, my voice deathly. "Follow my orders, and I'll do my utmost to ensure your safety. Disobey them, and I can't guarantee anything. Am I clear?"

"As day," Kijima said cheerily, and I had a feeling everything I had said went in one ear and out the other.

"Then prepare for battle," I said, turning to face Noro as the gears in my mind whirred at top speed. "Associate Special Class Kijima, you're in vanguard. First Class Sasaki, support the vanguard from the center guard. Rank 2 Shirazu, you're in the rearguard. Rank 2 Yonebayashi, you're in middle guard. Rank 1 Urie, Rank 1 Mutsuki, you're both in vanguard." I watched Noro carefully as he started towards us, his gait smooth and slow, like he had nothing better to do. "First Class Itou. Where would your men be most useful?"

"Nezu, you're rearguard," Itou said, without hesitation. "Mitchy and Takeomi, you're both in the middle guard. Gorimi and I will fight in the vanguard."

"Roger," came the reply of the four solemn, older men.

"Here it comes," I shouted, and Noro was off like a shot, almost faster than an ukaku ghoul could move. "It's going for the middle guard!"

Saiko was frozen in horror, but as I was opening my mouth to speak, Urie screamed, "Yonebayashi, dodge!"

She won't move fast enough.

Haise moved, barreling into the kagune with his quinque braced against his palm and shoulder, slamming into Noro's kagune with incredible force that only a ghoul could accomplish. Takeomi was there too, swiping Saiko away, but there was no need. Haise had forced the kagune to go flying, a deep laceration carved into the side of the organ. He was breathing a little heavily, and from the mouthwatering smell that leaked into the air, under the heavy smell of Noro's foul-smelling blood, I figured Haise had been wounded. I darted to stand in front of him, watching Noro's kagune with a careful eye, trying to predict the unpredictable ghoul's next action.

It took everything in me to keep my voice even and professional.

"First Class Sasaki. How badly are you wounded?"

"Lightly. Give me a moment, and it'll heal up," Haise announced, but with a glance back I confirmed a healing but deep gash between his right shoulder and his neck, and a bloody cut on his hand. Undoubtedly, they had been inflicted by his own quinque when he had applied force on Noro's kagune.

"Haise. You're lying to me. That's not a light wound."

"It will be in a moment, Hide, so I'm not lying," Haise answered me evenly. "I promise. So don't worry about it."

I'll worry anyway, but I know you're telling the truth.

"Are you all right, Yonebayashi?" Takeomi asked, and Urie and Mutsuki moved to cover them as Saiko stuttered out a thanks.

"What are you doing, idiot?!" Urie shouted at her. "That was close...!"
"Urie!" Mutsuki warned.

"Retreat back to your position in the middle guard." I instructed Haise, as Noro's kagune lashed out. Urie was ready, slicing it into bits, and Shirazu yelled, "Pin it down, Tooru!"

"Roger!"

Mutsuki's bikaku tore free from his skin, cutting Noro's arm and wrapping around his waist, ripping at his black overcoat with the serrated edges.

Shirazu bombarded Noro with his kagune projectiles, peppering him full of holes, and I shouted, just in sync with Haise, "Saiko, now!"

Her kakugan flickered to life, and her rinkaku tore the back of her coat to pieces as her kagune, easily several times larger than a person, came free and tore Noro in half.

See? What did I tell you, Saiko? You're more than capable.

Before I could say that outloud, though, Noro's upper half flew back onto his lower, connected by long strands of veins and muscle, sewing himself back together effortlessly.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Kuramoto's voice was incredulous. "I've never seen such monstrous regeneration..."

"Kuramo--!"

His deputy captain broke off as his squad leader was suddenly batted across the room by Noro's kagune, skidding and tumbling back until he eventually lost momentum and ended up at the other side of the room.

Right in the middle of the other ghouls.

"Rank 1 Michibata, take command of the Itou Squad! Rank 2 Shirazu, do the same for the Quinx Squad!" I ordered.

Haise had darted after Kuramoto, and I followed him, chasing after him as he cleared away ghouls to reach the leader of the Itou Squad. I took a decidedly less forward approach, leaping over the heads of ghouls and landing neatly on top of one who had approached Kuramoto. It smashed to the ground under my feet with a snapping noise, and from the looks of the body, I had broken the ghoul's spine. I offered the ghouls around me a cold, sharp grin, my kakugan blazing.

"Back off."

They did, clearing a little circle around myself and Kuramoto, waiting for an opening to attack that I wouldn't give them. Haise finally managed to kill enough of them to break an opening free, and trusting him to keep them back, I knelt beside Kuramoto, inspecting his wound. Blood stained the floor red, and two of his ribs were jutting through his skin. His breathing was ragged, and in lieu of talking, he made hand signs.

Just go, leave me behind.

"Hide wouldn't do that even if you told him to," Haise said, eyes never leaving the ghouls that surrounded us. "You're in good hands. So don't worry, Kuramoto."

"You really are," I affirmed, undoing the buttons of his shirt and inspecting the torn skin around his
wound. "And I need something to sterilize this." Raising my voice, I called, "Somebody's got alcohol on 'em, right? The strong stuff! I need a higher alcohol content than sixty percent!"

In response, somebody threw a metal flask at my head, and I caught it, uncapping it and pouring it over the gory wound, hopefully killing some of the bacteria. Then I tore away strips from his shirt and warned, "This is going to hurt, but it has to be done," and forced the ribs back into his chest with a careful, practiced (lucky Kuramoto, I'd done this to myself before, doing it to someone else was much easier) hand. I couldn't do anything about the bacteria that still remained on the bones, but it was either force them back and bind the wound, or let him bleed out. This way, at least he stood a chance until the medical squad got here.

I remembered saying to Uta, a long time ago, "Humans... are so fragile."

Kuramoto made a pained noise, but I ignored it and proceeded, wrapping the bandages around his chest tightly (but not too tight-- if I punctured a lung, Kuramoto wouldn't live long) and binding them like that.

But some humans are strong. Be one of the strong ones, Kuramoto.

"Listen, Kuramoto-kun, binding ribs isn't exactly one of the most recommended medical treatments anymore. It can cause hypothermia if we aren't careful, so I want you to be breathing as deeply as you can. Not enough so that it hurts, but don't breath shallowly. Nod if you understand me."

He nodded, and I called to Haise, "Alright, we should move now. I'll carry Kuramoto, if you'll watch my back?"

"Always," Haise promised, and I offered him a smile before I lifted Kuramoto up as gingerly as possible (not gingerly enough, it still hurt, I can hear his breaths stutter) and we made out way out of the crowd of ghouls that still remained. We walked back into the main group (still fighting, but having cleared the corner to aide in defense) and deposited Kuramoto with them before heading back.

Just in time to see Kijima's arm get sliced off, with Rotten Fellow still grasped in it's hand. His severed arm flew up, seeming to hover a moment before it crashed back down. Rotten Fellow sawed his head in half as we watched, horrified, but Noro wasn't done yet. His kagune swept down and the mouth at the end bit Kijima in half, blood spraying everywhere.

A horrifically gory death, even in my book.

As I approached the horror-struck group, I announced, "Noro will just keep healing every time we deal it, so attacking over and over again is a waste of stamina. We need high explosive power, but Rank 2 Yonebayashi needs time to recover after using her kagune. We don't have a quinque with very high explosive power, eith--"

"I'll..." Shirazu spoke up, and every head turned to him, but I still kept an eye on the regenerating Noro. "Use this guy..."

Shirazu?

"Are you sure, Rank 2 Shirazu?" I asked, and it took all of my willpower to keep my voice even, steady. Not Shirazu, Rank 2 Shirazu. People, not family.

He met my eyes, and they were determined. "I'm sure. I can do it, Hide-san."

I nodded, once, finally. "According to Chigyou, it expands explosively in response to stimuli, but it's
hit-or-miss. It's got to make contact with Noro and expand *inside* of him to do the damage we'll need, so target his mid-torso. Noro will split into two parts then, and we'll need to demolish each of those halves when he does, beyond the point of regeneration being a possibility."

*Fire.*

"I've got it!" I announced, then, to the confusion of the Itou and Quinx Squads, I said, "Hold him off awhile longer."

Without waiting for their confused reactions, I darted back into the main group. Specifically, to Ui.

"Ui-san! Let me have your lighter!"

"What?" Ui stabbed at a ghoul, turning to me with dark, unamused eyes. "Nagachika, the battlefield isn't the best place to have a cigarette!"

"I don't smoke," I said cheerfully, darting forward and sticking my hand into his pocket, snatching his cigarette lighter before he could react. To my utter delight, it was one of the butane lighters. "I'm going to kill a ghoul with this!"

"What?"

I paid him no mind, calling out, "I need lighters! C'mon, I know most of you smoke!"

Reluctantly in some cases, I collected a handful of lighters with relative ease, and raced back. I pressed three of them into Haise's hands, and met his eyes.

"Listen. We're the fastest out of everyone here, so when Noro separates, I want you to go to his upper half and *set it on fire*. Break the third lighter and spill the butane-- the lighter fluid-- onto the fire. It'll should overwhelm his regeneration, so when we cut him up, he should *stay dead*. Hopefully. Maybe. But still be careful when you do it-- I don't want any nasty surprises. So be careful."

*Don't get hurt.*

He smiled at me and it was the most reassuring thing he could have done, even if it was faint and a little strained. "I'll be careful. You do the same, Hide."

I released Haise's hands and shouted, "Okay, begin!"

Noro's kagune was flying at us and the Itou and Quinx Squads scattered. Takeomi and the Itou Squad worked on trying to keep Noro's kagune somewhat still and under control, but it was the Quinx Squad's work that I focused on.

"*Mutsuki! Hold him down!*" Urie ordered, slashing at Noro's kagune.

"Roger!"

In an act that surprised me, Mutsuki didn't charge Noro-- he ran up Noro's kagune. His bikaku shot out and wrapped around Noro, the segmented, serrated edges digging into the ghoul as it bound him.

Shirazu leapt up, inhumanly high, and from his silver briefcase emerged what appeared to be a simple, staff-like structure with a pointed end. I watched him pull back his arm and throw the quinque. It flew straight and true, burying itself into the ghoul's chest. Mutsuki had released Noro just in time, because the quinque definitely served it's purpose, expanding into a large ball made of what
appeared to be hollow pentagons with the force of an explosion.

I was moving and so was Haise, running towards the separate ends of Noro. I broke open my third lighter, sending butane all over the half of the body. I lit it with the other, my hands moving rapidly, spilling butane everywhere and sending the body up in flames. It burned my hands, but I ignored the burning and my bikaku and quinque were working faster that I had thought possible, cutting and slashing, hacking Noro to bits. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Haise doing the same thing, Mutsuki working with him to hack the body to pieces. Urie was beside me, cutting apart the burning body, and my mind was screaming at me to cut faster, faster, cut faster or everyone will die--

Then Noro's lower half seemed to explode, and I kicked Urie as far away as I possibly could, throwing away the professional air. Screw professional. I had tried to be professional, and look at what I happened.

*I failed.*
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

The Big Bad makes their appearance!

Chapter Notes

The Timeline for this fic so far is, roughly, as follows:

Spans 22 months in total (including chapters to come, not counting the Epilogue Chapters)

Chapter 1: Spring (Haise's age: 22, Kaneki's Age: 21)
Chapter 7: Spring's end
Chapter 14: Fall
Chapter 15: Fall end
Chapter 26: Winter/Year End (Kaneki turns 22)
Chapter 28: Spring (Officially one year has passed now, and Haise turns 23)
Chapter 35: Spring end/early Fall
Chapter 45: Fall
Chapter 46: Fall end/early Winter
Chapter 47-Current: Winter (The raid happens on the 13th, specifically)

Some chapters, like the more recent ones, cover more time than some of the earlier chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, I didn't fail completely. Noro's upper half seemed perfectly content to stay dead and burning, hacked into bits, and his lower half-- which had exploded into a massive kagune-monster-- was wounded. The skin of the kagune was charred and didn't seem to be regenerating as fast (had we brought it down to regular regeneration levels? It looked like it), and it wasn't moving as fast as Noro had been. It was wounded, which lifted my spirits.

I didn't fail completely.

Then I leapt up to dodge Noro's lashing tentacles (there were two of them now, as thick around as a tree, and a monstrous mouth at the middle) and felt my mind seem to slow now. It was just me and a monster, a monster that had threatened the well-being of my loved ones.

So die, monster.

Fighting, killing, those things I didn't need an elaborate plan for. It was instinctual, as normal and natural to me as the blood that ran through my veins.

I darted down and picked up my quinque, which had fallen at some point or other, and with the
sound of ripping skin my bikaku emerged from my tailbone. I had to force myself to keep my ukaku in check (my shoulders burned like someone had pressed a brand to them). With a smooth flick of my wrist, I carved a laceration onto the kagune, using it as a backboard to launch myself at the other kagune and slicing it in half, sending more blood flying (it sprayed onto my coat, staining some of the white hem crimson) and I glanced around, eyes narrowed. Out of all of the Quinx, Urie, Mutsuki, and Shirazu were the only ones still standing. Saiko was back in the main group somewhere, recovering. Most of the Itou Squad had sustained injuries (but not death, so take that, Washuu) and had retreated back to the main group as well.

"Mutsuki, pin it down! Once more!"

Mutsuki took a hesitant step forward, but then he was running and he was holding down Noro's other lashing kagune tentacle, slashing and wounding, dodging every blow that came his way.

"Shirazu, now you!"

And Shirazu was leaping over Noro, targeting the head of the kagune monster and pummeling it with stronger ukaku bullets than I'd ever seen him release before. His eye seemed darker-- darker, but not black-- and I suspected something had gone terribly wrong, because his kakugan wasn't supposed to be that dark, that was as dark as Urie's kakugan and Urie was on Frame 4. His kagune had changed shape, had gotten bigger, and my heart sank. But his kakugan wasn't black, so he wasn't a half-ghoul. Shirazu would be okay, yet.

A third kagune, smaller than the others but nonetheless there, emerged from Noro's lower half and slashed a long wound along Shirazu's abdomen. It didn't look deep, but Haise was there, and he caught Shirazu when he landed.

I trust you to get him away from the action, Haise.

I gritted my teeth as the round of ukaku shards (Shirazu had dealt a massive blow) cleared, re-adjusting my grip on Noro's huge kagune tentacle (my hands were bleeding) and shouted, "Urië! Finish it off!"

Finish it off he did. Urie cut Noro almost completely in half, sending more blood spraying everywhere.

The mouth on the kagune laughed.

"I'll see you on the other side, Eto."

Then Noro died, but I didn't have time to relax, because Haise shouted, "Hide!" and I knew that it was something with Shirazu, knew it deep in my bones even if I didn't know quite exactly how I knew.

I thought I might've run to them, in the very corner of the main group, protected by walls and people-people who had done a really damn good job of holding back and killing the first-floor ghouls. My bikaku had dissipated at some point or other, and I wasn't sure where I had left my quinque, but I was barehanded and kneeling beside where Haise had laid Shirazu down, and my heart seemed to plunge. Haise's face was pale, and his hands fluttered, like he had to do something but didn't know what to do, and I wanted to reach out and comfort him, but my first priority had to be Shirazu.

Shirazu, whose regeneration wasn't working quite fast enough to keep up with the damage.

"Shirazu!" Urie, out of all of the Quinx, was the first to arrive next to us, his face oddly pale and bloodless. "Shirazu!"
He's panicking. That's not good, I can't work if I'm worrying about Urie, too.

"Urie. I need you to do something for me," I said, my hands flying to undo buttons and to tear away his shirt and coat, leaving the gory tear in his abdomen that stretched from side to side, in a jagged tear, exposed.

Shit. He's bleeding out too fast for a ghoul-- a wound like this won't be stopped up with a bandage. His kidneys have been injured, but his healing will take those as first priority, and I'll have to leave that. But his thoracic aorta being cut will kill him if I don't stop it.

"Get me someone's pocket knife. Any kind of knife, but I need something long and metal, and I need it as soon as possible."

With the eerily bloodless face that was so uncharacteristic for him, Urie gave me a curt nod and disappeared, not bothering to ask questions.

"Saiko, go on and find me a lighter. Mutsuki, I'll need that alcohol again. Quickly, please."

With shocked, horrified expressions, Saiko and Mutsuki (a little worse for the wear, but they'll be okay), who had appeared a little later than Urie, darted off to find the specified items.

"What are you going to do, Hide?" Haise asked, helping me press the blood-soaked shirt into Shirazu's wound. His eyes were dark and frightful, like he was berating himself for not being able to do anything besides hold the bandages fruitlessly against Shirazu's wound. "Shirazu will be okay, won't he?"

I hope he will be.

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that he'll live," I assured Haise, but my voice was as grim as I was feeling. "I can tell from his blood-spray that he's severed an artery, and the only artery that runs through his torso where he's been hit is his thoracic aorta. I don't have the time or equipment for stitches, and a tourniquet won't work for a wound like this. I'm going to have to do something I don't like at all."

It might hurt more than help, but if I don't do this, he'll die of blood loss.

"What do you mean, Hide?" Haise asked, confused, and I scanned the crowd of people that were guarding us, although most of the first-floor ghouls had been killed or had retreated by now. Where were the others? I need the materials!

"I'm going to cauterize his wound. Which means I'm going to make his blood clot forcibly by exposing it to extreme heats, but I'll also end up burning some of his healthy tissue in the process. If I don't, he'll die, and if I do, he might still. But I'm going to do my utmost to ensure that doesn't happen."

Will my best be enough? Please, let it be enough.

"You're going to... burn him...?" Mutsuki asked, wide-eyed and holding the partially empty flask of alcohol.

I snatched the flash and uncapped it, grimacing. At least he's unconscious.

"Sorry, Shirazu. This is going to hurt."

I poured the liquid over his cut and watched him tense, even in his unconsciousness. He didn't
scream-- he had a higher pain tolerance than I gave him credit for.

"I'm going to try and save his life, but yes, I'm going to burn him," I announced, capping the flask. The announcement was more for Saiko and Urie's benefit, who had retrieved the needed items. "Like I said, it's called 'cauterizing', and if I had any other choice, I wouldn't do it. Each of you, hold him down. Haise, I'll need your help too."

With grim-faced nods, each of the four took a limb and held it firm as I lit the lighter and held the pocketknife under the flame, watching the blade heat up until it was almost glowing red, but not quite. Then, mumbling another apology to Shirazu, I pressed the knife blade onto his skin where the cut was bleeding the worst.

I didn't keep the knife blade there long, just long enough for the seal to take place and to hopefully not burn away any healthy skin cells. Which I probably did, inexperienced in the art of medically searing flesh (it was just something I had picked up a long time ago, from a very old medical book). But the reaction was as bad as if I had set all of Shirazu on fire, and he screamed and jerked. I held fast, bad as I felt (I was the one hurting him) because if I didn't, he would die.

He might die anyways.

Saiko was crying, and Mutsuki had momentarily lost his grip on Shirazu's arm. Urie's grip was faltering, his face bloodless, and Haise looked like he might be sick.

"Hold fast! If you let go, I'll end up burning him more than I have to!" I snapped, and scrambling with their shock, the others obeyed. Trying to swallow back the bile that had risen in my throat, I heated up the knife blade and repeated the process again and again, until no more blood flowed from the cut.

Stop it stop it you're hurting him!

I almost threw the knife from my grasp, resisting the urge to vomit. With shaking hands, I uncapped the flask and poured the remainder of the alcohol onto the sealed wound, hoping to ward off the infection for as long as I possibly could.

"Infection will set in soon," I said, and my voice was raspy. As if I was the one who had been screaming. "But the cauterization will keep him alive until his regeneration can catch up. By the time the infection begins, his regeneration should be up and running again, and it'll take care of that. Until then, somebody needs to watch him. Prop his head up and-- and hold him, ease his breathing."

Comfort him.

"I'll do it." Urie said firmly. He moved before I could say anything, lifting Shirazu's head up gently (his hands were shaking and mine were too, but I didn't say anything and neither did he) propping him up like I instructed.

"Alright," I agreed, standing up. His blood is on my hands, somebody get it off! "Somebody else, make sure his wound stays clean and dry. I'll go check on Kuramoto now and make sure he's doing alright. Then I'll reassess the situation and decide what needs to be done."

"I'll come with you," Haise offered, on his feet and beside me in a heartbeat. "Mutsuki, you stay here and help Urie with Shirazu, okay?"

"Okay," Mutsuki said, and I hated to leave them there like that, because even Urie was pale and shaking, looking as fragile as wet paper.
But I stood up and walked the short distance to where Kuramoto was sitting, propped up against a corner. His deputy squad leader, Michitaba, was caring for him, offering him sips of water from a plastic bottle.

"Can't believe you tried to play the hero, you shitty kid," He was saying. "You're younger than I am. Don't go spouting that 'just go, leave me behind' crap. You're just going to sit tight and rest till the medical squad arrives."

The statement made my eyes darken, and I knelt down next to Kuramoto, checking how much more blood he'd lost. It looked like it had clotted, and he would be fine.

_For awhile, anyways._

I beamed at him. "Look at that, the blood's clotted already! You'll be fine, so just wait a little longer, okay?"

He offered me a strained smile, and lifted a hand to shakily sign his answer back.

"Even you're sense of humor is intact," I said dryly, and Haise looked confused.

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Yes, Taichou,'" Michibata translated, looking faintly amused. "He'll be fine."

Haise let out a sigh of relief and offered Kuramoto a similarly strained smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Taichou," came a mocking voice, the title diminutive. It was Ui, his expression stony. His coat was stained crimson with foul-smelling blood.

_I take it he's still upset about not being picked to lead? Don't take it personal, Ui-san. Washuu and I are just playing another mind game, and he expects me to lose. He wants me to die in battle, or to ruin my reputation as the commander in charge when a mass slaughter occurred. He doesn't like me or Haise, you know. Then again, you don't either._

"Ui-san?"

"I've come with a report," He said dryly. "The ghouls from the first floor are all dead. There are guards standing at the staircase to ensure that no others come down."

I nodded. "I'll report it. Maybe Division II has a way to get us out of here by now," I said, standing and pressing a hand to my earpiece.

"First Class Nagachika, reporting in."

"Ah, Nagachika," came the amused voice of Washuu Matsuri. "How's the first floor coming? I want a report, and estimated casualty number."

"Roger, sir," I replied, maybe just a little sarcastically. "The first floor is clear, and we're holding it down," I raised my voice and called, "Casualty report!"

"None, sir!" Came the reply, from someone who I wasn't familiar with by name but was mostly certain that had a desk somewhere near mine in the office. "We've got fifteen critically wounded, but no deaths yet!"

I grinned, and it was wolfishly sharp. "Hear that, Washuu? We've got fifteen-- no, seventeen--critically wounded, and one death-- the death of Special Class Kijima. So hurry up and get the
medical squad down here before my people bleed out-- aren't you supposed to be a brainiac? It shouldn't be this hard to think of a solution."

He didn't reprimand me for speaking ill of a superior, nor for dropping all of his titles. The people surrounding me were staring at me with wide eyes, unbelieving.

"We're working on it. At the moment, we've cleared the fourth floor, and are working on the third. But the One-Eyed Owl has yet to show up, along with T-Owl, among other higher-ranked ghouls. Noro was believed to be sighted headed your way, as well."

"Thanks for the warning, jackass."

"SS-Ranked Noro is dead," I said dully. "Associate Special Class Kijima, First Class Sasaki, myself, the Itou Squad, and the Quinx Squad engaged Noro and killed it."

That got some silence out of him. For a moment, anyways.

"I see. Continue holding down the first floor until we arrive. Exterminate any ghouls in sight, and you can expect us when we finish clearing up the upper floors. Do your best to survive until then."

My comm line went dead.

"Hide," Haise rasped. His eyes were like saucers. "You just talked back to our boss. Our boss of bosses. A Washuu."

"Mm-hmm," I hummed, wiping my hands on my coat (it's bloodied to the point of no return, already). "I just won a little mental game with him, too, if that's of any interest. But that's also besides the point. He said to hold the first floor until they reach us-- they're working from the top down, and they're on the third floor."

Kuramoto gave a wheezing laugh that made him wince and hold a hand to his bandaged ribs. Nonetheless, he signed a statement, and Michibata translated, looking amused.

"He said, 'I see why you like him now, Haise'."

"Don't be getting any ideas, Kuramoto," Haise warned, the act ruined by the smile splitting his face. "Hide's mine."

Kuramoto offered Haise another breathless grin, but didn't sign back a response.

And then the peaceful moment was broken.

"As much as I want to stand around and watch this go on," Furuta announced, striding forward to stand atop a table that had somehow survived the carnage, and the blood drained from my face. He held Saiko by her throat, off the ground, and she looked furious about it-- but he was cutting off her air. "It's getting rather dull, don't you think? Let's end this, once and for all."

"What are you blabbering about, Rank 1 Furuta?" Ui snapped. "Release Rank 2 Yonebayashi immediately!"

"Oh, I will," Furuta agreed readily. "Once Pierrot shows himself, that is."

My heart sunk like a stone.

*He intends to make me reveal my identity. It'd be no fun for him to give it away himself. He wants me to, and he wants to see the despair and agony on my face as my life falls to pieces. He wants to*
"Pierrot isn't here," Ui hissed. "Now release Rank 2 Yonebayashi, Rank 1 Furuta. That is an order, so don't make me repeat myself."

Furuta laughed. "You're orders don't work on me anymore, Ui. I don't stand with the CCG. I'm with the winning side—Aogiri Tree. Why do you think I blackmailed that little bitch Eto and had all of Aogiri Tree be here and now? I'm the one with the power now! You can't order me around anymore, Ui!" He studied Saiko's face, the smirk still cemented in place. "Oh dear, look at that. Her face is turning blue. Better make a decision, Pierrot. Will you step up to the plate, or watch your dear daughter die?"

There wasn't room in my mind for a decision.

My secret, the biggest secret of all, the thing I had been concealing all of my life, under lock and key-

I took a deep breath, and it was like I was putting my Pierrot mask on. I was colder, better, faster, stronger, with no-holds-barred. My features were cold, my smile predatory, vengeful. Every cell of my being sang for his blood, and for once, I wasn't going to curb the urge.

--it wasn't worth Saiko's life.

I took a step forward.

Chapter End Notes

*the thoracic aorta is a section of the main artery of the body (the aorta), supplying oxygenated blood to the circulatory system. In humans it passes over the heart from the left ventricle and runs down in front of the backbone.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

I'm not even going to say anything for this chapter. There aren't even any words that I can use. My vocabulary is failing me.

"Hide...?" Haise asked, as I continued, walking forward. "What are you doing...?"

"Sorry, Haise," I told him, and the crowd of investigators parted for me. "I'm saving Saiko."

Don't turn back to look at him. If I turn back, I won't be able to go through with this. But god, do I want to look at him one more time.

I wish I could. I want to.

I'd memorize how he looked without betrayal and horror tainting his expression.

"Ui-san," I said, as I walked past him. His eyes were wide and dark, like he had finally put two and two together, but couldn't fathom it. "Take command for me, please."

"At least that won't ever change. "I take it you're going to subdue Rank 1 Furuta, by assuming the identity of Pierrot? Clever move, but I don't think it'll work."

"He thinks I'm pretending. I'm not pretending. Ui-san. I'm the real deal-- the real monster."

"It will," I said, but I didn't elaborate on my thoughts. I stopped in front of where Furuta was holding Saiko. Her face was still a frightening pallor, but it seemed that he'd relaxed his grasp just a little. I knew what he was thinking, frighteningly well-- it'd be no fun if she died too soon. "Furuta! I'm here, so let her go!"

He smiled wickedly at me. "Did you really think I'd be that simple, Pierrot? No, of course not! Tell everyone who you really are-- nice and loud, so everyone can hear!"

"He wants to see me in agony, despairing. Well, I won't let him. If it kills me, I won't let him see my despair."

I grinned, cold and sharp, my eyes threatening and predatory. Are you happy, Furuta? The despair is killing me. "I am Pierrot!"

"No, no, that's no good," Furuta crooned, and his fingers twitched on Saiko's neck. There were bruises darkening on her skin, and I vowed that I would break each of the fingers that made the marks on her neck. The fingers that tore apart everything I had built. "You're real name, Pierrot!"

"I am Kanou Hideyoshi!" I declared. "I'm not, I'm Nagachika Hideyoshi.

"Who's your father, little Kanou?" Furuta hummed, his grin seeming to leer at me. I'll rip your face off, Furuta. I'll tear your lips off so that you can't make that expression, break all of your teeth to dust. Make you suffer tenfold for all of the suffering you causing the people I love."
For all the suffering your putting me through.

"I am the son of Doctor Kanou Akihiro!"

I'm not, not anymore, not his son, not a monster--!

"What are you?"

"I am a half-ghoul!" I shouted. My voice didn't shake, didn't tremble. Didn't give away my despair, my agony. "I was born one!"

"Hmph," Furuta sniffed, then he released Saiko, who fell to the ground with a painful thunk. I darted out and snatched her, dragging her back into the crowd of investigators.

She was crying, big, fat tears.

"Why?" Saiko sobbed. "Why would you...?"

Why? That's an absurd question.


Please don't cry, Saiko. Please don't make this harder than it has to be.

"But Papa--"

"No 'buts'," I said sternly. "No more talking. Go on back to Haise now, okay? Take care of your mother for me."

"Please don't say that," She begged. It hurt, to hear her, to see her. "That sounds like good-bye."

This is good-bye, Saiko. I can't be your Papa anymore. It's time for me to be Pierrot again.

But I smiled and patted her pigtails, and didn't say a word. Saiko stared at me, uncomprehending, like she couldn't fathom why I wasn't rebuking her statement. Then she started crying harder, and I caught her gently when her knees buckled.

Then Mutsuki was beside me, leaving his post beside Shirazu for a moment. Urie was still frozen in place, holding a half-conscious Shirazu in his lap, and his eyes were blown wider than I had thought possible.

I'm sorry, Urie, Shirazu. I'm sorry.

"I'll take her."

"Thanks, Mutsuki," I said, and I offered him the same smile I had given Saiko. I didn't think it was as convincing as I had wanted it to be.

I know it's not. But I can't do any better.

"Be careful, Hide-san," Mutsuki said, and it sounded like a plea. You'll come back to us, won't you? He was asking.

I can't be careful anymore. I'm sorry, Mutsuki. I can't come back from this.

"I will be."
I left Mutsuki, holding Saiko up while she cried into his shirt, and then there was Haise, standing between me and Furuta, his grey eyes as wide as saucers and shining.

_Please, Haise. I can't face you. I have to leave. Don't make it harder than it needs to be. Please, please._

"Hide...? Was everything you said... true...?"

I offered him the same smile. Or attempted to, but it cracked and fell away, like a broken mask, and I couldn't summon another one, hard as I tried. "Everything I told Furuta is true, Haise. I'm sorry."

He was crying too. I wondered if he knew it.

_I wish I could wipe them away and tell you it'd be okay, but this time, I can't. I won't lie to you again._

"Were you just lying, all this time?" The question made me flinch. "Were you just-- just playing us?"

"No," I said, almost yelled it. I couldn't say it adamantly enough. "God, no. Haise, I lied about a lot of things-- almost everything about myself-- but I never lied about _loving you_. I love all of you, every single one!"

"Papa never lied about that, Maman," Saiko was trying to speak up for me, but I silenced her with a shake of my head.

"It's okay, Saiko. I-- I lied about too many things. It's only natural to doubt me. So--"

I don't know what it was about my statement (my voice broke, damn it all) but Haise cut me off.

"I don't doubt you. I'm... very confused. But I had to know, Hide." He met my eyes, and I marveled at the clear-as-glass, dove-feather grey. It was doubtlessly my favorite color. "So-- So let's subdue Rank 1 Furuta together, then we can talk. Right?"

_Right? It was a plea, and I almost said yes. But there was no point in adding more lies to the amount that I already had._

"Oh no, that won't do!" Furuta exclaimed. "This is a fight between _me_ and Pierrot. Nobody else! If anyone else tries to interfere, then I'll have to call down the rest of my... friends."

My head swiveled, turning to look at the stairwell. Black-and-red eyes gleamed at the top of the stairwell, and I knew without a doubt that they were only being held back by Furuta's orders. He had probably blackmailed Eto with her human identity, like I had him. He had full control at the moment. If he wanted to, he would overwhelm us with the sheer amount of ghouls.

We would all die.

_I have to buy time for the others to clear the floors above us._

"I'll fight alone," I said firmly. "This is my fight, and nobody else's."

"Your fights are my fights," Haise said, fiercely. He grabbed my hand with a vice-like grip, holding fast. "If you fight, I'll fight. I've got your back, remember?"

I pried my hand away gently, holding his by the wrist.

"Not this time, Haise." Still holding onto his wrist (_something to ground me in reality_) I called out to Ui. "Ui-san. You know what you need to do."
With a grim nod, Ui announced, "All Investigators, pull back! Give Nagachika and Furuta a wide berth-- get as close to the walls as possible! There will be no interference in this fight, and that is an order from your superior!"

I released Haise's hand.

"Go on. Take care of Shirazu and Kuramoto for me. If the ghouls come back down, you'll need to hold them at the stairs, to give you some type of advantage. But they shouldn't come down, so long as Furuta doesn't give the order for them to attack. And I don't intend to give him the chance to." I met his gaze, which was wavering and watery. "I trust you to take care of the kids, Haise. I can't fight at full if I'm afraid of you or the kids getting hurt. Protect them for me, okay?"

Keep them safe. I can't do it anymore, so do it for me?

"Okay." It sounded like the answer had been forced out, and it was horse, cracked. "Stay safe, Hide. I love you."

There's no more time to play it safe.

"You be safe too, Haise. I love you."

Then I walked alone to where Furuta stood. The Investigators had parted, and withdrawn to line the walls, and it was dead silent (except for the noise of fighting, going on far, far above me). Too silent, like a funeral parade.

Don't think about death right now. Just think about killing Furuta.

One of Furuta's eyes was black-and-red, and with the crack of skin splitting open, two tentacles emerged from his back, narrow and spike-shaped, with claws tipping the ends.

I could actually die today. That's a funny feeling. It seemed scarier as a kid-- now it just seems... dull.

I was no fool. That kagune could kill me-- now was not a time to get cocky.

If I'm cocky, I'll die, doubtlessly.

Half-ghouls were always stronger than regular ghouls. It was a natural law-- heterosis.

Furuta will try to play dirty. I'll need to watch his movements closely.

And I was facing another of my kind now. One of my kind that thirsted for my suffering and death.

"There's no reason to carry on chatting any longer," I said flatly. You've already torn my life apart, ruined my family. "Let's get on with this, Furuta."

"If you say so, Pierrot," Furuta said gleefully, and suddenly he was moving, slashing out at me with a blow that would have made my internal organs mush if I hadn't ducked out of the way, bringing an arm up to smash against his kagune. It hurt (the bone broke, but healed over just as fast) but the jarring sensation of being stopped dead gave me the opportunity to sweep his feet out from under him and land a punch to his ribs. Delighted, I heard more than one shatter and fragment, like glass.

But I didn't have time to delight for long, because I had to dodge out of the way of his clawed kagune. The three tips scraped along my arm (damn, they hit bone) and carved bloody gorges in them, but I wasn't concerned. The skin knit together as soon as it had been torn.

Furuta, you fool. Do you know how many times I've been injured to get regeneration like mine?
Wounds are nothing new. You’ll need to do better than that.

My bikaku ripped free of the skin from my tailbone, and I leapt up, aiming for a blow to his hip. I wasn’t sure what his kagune type was, but it looked like either a bikaku or rinkaku, and I wanted to injure his kakuhou. Injure it severely, hopefully, but I had no such luck and Furuta leapt up and back— but he didn’t get far enough to evade me. My strike severed his left leg at the knee, and I kicked the severed portion away with enough force to crack the wall it struck.

Furuta, a professional, merely used one of his kagune as a support as his leg slowly began growing back. *(His healing is slower than mine.)*

"That was mean, Kanou-kun," Furuta taunted, but I ignored the jibe *(anger will be my death, don’t get angry)* and swiped out with my bikaku, aiming for a strike to his lower back, my next guess being that his kagune type was a rinkaku. He dodged and evaded me with a grin, sticking his tongue out. "You’ll need to do better than that! Come on, show me the real strength of Pierrot, the chimera ghoul!"

*My ukaku's never drained my stamina like it should, similar to Kirishima-kun's. I'm also proficient in close-range combat with it, though my bikaku is preferable. Still, it would be an unneeded tax on my stamina that I don’t need. I want to drag this fight out, to buy time, not to kill.*

I leapt over his kagune and smashed a foot into it, throwing Furuta off balance. I threw him to the ground hard enough to shatter the table he stood on, sending splinters of wood flying. A wooden shard was sticking through his abdomen, through-and-through.

Well, I do want to kill him. Just not right away. I'll make his death as slow and torturous as I can.

I struck Furuta in the side, my bikaku piercing his flesh like a knife through butter, but Furuta just grinned and grabbed onto my bikaku, the edges tearing away at the flesh on his hands, but he didn’t seem to mind. He yanked me closer, towards his awaiting, clawed tentacles, but I dropped to the ground and spun on my heel, sending Furuta spinning away as my bikaku was torn roughly out of his abdomen in a spray of blood.

*I’ll make you suffer, Furuta.*

Not wasting my opportunity, I leapt down, ready to triumphantly pierce his throat *(yes, make him suffer, make him cry out in agony)* but Furuta rolled, hobbling to his feet *(foot)* and sending a swipe at me. This time, the kagune hit it's mark, and it pierced a nasty-looking gorge in my side, through and through. I cut the kagune off with my bikaku and yanked it out of my side, tossing it far enough away so that Furuta couldn't reconnect the tentacle with it's stump. There was a sweet-smelling spurting of blood from the wound, but it hadn't pierced anything vital, and the internal damage was healing over quickly. The blood was shockingly vibrant against my white shirt, even in the dim lighting.

Then Furuta, the sneaky, conniving Clown, picked up my quinque *(I had dropped it to tend to Shirazu, that's right)* and threw it like a lance, right into the crowd of investigators, towards where Haise and the Quinx were.

*I jumped in front of it, internally wincing *(I didn't let pain show in my expression, because pain was nothing, nothing but a mild amusement, so that was what I let show)* when the quinque pierced my shoulder. The velocity flung me back with bruising force, and I heard a familiar scream.

"Hide!"
"I'm fine, Haise!" I assured him, *(don't come near me, if I have to lose you, I won't let you get hurt, too)* quickly rolling out of the way of Furuta's strike and into a crouch, ripping the quinque free of my shoulder. The damage was slower to heal, and my muscles shrieked protests when Furuta approached me and I leapt out at him, stabbing him through the chest with the just-freed sword and impaling him in the fancy, tiled ground, trapping his kagune underneath him. I had punctured a lung *(maybe both, but I wasn't that lucky)* and broken quite a few of his ribs. For good measure, I twisted it savagely, and heard Furuta wheeze a squeak as his lungs collapsed.

Unlucky me, he pulled a Roma and *stabbed himself through the stomach* to impale me with his kagune, and my breath caught when the two claws ripped through my lower abdomen. In my head, during the brief lull of fighting while we both basked in our pain, I ticked off the damage.

*He's done damage to my stomach, intestines, and kidneys. He punctured my kakuhou, too, the bastard.*

My bikaku dissolved, evaporating into a mist of RC Cells, and I wrenched myself free of Furuta's kagune., tearing my quinque and stabbing him again *(I stepped on his hands and heard a satisfying crunch-- that's for Satko)* before I staggered a few steps back, a hand pressed to my healing wound. There was blood in my mouth, leaking away from the corner as I struggled to regain my breath, and I wondered why. The trauma to my stomach, probably. I coughed once, to clear my airways, and wiped away the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. It left an ugly red smear on my skin, but I ignored it, feeling the damage fading. I studied Furuta, as he studied me, the same cheerful, mildly amused grins plastered on our faces to conceal pain.

*Why did he choose to attack me now? Now, of all times?*

His leg had mostly grown back, but it looked like the rib and lung damage was taking longer to heal, by the unnatural indent of his shirt that suggested bones puncturing the skin, and my smirk turned into something more real.

*Serves you right. That's karma, for orchestrating the attack that got Kuramoto injured.*

"What's wrong, Kanou-kun," Furuta called out mockingly, though his voice was slightly raspy. "Can't use your bikaku anymore?"

"I don't know, Fruit-chan," I called back, pleased to find that my voice was perfectly steady and not raspy at all. How long I could keep it like that was a different matter, though. "I just sorta feel like using my ukaku for awhile. Don't suppose you've got a problem with it, would you?"

"I do, actually," Furuta said, and grinned. "I'd like to call in that favor now. Die, won't you? Pretty-please? With a cherry on top?"

I actually barked a laugh, but I watched him warily. "Your favor went out the window the second I didn't cut your head off when you laid a *finger* on my daughter."

"Cut my head off, you say?" Furuta's eyes narrowed. "That sounds pleasant. Want to try it? I'll help you~!"

Off like a shot, Furuta was flying towards me as if he had wings, and with a burst of speed I dove to the ground and twisted my ankles around his, giving a twist before I slammed into the ground, taking Furuta with me. My ukaku, crystallized, sliced his kagune away. The decreased flexibility made me want to grimace, but I was used to it, and it faded, back into it's normal, flickering shape *(like flames)* within a few moments. I held Furuta down with a hand to his neck and peppered him full of holes.
Finally, his expression twisted into one of pain, and I forced my heel into his newly-grown leg, snapping the bone with a menacing snap! Furuta shrieked, but I ignored him and twisted his arm, hoping to break it.

"Why did you choose now to attack?" I hissed.

Furuta had the nerve to laugh. "You'd never understand, fool! What it's like to be bred, to be parentless, to be unwanted! Kanou gave me a purpose—accepted me! And you, you, his son, just threw him away!"

The answer was... frighteningly truthful, for a Clown. It also made my heart speed up, because I did know. I was bred. But Uta and I-chan loved me as parents, and Kaneki accepted me. I always had support, love.

*He didn't?*

*He's what I could have been.*

His arm creaked under my hands, and eventually gave way, twisting unnaturally. The bone broke through the skin, and I was forced to release him when his kagune regenerated and he swiped a wound through my upper torso, tearing away at my ribs mercilessly. I flew back, to where I had dropped my quinque, and threw it with an archer's precision. Furuta managed to dodge it partially, and it only skimmed his arm.

I pressed a hand to where Furuta's attack had hit me, and immediately my hand was soaked through in blood. I glanced down, to see that most of my shirtfront had been torn away when the wound was placed, baring it to the world.

Most of the skin from just below my collarbone to where my ribs ended had been torn away, and a few flashes of white were visible where my ribs were. The damage wasn't deep (*I think? Maybe?*), but expansively shallow, and I shook my coat off. It was only hindering my movements, and most of it had been torn to shreds. If I had time, I would have bound the place where my internal anatomy was visible, but I didn't have such luxuries.

The world was a little fuzzy at the edges, and my head ached painfully, throbbing at my temples. I was faintly dizzy, but it was bearable, and with a little bit of shock I noted that I was sweating. *Had I already gone into hypovolemic shock?*

That was slightly worrying. Ghouls reproduced blood at a much faster rate than humans did—*we were built* to take and deal damage efficiently, but if I had already lost a fifth of it at a faster rate than my heart could produce it... I needed to be careful. I needed to *end* this, and *now.*

*Did I buy enough time?*

The sounds above me had definitely gotten louder. How much, I couldn't be certain, but I couldn't buy any more time without serious risk to my life (*and if I die, Haise will die, our kids will die, my comrades will die. If I died, everyone died*). I would have to put my faith in Washuu Matsuri, much as the thought repulsed me, and in Division II.

*Let's end this, Furuta.*

I studied said man, and found that he looked much worse than I did. He was barely standing, his healing much slower than mine, and I started towards him. My footsteps seemed to echo, too loud, and Furuta started towards me, lurching a little as he wobbled but didn't lose his footing.
We stopped walking, just a few feet from each other, and Furuta looked wary but ready. I wasn't a fool. He wouldn't go down without a fight— but hopefully I had damaged his kakuhou enough that he couldn't bring out his kagune. My own kakuhou— my bikaku— had healed up already, and with an intake of breath to steady myself I released it.

I won't make you suffer more than I have to.

Rarely did I use both kagune at the same time, but it was a euphoric feeling to do so. To stand facing an opponent, one of Kanou's greatest allies, and to know that Kanou's experiment had made me strong enough to fight and win this. Kanou, of all people, had given me the strength to kill his strongest ally (the one who was stupidly loyal, who was devoted to Kanou without fail). He'd given me the power to kill and harm to my heart's content.

He gave me the power to protect, although he didn't intend it that way.

"This is the end, isn't it?" Furuta asked me, breathlessly, tilting his head to the side like a cat.

"This fight has dragged on for long enough," I agreed, and with that I sent ukaku shards burying into Furuta's feet, pinning him to the floor. Similar shards shot through his knees and legs, his torso, his arms. I peppered him full of holes, and immobilized him. Furuta's expression twisted into a grimace. "Don't worry, you'll have company. I'll send Kanou down to you soon, and eventually, I'll see you in hell myself. Save me a spot, won't you?"

Furuta looked almost amused, through all his pain, and he said, "Save yourself one, Pierrot."

My bikaku swiped out, aiming for his head. I focused on his neck with laser-precision, my eyes narrowed, and aimed for a clean decapitation.

I was so focused as my bikaku swung out that I didn't see the claw that swiped out at my own throat.
This is the last chapter, not including the Epilogue-- which is really a few different chapters. Three, probably?

Furuta was dead before his kagune struck me, his head rolling away, neatly severed from his neck, but the momentum carried the kagune forward and it tore out the front portion of my throat.

My heartbeat was suddenly very loud, and I stared downward as my vision blurred. There were red stains, spreading from the collar of my shirt downward, soaking the once-white fabric-- or what was left of it, anyways. The bloody wound from earlier was still open and gaping, though the skin was gradually closing.

Is all that... my blood...?

I swayed on my feet, vision swimming. Everything blurred, until all I saw was a hazy canvas of colors, and then I was falling.

Somebody caught me, holding me in a sitting position while I coughed violently. Blood sprayed from my mouth, an obscene amount of it, and unbidden tears rose when I still couldn't breath. Eventually, the coughing fit passed, though my breathing remained raw and ragged, and with a few furious blinks my eyes cleared.

It was Haise, holding me in his lap and trying to ease my breathing. Saiko was kneeling next to me, blinking away tears while Mutsuki still supported her vigilantly. Urie had mostly carried a stumbling Shirazu over, and they were sitting to my right.

Why is everybody crying?

My hand came up to touch the skin of my throat, to find that the skin was growing back at a quick rate, which was good. Except the internal damage wasn't healing anywhere near as fast, and although the skin growing back meant that I was in less danger of bleeding to death, it also meant that it was trapping the blood from the internal wounds inside me. So it was draining down my throat, or I was coughing it up.

I was drowning in my own blood.

I coughed again, and without fail, more of the crimson liquid sprayed onto my lips. It seemed like my healing was taking priority on my throat instead of my chest, where the skin had also grown back in a last-ditch effort to prevent my bleeding to death.

I was dying. That's why everybody was crying.

Haise was saying something, and I had to blink (my vision was still hazy at the edges) a few times to be able to focus on him. Something was off about my hearing, too. Sounds echoed oddly, like I was hearing things from a tunnel.
"--ide! *Hide!* Can you hear me? *Hide*?"

I nodded once to confirm I could indeed hear him, though the act made the room spin. My vocal cords were still in the unfortunately painful process of being repaired, and it left me temporarily mute.

He was pressing a makeshift bandage to my throat, and I lifted a hand to tell him to stop. I made the signs, but was irritated by the fact that my hands wouldn't move quite right. It was the same feeling I had when I had been shot by the super-strong RC Suppressants-- like moving through syrup. It made me slower, clumsier.

*Human-like. That means my regeneration's all but given up on trying to save me too, huh?*

"I-- I don't understand what you're signing, *Hide,*" Haise admitted, and he had to blink rapidly, trying to adjust his grip on the crimson-soaked piece of cloth. When he saw that the skin had already been repaired, he wiped away the blood that stained my chin.

Mutsuki understood to some extent. Saiko, who was crying to hard to see anything, let alone attempt to read my clumsy signs, didn't know them anyways-- she hadn't paid any attention in the Academy. Shirazu was barely partially conscious, and he had slung his arm around Urie's shoulders, using him as a support for most of his weight. He didn't register anything that was happening, but Urie did. Urie understood me perfectly.

*As expected of the Academy Scholarship Student.* I tried for a smile, but it was ruined by another wet cough, and more blood. Haise wiped it away with gentle hands and an expression that he was fighting to keep worry-free. Trying and failing. Miserably.

"He said... *Stop that, it's useless*,'" Urie translated hoarsely.

Haise's eyes became sharper, and he said, "*Useless? Don't talk like that, *Hide!* Look, you're regeneration is just as good as mine is! You're healed up already! Just rest until the reinforcements arrive-- it'll be any minute now!"

I struggled to catch my breath and shook my head adamantly. I lifted my hand and made the next round of signals.

Urie's face paled, and Haise asked, "What did he say, Urie? Can you-- Can you understand?"

"He said... *You need to prepare for the next round of attacks. Furuta is dead, and the ghouls will attack.*" Urie paused, swallowed. "*And... he said I'm sorry I couldn't buy more time.*"

Haise's hand seemed to grow tighter on mine, and slowly my thumb moved in circles, trying to calm him. If my breathing wasn't so ragged, I would have tried to speak to him. But my throat wasn't healed enough yet.

"Don't you dare say sorry!" Haise hissed, and I stared at his hand for a moment. It was shaking-- or was that mine, making his tremble too? I couldn't tell anymore. "*Don't even try it! We're-- We're all alive because you fought for us!*"

"*First Class Sasaki is correct,*" The very last person I ever expected to say anything spoke up, Ui Koori. "You've done well, *First Class Nagachika.* We'll take care of the rest, so there's no need to worry. Have faith in your co-workers. We're all competent--"

Ui's statement was cut off by glass shattering, and a parade of ghouls came through the window. Among them, I saw Uta's mask, Itori's, Yomo's, Touka's, Ayato's, Hinami's-- it seemed as through everybody had arrived, and my heart plunged.
Ui went ridged. "More ghouls? What the hell is Division II doing?" His expression twisted into a hardened one, and he announced, "Prepare for b--!

"Stop!" I shrieked, and the act made my throat burn but I didn't care. I hoisted myself to my feet and the room spun like a top. I staggered like a drunk, almost falling, but I had caught the attention of everybody, ghoul and human alike. "Don't-- don't kill them! Everybody, retreat!"

I wasn't sure which side I was talking to, but Itori and Uta were by my side in an instant, supporting me like the had when I was a baby and was learning to toddle.

"It's okay, Kiddo," Itori said gently. "We're here to help defend our grand-kids and son-in-law, not to fight them."

"Grand...kids...?" Mutsuki asked, rigid and wide-eyed. "You're...! You're...!"

"They... know..." I rasped hoarsely. "Who I... am..."

Uta nodded, taking everything in stride, and with a dramatic bow he offered a hand to Mutsuki. "I'm Pierrot's dad! At least, I raised him, with the old bat next to me! It's a pleasure to formally meet you, grandson of mine!"

"That's... When you said... at the Auction..." Mutsuki's eyes were like saucers as Saiko's weeping paused for a brief moment, to stare at the other side of my family with wide-eyes, like she couldn't believe that they were standing there. I couldn't either.

What did you say to him at the Auction, Uta? What did you get yourself into?

"You were talking about Hide-san," Mutsuki continued. "When... when you called yourself 'grandpa'."

"Right again!" Uta declared cheerily, but his head whipped around when my body convulsed with another fit of bloody coughing, and Haise started forward, eyes menacingly mismatched.

"I don't know who you are or what you're doing, but if you don't give Hide back right now I swear to any god that will listen, I will rip your heads off."

"Haise," I croaked, but coughed again. Itori's hand rubbed my back gently until the fit passed. "Haise. It's-- It's okay. They're my family."

"Family, huh..." Ui's eyes narrowed, studying the group. "State your motives, family. Why did you come? To retrieve Nagachika-- or rather, Pierrot?"

"Ah, I apologize!" Uta said, with a faked cheery demeanor. He bowed to Ui. "I suppose I'm the leader of our little rag-tag bunch, since Pierrot's out of commission! I'm No-Face, and we came to assist you!"

Ui's quinque (a koukaku, I remember, rate A+) was pointed at Uta's face, but Uta showed no concern about the tip of the halberd-like quinque hovering inches from his face. "Why would ghouls help the CCG?"

"Because our little boy's smitten with one of your investigators," Itori said, just as cheerfully as she produced a handkerchief-- where she kept it, in her very revealing clothing, I would never know-- and dabbed at my face, cleaning away the blood. My head was fuzzy, like it was stuffed full of cotton, and it was extremely hard to focus. It was like my legs had given up on attempting to support my weight, but Itori held me up with Yomo's help, while Uta was otherwise occupied. Hinami and
Ayato had moved to stand in front of me, and the others had moved to guard the stairs, where the Aogiri Tree ghouls were moving and shifting anxiously, wanting to descend but too afraid. It was a natural instinct-- now that Furuta was dead, the strongest ghoul was me, and only a fool would go against the natural instinct to submit to the powerful. "And those four kids of his are our grand-kids. What kind of grandparents would we be do let them die? Not very good ones, that's for sure!"

Maybe... my regeneration is working, after all? I should have already drowned by now, choked to death on my own blood, but I'm still alive, I thought, giving another hacking cough that made my lungs scream in pain and my body convulse violently. Itori gently dabbed away the blood.

"Shh, Kiddo. Everything will be okay now. No more fighting, okay? Just rest. Momma and Daddy got it covered now."

I've never heard Itori and Uta refer to themselves as... 'Momma and Daddy' before. It's... nice...

My eyelids were heavy, but I fought the urge to fall asleep. If I fell asleep, I might never wake up again.

"Ui-san," Urie spoke, and his voice was level and calm. "If the ghouls raid, we'll all die. We don't have anybody rested enough to fight and win. This is my professional opinion: if we don't take the aid, we'll be long dead before the reinforcements arrive. You forget, I think, that we all have enhanced hearing; you can't hear just how far away Division II and the reinforcements are. I can, so please take my opinion into consideration."

Ui gritted his teeth, but I knew the choice he would make, even before he did. Ui was a jerk at times, and jealous, but he did care for his men. If there was an option to save lives, Ui would take it.

You're a good commander, Ui-san... I respect that...

"If I see one of you get anywhere near my men, then I don't care if you're his family," Ui spit the word with venom, "or not. I'll kill you myself."

"Agreed~!" Uta announced happily, then called, "Okay, guys! You heard the man, let's defend! Rabbit, Black Rabbit, take the watch over the stairs, won't you? The others can back you up, but you've both got the best eyesight."

They're both ukaku ghouls, so if a ghoul attacks, they can shoot it down before it reaches them. Clever...

Haise was beside me in what seemed like no time at all, and Itori and Yomo helped to re-seat me, so that Haise was propping me up and holding my hand. Yomo sat, a silent and stony presence, near Mutsuki and Saiko, while Itori slid in next to me, beside Urie and Shirazu. Uta was there too, and he asked Haise seriously, "Where was he injured?"

"His throat and his chest," Haise swallowed. "But he healed over already, and he doesn't seem to be in any pain. I'm not sure why he's still coughing up blood-- why he can't breathe."

"Hush, now, my dear son-in-law," Uta commanded, his fingers gently feeling at my throat. Pain, like little lightning bolts, shot through me. I showed no signs of it, and Uta's eyes narrowed behind his mask. "Hide. I know you've don't like to show pain, but you're going to need to, since you can't tell me where it hurts." His voice was, for the first time I could ever remember, grave and serious. "You're going to need to take your mask off, now."

"Mask...?" Saiko whispered, confused, but I understood.
"Understood and hated it."

"Hide is very careful about showing his pain," Uta explained, quietly. "Thing is, he doesn't. Show it, that is. He'll laugh it off, say it's nothing, even when the injury could be fatal."

"Like now, he doesn't say, but I hear, as plain as day.

*You do the same thing I do, Uta.*

With a shaky exhale of breath, I let my mask fall away, and my face twisted into one of pain. I would have cried out, but my throat was too raw from my outburst earlier, and I had to content myself to tensing when Uta's fingers found my throat, prodding at it gently. A wheeze of pain, ragged and rough, leaves my lips. His fingers are gentle but firm, and after a moment, he had me open my mouth and gazes inside of it.

"He's bleeding internally. The damage done to his throat hasn't healed-- the skin just has."

"His vocal cords are probably damaged, aren't they?" Itori questioned. "That's why he can't speak. Or, speak well."

Uta shrugged. "I don't know what Hide knows about medicine, so I can't say, but Kuro and Shiro should be here any second now. They'll be able to help him." His fingers drifted lower, to my upper abdomen, feeling at it with the same gentle prodding. He drew back when I hissed and coughed in pain, the lightning-like sensation making my muscles go rigid. "I'm sorry, Hide. I can't tell much about what's wrong with you."

I reached out a hand to tug at Urie's shirt, making the same clumsy hand-signs. Urie hesitated briefly, then he said, "Hide-san said that *It's not your fault, so don't be sorry.*"

*Please don't say sorry.*

I couldn't see Uta's expression behind his mask, but his head whipped around with the sound of more glass shattering and Kurona and Nashiro-- in their masks and cloaks-- leap through the window, toting a bag a-piece that was no doubt stuffed full of medical supplies.

They were beside me in an instant, kneeling down and opening their bags while Itori filled them in quietly on the fact that the jig was up, *everyone knew who I was.*

"Shiro, check his heartbeat. I'll listen to his lungs while you do," Kurona announced, straight down to business.

"Who are you?" Haise asked, a little suspiciously. His hand tightened on mine. "What are you doing to Hide?"

"Saving his life, hopefully," they said together, in perfect unison.

"We're doctors," Nashiro elaborated, which I supposed was a bit of a lie-- they were *training* to be doctors. "Set Hide-nii up further for me, please. I need to take his pulse and Kuro needs to listen to his lungs."

Haise, after a brief moment of uncertainty, nodded and propped me up a little further. Admittedly it eased my breathing, and I swallowed against another cough. There was a terribly sweet taste in my mouth, and I knew that it was my blood, which should have been sickening. Instead, the sweet taste reminded me of the blood that Itori and Uta had used to let me drink when I was young, a glass every night before sleep, and fighting against sleep became harder.
"Stay with me, Hide," Haise said insistently, squeezing my hand. He took on a begging tone. "Please, don't fall asleep."

I offered him a smile, forcing the pain from my expression and giving him my best, brightest smile, the one I used to charm and manipulate. The one I used to convince. In Haise's case, to reassure. I send a round of hand-signs along with it, and Mutsuki translated this time.

"Hide-san said... *I'll be okay.*"

*Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan are good at what they do, so that wasn't a lie... right? I don't want to lie to him, so I'll be okay.*

Haise started crying when I smiled. I couldn't fathom why, but the smile slipped off my face as the tears, hot and salty, fell onto our joined hands. One of his tear tracks were tinted red with blood-- the tears of a ghoul. I blinked hazily a few time to clear my again-blurry vision to find that his kakugan was activated.

*I have to be okay.*

I wanted to reach up and touch it, to tell him that it was okay, not to cry, but my hand was shaking too badly to. So I merely sat still while Kuro and Shiro went to work, and when they did, I tried my best to keep my eyes open. The drowsiness seemed unbearable, even worse than the pain.

"Shiro," Kurona said, and I didn't miss the strain on her tone. "What does his pulse sound like?"

"It's too fast, irregular, and it's getting weaker," Nashiro announced. "And his lungs? What about them?"

"Labored and rapid," Kurona informed. "I can hear rales, as well. I think it's an issue with his lungs-- did he have a wound to the chest?" She asked Haise.

He nodded. "It was pretty bad, too, but the skin's healed over already, just like with his throat. He looks like he's healed completely-- I don't know why he's coughing up blood."

"He's what?" They ask, in their perfect synchrony.

In response, with my perfect timing, I gave a rattling, hacking cough. Blood, pink and frothy but mixed with a liquid crimson, sprayed onto my lips. Kurona and Nashiro's bodies went stiff.

"That's not good," Kurona whispered. "Oh, that's not good at all. Shiro, check his throat. I'll take his chest."

Shiro gave her a nod, and they began their prodding, with quick and efficient fingers. Each touch send a bolt of pain through me, and my breathing hitched. Haise must have seen my hand trembling, because he held it a little tighter.

*The pain keeps me awake, at least.*

"Are you tired at all, Hide-nii?" Kurona asked me, after their examination was done.

I gave them a curt nod, and had to blink to clear the spots from my vision. I was so dizzy, and so tired. I wanted nothing more than to sleep, but I forced the drowsiness away.

Nashiro spoke now, a note of hysteria in her voice. "Kuro, are you thinking what I am? Please tell me you aren't."
"Pulmonary edema, probably caused by acute respiratory distress syndrome," Kurona whispered.

I gave a wheezing laugh, breathless. My heart had dropped like a stone.

"H-Hide...?" Haise asked, and he sounded almost as nearly-hysterical as the twins did. "Why is he laughing? Is-- Is something wrong? What does a pulmonary edema-- and the other, acute respiratory distress syndrome-- what does that mean?"

I thought that Nashiro might have been crying, and Kurona answered for her.

"It means that the wound to his chest leaked blood from the smallest blood vessels in his lungs, and into the tiny air sacs where blood is oxygenated." Kurona sniffed, like she was close to tears. "Normally, a protective membrane keeps his blood in his blood vessels. But the wound to his chest caused the membrane to inflame, so that the blood leaked. Not enough oxygen is getting to his bloodstream to keep his other organs functioning."

*My body is shutting down.*

"Can't you-- y'know, make it stop?" Saiko asked, hiccuping. "Papa-- Papa won't die, will he? You'll save him again, right?"

"We can't," Nashiro sniffled, wiping at her eyes under her mask. "Not with the material we have. We don't have anything to get more oxygen into his blood-- we'd need a ventilator, or an oxygen tank. We can give him something for his pain, though, and sedate hi--"

"No," I croaked. It made my throat burn in protest, but I carried on anyways. "No pain medication. No sedatives. Too hard to get a-hold of. Save them."

"Hide-nii!" Kurona and Nashiro said, at the same time.

"You're lungs could collapse any time now!" Nashiro protested.

"You're in pain," Kurona begged. "Please, please let us treat you. Let us ease your pain."

"No," I rasped adamantly. "No. I don't need anything. It doesn't hurt at all."

*Why am I lying, even now?*

"*One measure-- and perhaps the best measure-- of a person's greatness is the capacity for suffering,* is it?" Itori asked softly, and I nodded. She sighed, and suddenly her long-nailed hands were combing through my hair. "Silly boy. You aren't the protagonist of a manga. You don't need to bear the pain."

"I want to stay conscious and lucid for as long as--" I coughed, and more of my blood came up. Haise wiped it away with Itori's handkerchief, with a touch that was painfully gentle. "--as long as possible."

"You aren't saying what I think you're saying, right?" Saiko whispered, tugging at Kurona's sleeve. "You aren't telling me Papa will die, right?"

"He might not," Nashiro amended, with a hiccuping sob. "But the chances of survival are... slim. We're... we're sorry, Hide-nii. We can't save you."

And then they were crying too, and everybody around me was crying, and there were suspicious noises from under Uta and Itori's masks that sounded like sniffles. Saiko was sobbing, and Mutsuki
and Urie had bewildered tears in their eyes. Shirazu, whose eyes were clouded and hazy, was somewhere between sleep and awakening. He didn't even register anything said, and for that, I was glad.

My chest ached, and my movements seemed sluggish, but forced my mouth open and said, "Don't cry. Please, don't cry. It's okay, Kuro-chan, Shiro-chan. You did your best! That's all I could have ever asked of you! Besides, everybody's show has to come to an end at some point. My call to exit the stage just happened to be sooner than expected."

Haise's face was buried in my hair, and he let out a broken laugh.

"Of course I'm going to cry, damn it! I can't do anything, while you're dying in my arms. I'm going to cry, damn it!"

I reached up to touch the side of his face gently.

"Haise. Haise, listen, I-- I want you to do something for me, okay?" I coughed another bloody cough, and this time, it left me gasping for breath.

*I don't have much longer, do I?*

The thought was surprisingly dull. It didn't make me want to cry, or sob in despair. I accepted it-- I was ready to face the judgement for my terrible choices.

*I don't regret a thing.*

"Anything," Haise promised, and I wiped away tears with the back of my hand.

"There are envelopes, in my desk," I fought for my breath. *A little longer, just last a little longer."* They've got answers in them. I'm-- I'm sorry I couldn't give them to you myself."

"I'll find them," he vowed, and I blinked up at him through eyes that were hazy with something hot and wet.

Pretty. He's so pretty. Like an angel.

"I love you all," I announced, louder. To everyone. Then I brushed a hand across his cheek and sat up further, ignoring the screaming in my chest that was against it, and I kissed him. "I love you, Haise."

Then I closed my eyes as there were twin sharp pains in my chest (*my lungs had finally collapsed, huh?*), and I winced, letting myself fall back into Haise's lap. I had said everything I wanted to say, and was content, if not happy, with going out like this. It was an exit maybe not fit for Pierrot, the Clown, who would have made an extravagant exit, but I was content. Nagachika Hideyoshi didn't need a curtain call.

*I'm sorry, Haise. I'm leaving you alone again.*

I died.

Chapter End Notes
Pulmonary edema is a condition caused by excess fluid in the lungs. This fluid collects in the numerous air sacs in the lungs, making it difficult to breathe. In most cases, heart problems cause pulmonary edema. But fluid can accumulate for other reasons, including pneumonia, exposure to certain toxins and medications, trauma to the chest wall, and exercising or living at high elevations (Simplified definition courtesy of Mayo Clinic). In Hide's case, his was caused by Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), which occurs when fluid builds up in the tiny, elastic air sacs (alveoli) in your lungs. More fluid in your lungs means less oxygen can reach your bloodstream. This deprives your organs of the oxygen they need to function. His death is not sudden, but people with ARDS can sometimes survive days without the first symptom showing.
Epilogue - Part 1

Chapter Notes

The Epilogue-- and I mean, all three chapters of it-- has pretty much been written since about Chapter 26, and I’ve just been working on it for awhile, knowing this would be how it all ended and just piecing everything together. Part 2 and Part 3 still need some cleaning-up and checking before they can be posted, but expect them both tomorrow, and then... that'll be it for The Last Laugh.

I am planning some short stories to tie in to this fic-verse later, though. Think of it a mix between a prequel, extra, and sequel. There will be too many questions that probably need answered that aren't wrapped up in the last chapters, especially something Eto will mention later on.

Speaking of her, what happened to her, Takizawa, and Tartara will be cleared up in Parts 2 & 3, and maybe the short stories, depending on how it goes. Eto for sure will be cleared up then, but as for the others... I'm not quite sure yet, myself.

If you've got a question that you want answered through the short stories, tell me, and I'll see if I can arrange it! There's a few that I already have planned, but I know that there are so many questions to answer, still, and I'm bound to forget about some!

Aogiri had abruptly all fled, and Akira had a bad feeling about it. But she proceeded to the first floor nonetheless.

Akira found something like from her nightmares. It looked like a slaughter had happened: blood and gore were splattered everywhere, Rank 1 Furuta's decapitated body lay separated from his head, a monstrous corpse that was most definitely not human was sprawled on the ground, and everyone looked mostly worn-out and battered.

Worst of all, Akira found Haise cradling Nagachika's body, blank-eyed and distant. Around him, the Quinx Squad-- excluding an unconscious Shirazu-- were crying their eyes out, even the ever-stoic Urie.

Dear god, what happened here?

But Haise, although tear tracks stained his face, didn't cry. He stared ahead blankly, and as Akira approached him, eyes wide, he didn't even react.

"Haise. Haise, what happened?" She asked gently, trying her best not to startle him. When he didn't respond, she asked, just as gently, "Can you tell me who you are?"

Haise laughed, like it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. He turned his head from Nagachika's corpse, which was held delicately and gently in his arms, to face her, and her blood ran cold. His eyes were terrifyingly dulled, like the eyes of a dead man, and they seemed... darker, as if their very color had altered, to a darker shade of grey.

"My name is Kaneki Ken. I go by the name of Sasaki Haise. I am a First Class Ghoul Investigator. I
am twenty-three years old. The date of my birth was December twentieth, and my birthday is April second. I grew up in the Twentieth Ward, and was born a human. I was turned into a half-ghoul by Doctor Kanou." Haise gave her an empty smile that was equal parts as terrifying as his eyes. "What do you want to know about me, Akira-san?"

For a moment, Akira considered shooting him down with RC Suppressants. The thought was fleeting, and it was gone before her hand could even twitch towards her gun. Haise was not out of control, on a rampage, and therefore not technically breaking the rules of his existence. There was no rule against him regaining his memories, although before flashbacks tended to end in emotional breakdowns. Breakdowns that Nagachika could stop before they happened. Breakdowns that Nagachika made nonexistent.

"Haise. I can still call you by that, can't I?"

"Why not?" Haise shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me anymore. Call me what you want. Kaneki Ken, Sasaki Haise, Eyepatch, Centipede. Even Number Two-Hundred and Forty is fine."

_He doesn't even care. He doesn't have a reason to, anymore._

"Is that true, Haise?" Arima, standing beside Akira, with a coat that was spotlessly white, despite the hundreds of ghouls he'd killed. "Well then, can you tell me, _what_ are you?"

"I am human, and I am a ghoul. I am a half-ghoul and I am half-human. I am a monster." Haise offered Arima the same terrifyingly blank smile. "I am your quinque, Arima-san."

Arima didn't answer Haise straight away, like he was pondering something. Then, with a hand that seemed awkward, he reached out and put a hand on Haise's head.

"First Class Sasaki Haise, also known as Kaneki Ken, go home. This is an order. You've done enough for today." Arima paused. "Well done... Ken."

Haise's hands tightened on Nagachika's body. "I'm sorry, Arima-san, but I'll have to defy that order. I won't be letting anyone take Hide and dismantling him to make a weapon."

"That would never happen to an Investigator's corpse," Arima said calmly. "An autopsy will be preformed, but that will be the extent of it."

"Hide isn't just an Investigator. He's like I am." Haise's hands twitched. "I-- I don't know the full story. But Hide is Pierrot, and Pierrot is an SSS- Rated ghoul. Pierrot will be made into a quinque. I won't let anyone touch Hide." His left eye became red-and-black in the blink of an eye, and he repeated himself, threateningly. "I won't let anyone touch Hide."

And then there were three angry pairs of eyes that were staring at Arima, all mismatched.

"You won't let anything happen to Papa, would you, Arima-san?" Saiko asked, through watery, mismatched eyes. There was a threat in her tone that managed to sound like a plea.

"I've already been informed of Nagachika's true identity," Arima said, just as calmly, and he knelt down to look Haise in the eye over Nagachika's body. "Listen to me, Haise. _I will not let Nagachika, also known as Pierrot, to be made into a quinque._ Am I understood?"

Slowly, Haise relaxed, and he nodded mechanically. "Yes... Arima-san. Thank you."
"There's no need for thanks," Arima informed him, shedding his coat and laying it over Nagachika's body, to hide the ghastly wounds. Haise put Nagachika's corpse on the ground with the gentleness of one handling china, and with the same blank expression, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to Nagachika's lips. "It's proper courtesy for an Investigator. Especially one who gave his life for his comrades."

"Good-bye, Hide."

[Haise said 'sayonara']

"Akira," Arima announced. "Show Haise home. He shouldn't need medical treatment, from what I can see. I'll see to it that the Quinx are given proper care before returning them home."

Akira nodded, and with gentle hands, she put a hand on Haise's shoulder and lead him out the door. As she passed Arima, he said, "Stay with him. He'll need it, Akira."

She nodded.

Just before Akira left the building, Haise in tow, Ui Koori caught up with her.

"I've already informed Arima-san," He said, "but he said to tell you as well. The casualty report for the raid: two deaths, that of Special Class Kijima and that of First Class Nagachika. There are sixteen serious injuries, but all have received medical treatment."

Two deaths? For a raid of this size? That's unheard of, but surely Ui wouldn't mess up his facts...

"Has the medical squad already treated them all?" Akira asked, genuinely confused. Surely even the best medics couldn't move that fast.

Ui shook his head. "The medical squad hasn't even arrived yet. A gang of ghouls under Pierrot came and defended us from the Aogiri ghouls until you arrived, and they brought two doctors with them. The doctors patched everyone up properly, and when you all arrived, everyone from Pierrot's gang fled." He hesitated, briefly. "Nagachika... he was the one who ensured there were so few casualties. He was a genius." Ui did something strange then: he bowed to Haise. "I apologize for my previous conduct with yourself and Nagachika. My actions were foolish, and you have my sincerest condolences for your loss."

Haise just gave Ui the same blank smile. "Thank you for that, Ui-san. May I ask a favor of you?"

"Anything," Ui promised him, and Haise's smile wavered for just a moment.

"May I have one of your cigarettes?"

Akira watched Haise warily, unsure of where this was going, but to her surprise Ui merely drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to Haise, who accepted it.

"I didn't know you smoked, Sasaki," Ui admitted as he drew a lighter from his pocket. He noted Haise's eyes on it, and he explained. "I always carry a spare. I'm prone to losing them."

"I don't smoke," Haise said simply, then paused as Ui lit his cigarette for him. "Well, I never have before."

Ui seemed to understand well enough, and he didn't say a word, lighting another cigarette for himself, and Akira watched the two men smoke in silence. To Haise's credit, he smoked the entire cigarette without coughing once, eyes dark. When they finished smoking, Haise and Ui parted ways,
and Haise allowed himself to be lead into one of the CCG's cars.

"Smoking will give you cancer," Akira commented.

Haise laughed hollowly. "Not me. I heal. It won't do anything to me."

Akira drove in silence after that. When they reached the Chateau, they entered in silence. Haise flipped on the lights mechanically and took his shoes off in the same robotic manner.

"Go take a shower," Akira commanded. "Scrub the blood off."

Haise didn't protest, merely nodding and disappearing into the bathroom. Akira went upstairs and retrieved pajamas from the drawer, depositing them in the bathroom for Haise, and he reappeared a short while later, fingering the hem of the shirt with far-away eyes.

I chose the most comfortable-looking pajamas there. There isn't anything wrong with them, right?

"Is something wrong with the clothes I chose?" Akira queried, handing him a glass of water. He accepted it with a muttered thanks, and the distant look remained in his eyes for a moment.

"No. They're Hide's." Haise drank down the glass of water without protest, and he returned it to the sink with Akira's in the same mechanical, robotic manner, like he was running on autopilot.

"Haise. Don't do that. Don't shut everything out," Akira told him, but it wasn't an order, it was more akin to a plea. "Don't run on autopilot. Nagachika wouldn't have wanted you to do that."

"Haise," Haise repeated, with another laugh. The glasses he was washing in the sink shattered in his hands, but he didn't even flinch as the glass cut his skin. It healed in a heartbeat, but the crimson that stained his hands remained. "Nameless. Ken. Strong. Ha-- I'm not strong. I'm weak, too weak, and now Hide's dead because I wasn't strong enough--!"

Akira watched Haise break, like the glass had shattered, and she drew him into a hug without thinking.

"It wasn't your fault that Nagachika died, do you understand? Death is something nobody can stop," Akira told him, her hands firm and her shirt wet with a flood of tears that weren't her own. "You aren't nameless. You aren't weak. You are Sasaki Haise and Kaneki Ken, and whatever you chose to call yourself, it's all the same. Names are unimportant."

Akira held him until Haise stopped crying, and then she sent him to bed. He obeyed her, but in a much less mechanical fashion. It was more like he had cried so much that he had nothing left in him, and Akira watched him go worriedly.

Akira slept on the couch, and when she got up in the morning, she went into the kitchen to make breakfast. One by one, the Quinx trudged out of their rooms and to the dining table, excluding Shirazu, who was still sleeping off his wounds in his bedroom. There were dark circles under their
eyes, like they hadn't slept a wink.

They probably hadn't. Akira knew she hadn't, either.

"Whe-- Where's Maman?" Saiko asked, and Akira noted that her eyes were still red, despite the Quinx's healing. Her voice was horse.

"Right here," came a voice from the stairs, and Akira had to do a double-take.

Haise was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking very washed-out but more animated than he had the previous night. He looked terribly sad, but he looked more human and less robot.

He also had a head full of stark-white hair.

"What are you all staring at?" Haise questioned honestly, frowning.

"You're hair," Mutsuki croaked. "It-- It's white."

"It's... what...?" One of Haise's hands drifted to his head, feeling at the snowy white hair, as if he was able to discern the color by feeling it. Saiko snapped a picture of him with her cellphone, and she showed him the picture. His eyes seemed to shift colors, from the faintly cold and glassy color of dark grey pearls to something... colder, like steel or chrome, for just a brief instant. "Oh. It's like that again, is it?"

"Again?" Urie asked, then blinked, like he hadn't meant to say that out-loud. Haise took it in stride, simply blinking, and Akira watched as his eyes seemed to shift colors again, to the same dark, glassy color they'd been before, the emotionless, metallic color fading away.

"It turned white after I was tortured," Haise said it so nonchalantly that Akira did a double-take. "But I'd rather not talk about that, if you'd please. I'll make breakfast, Akira-san. What does everybody want, Western or Japanese?"

Bleakly, it was agreed upon for a Western-style breakfast, and Akira watched Haise cook with a practiced, talented ease. He cooked eggs, pancakes, and bacon, all while grinding coffee beans and making coffee in the style often found in professional coffee shops.

Akira noted that the ring that Nagachika had given Haise, engraved with the kanji for protection and luck, gleamed on the opposite hand that he'd always worn it.

As if he was a widower.

Then there were footsteps, coming down the stairs in a clumsy, stumbling manner. It was Shirazu, looking rather ragged with the new scar that stretched across his bare abdomen, wide-eyed and confused.

The doctors had given him RC Suppressants after his wound had healed, confirming that it was a break in his frame system, but assuring everyone it was nothing to worry about, just a minor thing. The doctors would keep him on suppressants until the low-risk surgery to fix him would take place tomorrow.

"Hey, guys... can anyone tell me what I'm doing? 'Cause, I thought that we were at the raid, then everythin' goes a little hazy and I don' remember anythin' else. How'd I get home? And how'd I get a scar?" Shirazu's confused orange eyes skimmed the kitchen. "An'... where's Hide-san? He's always up 'efore us."
Haise's hands stilled, halfway to the table with the plates piled high with food. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and Akira couldn't really believe what Shirazu was saying either.

"Shirazu..." She began, dreading the conversation to come. "You had... better take a seat."

Haise brought Akira and Arima the letters from Hide's desk. There had been a personal letter addressed to himself and each of the Quinx, respectively, a strange file-folder about an experiment on synthetic meat, and then a longer, unbelievably thick letter that detailed his entire life story like an autobiography, omitting only the names of the people and replacing them with their CCG-given aliases. It told of Kanou and his only remaining lab, with specific details, like the address, an estimated personnel count, and of Kanou's home address. When Akira brought the letters to the higher-ups, it was agreed upon that an emergency raid would be conducted as soon as possible.

"I want in on the raid," Haise demanded.

"Pass a psychological exam to make sure you're healthy enough in body and mind, and I'll let you," Arima promised.

Haise passed the psychological exam with flying colors.

"No, I've never met Nagachika's family," Arima informed.

"Neither have I," Akira told, and Kuramoto and Kuroiwa Takeomi echoed her statement.

Washuu Matsuri's eyes narrowed. "Sasaki. Didn't his family come to your Christmas party, two years back?"

"No," Haise lied, just as smoothly and with an innocent smile. "They said they had a KFC tradition they didn't want to break."
"You were in a romantic relationship with him," Washuu Matsuri insisted. "Surely you have met his family."

"A few times," Haise admitted honestly. "On the occasional Sunday, we met them in coffee shops, and we talked for awhile there. But never anywhere personal."

"I see," Washuu said, but he didn't sound pleased. "So nobody knows where they live?"

Not a single voice spoke up.

Though the three days after Hide died had seemed busy-- and they were busy-- the day of his funeral seemed to drag by.

Haise went through the entire ordeal numbly. Not mechanically, because he had gotten past that with Akira's help, but... numbly. He was there, he processed everything that was going on, but he wasn't there, not really. He was deep in his own memories, even while he held Saiko while she sobbed, and dried Mutsuki's tears, and picked Shirazu up off his knees when he had dropped his crutch and started crying, and told Urie that it was okay to cry when he tried to hold back his tears.

He supported the weight of four people while they placed the urn in the crypt of the brand-new family grave. Hide hadn't had one, just like Haise didn't (even going by Kaneki Ken, he'd be damned if he would be buried in the same grave as that woman), but the CCG had it's own cemetery and at Hide's death they erected a new family grave.

Haise had been the one to firmly insist that it be inscribed with the name Hide had gone by since childhood-- Nagachika Hideyoshi, not his biological surname, Kanou. And since there was no other family to object, that was the name put on the stone: Nagachika.

What Haise hadn't been told of was the fact that his name would be added to the family grave, so that it read, complete with a hyphen, Nagachika-Sasaki. Which was mildly irking that someone did it without his consent, but also mildly heartwarming. A balance between the two, he supposed.

It was probably Akira or Arima, if the conversation they'd had yesterday was any clue.

_Haise had been called in to Arima's personal meeting room, only to find Akira waiting for him with the man he'd grown to think of as a father, despite the bad history that lay in their past._

"Haise. Take a seat," Arima informed him, and Haise complied. He'd gotten more than a few strange looks in the lobby for his snowy-white hair, but he couldn't be bothered by it anymore. The attention was uncomfortable, but he'd been through this before, and he could put up with stares.

"You said you had something important to speak to me about?" Haise questioned, and Akira nodded.
"Legally, it's as though Kaneki Ken never existed," Akira admitted. "We concealed your previous records from you, and wiped them from public databases. But they do still exist, and it would be possible to simply replace your records in the public databases. That's the reason we've called you here today."

"What name do you want to go by?" Arima asked him, and Haise was startled for a brief moment at the bluntness of the question. "Don't answer me right away. Think about it carefully--it's an important decision."

And think about it he did. He thought about being Kaneki Ken, and being Sasaki Haise.

In his mind's eye, he saw his biological father's study, and the smell of old books. He could see, as if he was reliving it, wearing long-sleeved shirts to hide his bruises in warm months, and being taunted by the other children for it. Hide stepping in, protecting him, being his friend. His mother passing, his aunt taking him in. Being praised at first, for his excellent grades and behavior, then loathed for it. Eating less and less, until Hide noticed and started bringing a lunch for two, bringing him to their park late at night to eat dinner, no matter the season. Moving out when he got old enough, getting into Kamii on scholarships. Meeting Rize.

Turning into a ghoul.

Things flew faster past his mind's eye, memories blurring together, some in order, some not. Being taken in by Anteiku, meeting Hinami, Fueguchi-san's death. Training to be stronger, but not ever being strong enough. Fighting Amon. Meeting Tsukiyama, and being thrown into the ghoul restaurant. Getting tortured by Jason, and escaping. Leaving Anteiku. Cannibalizing. The terror of slowly losing his mind and knowing it, but pressing on because he was more terrified by his own weakness and inability to protect. Staring at the hundreds of messages, all from Hide, all read many times over but unanswered. Cutting Hinami's hair. Hallucinating until the lines between the distorted world in his mind and the real world blurred.

The raid on Anteiku.

Fighting the man he thinks now of as a father, and losing his memories.

Becoming Number Two-Hundred and Forty, nameless and terrified, lost in a state between nightmares and awakening for what seemed like eternity, knowing he had to protect and save, but not knowing what or who. Arima-san being the first one to speak to the nameless, terrified him, to show him kindness, to guide him when he was lost. Helping him pick out a name, Sasaki Haise, and releasing him from his cell. Treating him like a human when he was a monster in Cochlea, making him a ghoul investigator.

Giving him a second chance at the life he'd always longed for.

(Hide had loved him by both names. It didn't really matter which he went by, because both were his, but the name Sasaki Haise held so many more happy memories than Kaneki Ken.)

"Sasaki Haise," He said, firmly. "That is the name I chose to live by."

Haise didn't mind his name being on the grave. It was fitting, after all-- one day, he'd be buried here too.
As per tradition, his name was carved on the grave and painted in red when the headstone was erected, and Hide's lacked the color. Haise despised the color, the red. It symbolized the thing he hated most.

*I'm here without you, Hide. And the world doesn't seem quite as bright.*

Haise refused to cry. He had cried enough-- he would be strong, strong enough to protect, and strong people didn't cry.

*I'll be strong enough to protect everyone without you. I have to be.*

Everyone else had already gone home, Akira shepherding the kids into a car and promising to stay with them until Haise came back, however long it may take. Reminding himself of the fact that he was alone, Haise slipped a hand into his pocket and withdrew the gift Ui had given him, when he had visited Hide's grave.

A pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

It was almost laughable, Haise thought. When he was younger, cigarettes terrified him. They were something that the bad kids did, the people who lived dangerous lives, or people who didn't mind if they were slowly killing themselves.

Now, they were his salvation. He wasn't a fool. Hide always hated his self-destructive tendencies--well, Haise wouldn't give in to them, for Hide's sake, but that didn't mean that he could just let them go. So he smoked, because smoking wouldn't hurt him at all. Wouldn't give him any lasting damage, but it did sate his self-destructive tendencies.

There was something oddly satisfying about it, Haise thought, though he wasn't sure quite what. He wouldn't worry the kids or Akira or Arima with it, that he was sure of. He would keep his newfound habit hidden, and only smoke when he was alone.

*I'm alone now.*

It started raining, and Haise blinked at the sky dully. The rain was freezing and icy, chilling him to his bones and soaking his clothes through, and Haise wondered when it was supposed to rain. The last he heard, it was supposed to snow, not rain. But he didn't really care. It wasn't as if he could catch his death anyways-- though, the rain did irk him by dampening his cigarette.

Then an umbrella was over his head, and there was a man and a woman, in funeral attire, standing beside him. The man had the distinct smell of charcoal pencils, leather, and metal, and the woman smelled of sweet blood and alcohol.

"It's not good to stand in the cold rain, ghoul or not," The woman said, and Haise knew that voice.

*It's them. Itori-san and Uta-san.*

Haise voiced his realization, and Uta smiled, his lip ring catching the watery sunlight.

"It's nice to see you again, Haise," Uta greeted, and he paused, staring at the grave. The smile remained on his face, faint and almost nonexistent. "Though I wish it had been under more pleasant
circumstances. The gravestone is nice, though. Rather plain, but that can't be helped."

"I think Hide would like it," Itori said, offering the same faint smile. "It's elegant, if not elaborate."

"What are you doing here?" Haise asked quietly, taking another drag on his dampened cigarette. "It's a CCG cemetery. It's dangerous."

Uta shrugged. "We deserve the right to see where our child is buried, don't we? Kuro-chan and Shiro-chan are already distressed that they can't come with us. Touka-chan and Hinami-chan were outright crying about it, and Banjou-kun still blames himself for not getting to Hide sooner. The entire Fifth Ward is in mourning, and the Sixth Ward is only held together by those three subordinates of Banjou-kun's. Tsukiyama-kun and Kanae-kun were terribly conflicted-- Kanae-kun wanted to return to Tokyo. He probably would have, if not for the danger to his master's family should such an event occur."

"The Clowns are all distraught," Itori mumbled, twirling her umbrella. "Even Roma. Nico's drinking his sorrows away, and Roma's joined him. She was the closest in age to Hide, and she practically grew up with him."

"I... meant to ask about that," Haise admitted, staring at Hide's grave over the burning tip of his slowly-shrinking cigarette. "I didn't think I'd ever get the chance, but... Did Hide really have control of the Fifth Ward?"

"Are you asking as First Class Sasaki, the Dove," Itori asked quietly, "or as Haise, the widower?"

"We were never married," Haise said automatically. "I'm not a widower. But I am asking as Haise. This is... off-record, so to speak."

Itori raised a salmon-colored eyebrow, though Haise couldn't see her eyes, which were concealed by dark sunglasses. Uta wore a similar set.

"The ring on your hand says otherwise, but I'll let that slip for now," Itori shrugged. "Hide's debut as Pierrot happened when he was twelve. A faction of the yakuza, consisting entirely of ghouls, began targeting Kanou because of his experiments. Kanou sent Hide after them, as a test of strength, and Hide won." She paused, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "He slaughtered them all, though he was critically injured afterwards, and by doing so he liberated the Fifth Ward, which had been under their control. By all rights, he was the new leader, and they accepted him-- and the Clowns-- as such without fuss."

"In fact, they were rather grateful," Uta said fondly. "Hide had never really done much with the ward before a few years back-- five or six, if I'm not mistaken-- did he really become active in it and crack down on reforming it. It was a pretty docile ward while it was under our control and we didn't do much, but Hide made it into something out of a storybook." He sighed. "He did it because he felt guilty after what happened with you, you know. Started saving and relocating orphans, gave a kill-on-sight order to any of Aogiri Tree inside the boundary of the Fifth Ward, saving the Yasuhisa twins, even going as far as saving that doctor girl from being hunted down by the Doves and Torso."

Itori smiled.

"A hero from a storybook, huh..." Her smile faded. "Except in storybooks, heroes don't die. They live, which is the difference between fantasy and reality." She sighed. "I'm a Clown for a reason. I don't like reality-- fantasy is so much better."

His cigarette was burned down almost completely, and Haise snubbed it out with his fingers (the
burns healed as soon as they appeared) before tucking it back into the pack and into his pocket. He wouldn't ever litter, especially in a cemetery. What Itori and Uta were telling him was making his head spin, because it completely matched what Hide had written into his letters and into what was essentially his autobiography, but reading it and hearing it from the people that had raised Hide were two very different things.

"Tell me more about him, please." It left his lips before Haise could stop it, a plea. "I want to know what he kept to himself, what he wouldn't burden me with."

Itori laughed, and Haise thought it sounded on the verge of tears. "Hide would hate us for it, but we'll do it, won't we, U-chan?"

"He did everything early," Uta said, in response. "Sitting up, saying his first words, walking, talking in full sentences- he did it all much before he should have. He never needed any discipline. He was the perfect child, to others, but it just seems like he grew up before he should have." When he sighed, the metal of his lip ring fogged up. "It seemed like Hide never had time to be a kid. As soon as he could walk, it seemed, Kanou was expecting more of him. Hide was never good enough for Kanou. He always needed to be better, and he wanted to please his 'father', so Hide tried to be."

"He was fine how he was," Itori agreed. "But when other kids were figuring out how to read, he would stay up as late as he could, pouring over medical textbooks that college students find hard to read and understand, committing everything to memory so that he could talk with Kanou on equal grounds. He would pick fights with opponents that were too strong for him and almost kill himself beating them-- but Hide would always win, no matter the cost." She gave another short, sad laugh. "He always got the last laugh. How do you think his regeneration got to be on par with yours, Haise? We've lost count of how many times we brought him home bleeding and broken and almost dead, but happy, because he would always be hoping that maybe this time, he was good enough to make Kanou proud."

"Kanou was never happy, though," Uta continued. "And eventually, Hide became more dispassionate, a jaded adult. But he never really stopped wanting to make Kanou pleased with him. He wanted to be loved by the one person who really never would."

"That's why you were so important to him, Haise," Itori said, wiping not-so-discreetly at her eyes. "You never knew what he could do, what power and influence he had, but you loved him anyways. And that was the best thing you could've ever done for him."

Haise could see their eyes, watery behind their glasses, as they both turned towards him and smiled. When they spoke, it wasn't in unison, but it was the same words, and that seemed to take the weight of the world off his shoulders.

"Thank you, Kaneki Ken, or Sasaki Haise. Thank you for loving our boy for who he was, and for letting him love you."

Haise started to cry.
BAM! LOOK AT THAT! I said the chapter would be out early morning! I don't lie!

(It's 3:01 AM where I am.)

This is where things start to get a little happier for Haise/Ken. It's going to be a bittersweet ending, after all.

The next chapter will be up... probably later today! It's the last official chapter-- the others are just the letters. There'll be five, and probably in this order: Saiko, Shirazu, Urie, Mutsuki, and Haise/Ken.

Two days after Hide was buried, Haise received a call from Arima, which was odd enough in itself. If Arima wanted to see him, especially lately, he would just drop by.

Haise answered, nonetheless, balancing the phone between his ear and his shoulder while he mixed together the eggs, salt, soy sauce, and sugar in a bowl for the rolled omelettes.

"Haise. Have you seen the news today?"

"No," Haise answered honestly, frowning. "Was I supposed to watch the news today?"

"Go turn on the news."

"I'm in the middle of cooking breakfast," Haise said, wondering what the strained note in Arima's voice was caused by. "Is it important, or can I do it later?"

"Haise. Go turn on the news."

"Alright, I'm going," Haise said, setting down his bowl and chopsticks and going into the living room, where Mutsuki was reading quietly, asking Urie about something he didn't understand, and Saïko and Shirazu were watching some television program or other. "Shirazu, will you change it to the news? Arima-san, what news channel?"

"Any of them," Arima informed. "They're all playing the same thing."

Haise shrugged, but Shirazu's sharp hearing had picked up on the conversation and he flipped the channel to the closest news station.

Haise's phone slipped out of his hand and hit the ground.

"Organizations protesting for ghoul's rights have sprung up all over the place," The female anchorman was saying animatedly. "After the release of Nagachika Hideyoshi's-- who claimed to be the infamous ghoul, Pierrot-- autobiography, which was leaked by an anonymous source early this morning to every news station in Tokyo. Multiple sources have supported the autobiography's authenticity, one of them being a source from the former Kanou General Hospital, who has requested that his identity not be revealed. Our source has confirmed the timeline of the
autobiography is concrete, and that Doctor Kanou Akihiro, associated with the organ transplant scandal five years back, did indeed have a son, off-record! Nagachika Hideyoshi is also listed as a First Class Ghoul Investigator in the CCG’s online database, which is open to the public, and his status is deceased-- deceased by only a few days, and it says that he died honorably in battle. The Commission of Counter Ghoul refuses as of yet to give a statement-- make of that what you will, folks!"

"Maman...?" Saiko asked, after a moment of silence. "Papa's autobiography... doesn't the CCG have the only copy?"

Haise's fingers itched to light a cigarette, or to maybe bang his head against a wall until he fell unconscious. The latter was growing more and more appealing.

"Uta and Itori, they probably had a copy. But I can't believe... no, actually, I can believe they would do it.

Feeling numb, Haise picked up the phone and said, "Arima-san, is what the newscaster saying true? Has Hide's autobiography been leaked?"

"It has," there was shouting and noise in the background of Arima talking, and Haise thought he heard one ask for a comment. Reporters? "The press will probably be trying to break in to the gated community the Chateau is located in to get your statements, so watch out for that. Also, you and the Quinx have already been cleared of suspicion, so don't worry about that. The leak came from somewhere outside the CCG. It was probably Nagachika's family."

"Ah... I... see." Haise gave himself a moment in silence to collect himself. "Thank you for the warning, Arima-san."

"Another thing-- don't give comments to the press, it's like throwing fuel onto the fire. They'll twist your words, Haise. Pull down your curtains, too, because they'll snap photos through the windows. Be cautious in general. Anything you say or do can impact the CCG's current social standing."

"Are we not going to say anything?" The idea didn't sit well with Haise. It was cowardly, like running away from an issue. And he had run away from his problems enough-- he was done with running.

"I didn't say that," there was a car door slamming, and then Arima muffledly thanking someone. "We'll be holding an emergency press conference, at some point. You'll need to be there, and it might be good to have the Quinx there too. Since you're all explicitly mentioned in Nagachika's autobiography. All you need to do is answer questions for the press."

There was the sound of a car horn honking, long and loud, and a voice that sounded suspiciously like Akira's shouting, "I will run you over if you don't move, you damned journalists!"

"Was that Akira-san?"

"It was," Arima confirmed, almost grimly. "She came to pick me up. I'm having a difficult time leaving my residence, since there's a hoard of journalists outside. But Haise, keep watching the news. Nagachika's autobiography wasn't the only thing that was unexpectedly released today."

Haise obediently turned to the television, and his eyes widened like saucers behind his glasses.

"And with that, folks, lets move onto another source backing the autobiography's authenticity-- Best-selling author Takatsuki Sen! She also released her final work, King Bileygr, today, over six weeks earlier than the official release date!" The male anchorman had taken over the conversation. "She
held a press conference earlier this morning, and folks, you'll never believe what she revealed! Takatsuki Sen is a ghoul!"

Oh shit.

The screen went blank for a moment before it flashed to a very raucous crowd, all shouting questions to none other than Takatsuki Sen, sitting at a conference table on a stage with a wide grin. One of her eyes was blatantly a kakugan, gleaming a proud black-and-red.

"This is an offering to the One-Eyed King, and a token to Nagachika-kun, who will always be in my memory, and that of the ghoul community!" Takatsuki (Eto, Haise's mind whispered) proclaimed. "A symbol of hope for all of my lonely comrades who thirst for blood and flesh! For those like me, who were born wrong!" She spread her arms wide, like an offering for an embrace. "This is my hope, that it will be the catalyst to create a good world for ghouls! A world where ghouls can live openly and freely, instead of oppressed by the CCG! I'm sure you all have heard about the other book that will no doubt be a catalyst in changing the world-- the autobiography of Nagachika Hideyoshi, better known by his alias, Pierrot! I can confirm it's authenticity, and guarantee that it will be a ground-shaker in the world of catalysts!"

Haise felt a migraine coming on, throbbing behind his eyes.

"I'll take your silence as a confirmation that you've seen the news," Arima intoned. "I know it was supposed to be your day off, but you're all being called in. Her confession-- and later, her arrest by us-- has caused ripples that just keep spreading. Riots have begun to spring up everywhere, and we're swamped trying to contain them. Our lines are on the verge of being taken down completely by the sheer number of calls we've been receiving."

"What is... the ratio of those that support Takatsuki?" Haise managed to ask. "How many support us?"

How many support Hide?

"The ratio of those that support her and those that continue to call for a greater punishment for ghouls is about seventy-five to twenty-five." Arima paused for a moment. "The numbers are fluctuating in Takatsuki's favor as we speak. Nagachika's autobiography is strongly influencing it, and people are making their... varied opinions known to the CCG."

"I see," Haise said, but internally his mind had gone into overdrive, trying to make sense of everything. "We'll meet you at the Headquarters, then."

The line went dead.

It took two more days to get the riots calmed down, and even then it was simply because the CCG promised a conference with the media. But Haise's mind was otherwise occupied.

The CCG had been only too happy to declare the laboratory workers in Kanou's remaining lab as
'felons guilty of crimes against humanity, conspiring against humanity and aiding/or siding with ghouls, punishable by death'. Kanou was the only one to be arrested. The others would have their sentences carried out immediately, with on-sight termination.

The raid hadn't been postponed, even with the raids. There was too much danger in waiting-- Kanou could switch laboratories at any time, and on that basis, Haise swinging his quinque with narrowed eyes, dressed in all black and slaughtering people in lab attire left and right. Even his coat was black, because he hadn't had the time to buy a new white coat.

There was no more hesitation before he killed, and he hated to see it, but there wasn't any hesitation in the kids' movements, either. A fire was burning behind their eyes, calling for the blood of the people that their surrogate father had been devoted to wiping out.

Haise wasn't any better. His soul sang for the blood of these people, Hide's enemies, and his eyes were as cold and dead as corpses as he slaughtered person after person, leading the charge into the basement of the facilities. There were no ghouls, no Aogiri Tree guards, no guards at all. It was like child's play to himself and the kids, who were braced to fight S-Ranked and stronger ghouls, like Triple Blades and Naki. This was like squashing ants.

The other squads steered clear of them. They were far, far ahead, and the only squad that almost kept up with them was the Suzuya Squad, lead by Juuzou, who's bright smile was gone for once. He seemed perfectly at ease killing other humans, if not exactly happy about the lack of strong opponents.

Slash, slash. Blood sprayed, staining his already blood-dampened coat, and some splashed onto his glasses. Haise paid it no mind, throwing a lab assistant to the ground with his rinkaku so hard that she bent at the spine and lay like that in death. The red tendrils spanned behind him like a fan, clearing his sides and protecting his sides (watching out for the blind spots in the kids defense) while his quinque cut down person after person. The hallways of the lab looked like something from a horror movie, gore-stained and blood-spattered. The scent hung in the air, urging him on as his kakugan flickered to life, despite the fact that he wasn't hungry. He was too angry to be hungry-- the anger ran through his veins like blood, burning away all other emotion until nothing was left but his blood-lust.

They arrived at a fork in the corridor, and Haise called out, "Juuzou! I'll take left, you take right!"

Juuzou, who wasn't far behind them, swinging his scythe like the grim reaper, gave Haise a bright smile as he disemboweled a man and left him screaming.

"Okay, Haise~!"

Without another word, Haise led the kids down the hallway, and was surprised by Shirazu's sudden, "Wait, Sassan!"

Haise turned to him, finding that his eyes were closed, a hand held up. "I hear somethin'. It sounds like... machines? A beepin'. Over an' over."

Haise frowned, straining his own ears, but found that he couldn't pick up on the sound. Shirazu's hearing really was remarkable.

"Understood, Shirazu. I'll approach carefully. Urie, you sweep that room with Mutsuki," Haise pointed to the room to their left, "and Shirazu, you sweep that one with Saiko. I'll take the one at the end of the hall."
After receiving four solemn nods, Haise turned and approached the door quietly. It was made of metal, and he found that it was too strong for him to break down with his bare hands, for which there was only one explanation: it was quinque steel.

His rinkaku dug into the edges of the door and it splintered, metal shattering as Haise flung the door inward. It slammed against the wall and crumbled into a million pieces, as if it was made glass. The fragments flew across the room-- some tore into his skin, burying themselves deep until his regeneration kicked them out and sealed the wounds, within the span of two heartbeats.

Inside the hospital-esque room, a woman was pointing a gun at him.

"These are the only two experiments that survived," She hissed. "I won't let you trap us in this birdcage any longer, Dove. I'll kill you here and now, and save Doctor Kanou's work."

She fired, once, twice, three times. Haise caught all of the bullets, and the skin on his hands became burned and bloody. They healed slower than Haise expected, and out of curiosity, he inspected one of them to find it was coated in a thick, clear, glossy substance.

RC Cell Suppressants.

He dropped the bullets in disgust and stepped forward, ready to kill the woman, but then her words rang through his mind and he halted, his hand covering the muzzle of the gun.

"What do you mean, experiments?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you interested in the Doctor's work for, Dove?"

Haise smiled coldly. "I'm one of his 'experiments' myself. Kaneki Ken, don't you remember? And one of his other 'experiments' was my partner, Nagachika Hideyoshi." His hand tightened on the gun until the metal crumpled. "So you could say that I'm quite... interested, in his experiments. So then, won't you tell me?"

She snorted. "You're his favorite prototype. I'll tell you if I'm going to die anyways. Maybe then you'll finally realize the oppression you're under, and what a fool you are to not follow Doctor Kanou."

Oppressed? I know I'm oppressed. I'm a half-ghoul. I kill my own kind and cannibalize, no matter what I eat. I live under a strict set of rules, and if I break them, I'll be subdued or killed by my own family.

But at least I chose this life, as a Dove. I have more freedoms than you can ever imagine. I have friends and family. But I never chose to be a ghoul. Kanou will pay-- for me and for Hide, and for all of the other lives he's ruined.

"You should know, what with your relationship to Experiment Number 49, but these experiments are special." Her eyes gleamed with a manic light that made bile rise in Haise's throat. "They're bred to be the best of the best! Natural half-ghouls! Able to consume human food, and produce RC Cells! We weren't able to get as many infants this time as the initial experiment, because the egg donor died, but two are enough. We're keeping the girl, this time, to harvest eggs when she comes of age, and the cycle can start again!"

Infants? Eggs? Don't tell me...

"Two are enough to do what?" Haise growled.
"Remove the kakuhou of one, that's a different RC Cell Type, and implant it into the other," The woman said it like he was stupid. "What else would we do? Keep them both?"

_It's just like Hide's autobiography. They breed children for spare parts._

The woman was dead, her head torn off in an instant, before she could say any more. Haise's hands were covered in the crimson liquid, but he didn't care.

_I'll exterminate the experiments now. I'll save them from Kanou's grasp, and from this wrong world._

Haise walked to the space where what appeared to be two glass boxes lay, almost side-by-side. Inside were two squirming, bundled up, blanket-wrapped shapes that were no doubt infants. He found that the beeping noise was coming from the two heart monitors, beeping in synchrony.

_I'll make the kills short and swift. They won't suffer at all._

He paused at the foot of the first crib (cage), which was labeled _Experiment 357_. The one beside it was labeled _Experiment 358._

_Seven and eight, huh. Lucky numbers for unlucky children-- how fair is that? Then again, this world isn't fair, is it? But the least they could have done is given them names. Nobody deserves to be nameless._

Haise pulled a hand back, ready to shatter the incubator's side to give him access to the infant, but he froze.

Two sets of brown eyes, as brown and warm as chocolate, stared up at him. They seemed too intelligent for such small bodies, but that wasn't why Haise had froze.

_It's like Hide's staring at me._

_They've got his eyes. As if they're his kids. They-- they're his siblings, aren't they?_ 

_I can't kill them._

"I'm not a child-killer," Haise said, his eyes hot and his lungs empty of breath. He slumped to his knees and pressed his forehead against the incubator's base. _"I'm not a child-killer."_

"Sasaki? Is something wrong?" Urie, the first to finish sweeping the room he'd been assigned to with Mutsuki, asked from the door, sounding impatient. "Suzuya-san is waiting for us."

Haise didn't say a word, and after a short moment of silence, Mutsuki set a hand on Urie's shoulder and they exchanged glances. Mutsuki entered the room, and Urie waited at the door.

Mutsuki approached Haise quietly, sheathing his knives. When he approached, Haise merely pointed at the incubators, and Mutsuki's face paled.

"Urie. There are infants."

"Shit." Urie cursed. "So what was in Hide-san's autobiography was true, then. Experiments on children."

"We can't kill them," Mutsuki said quietly, pressing a hand to the side of the second infant's incubator. "We're supposed to though, aren't we? Our orders were no survivors."

"I'm making a call to Arima-san," Haise said, reaching a hand to his earpiece. "Watch the door,
"Ha~ise~!" Juuzou skipped into the room, swinging his scythe in a terrifyingly careless manner. "What's taking so long, hmm? Washuu-san's getting im~pa~tient~!"

That's right. Washuu Matsuri has command of this operation.

Juuzou stopped, his red eyes wide and child-like but completely serious.

"Babies?" He was next to Mutsuki in an instant, pressing his hands and face against the glass. "Wow! They're so tiny! Like little kittens!"

Juuzou... he might have killed these infants once. But now, he wouldn't... I can trust him.

"Juuzou," Haise said quietly, urgently. "I am not going to kill children, orders or not. Do you understand?"

Juuzou offered him a smile, his stitches gleaming brightly against his pale skin. "I understand perfectly! You want me to distract the big-shot while you contact Arima for ownership rights, right~?"

Haise remembered asking him, once, just after he had become a ghoul investigator, why people thought so ill of Juuzou. A handful of fellow investigators were wary of him, some even afraid and disgusted, but Juuzou had always been sweet in Haise's eyes. Child-like, but not innocent or ignorant. He loved pets and children, and had drug Haise to the zoo once.

Haise had bought him a stuffed giraffe and a balloon, and Juuzou had told him, "Because I used to be a monster, Haise. Then someone gave me a conscience. But just because I'm different now doesn't mean that the impression I left first will ever fade." He had paused, and licked at his ice-cream. "Human relationships are chemical reactions. Once you have a reaction, you can never return to your previous state of being."


Juuzou gave him a too-wide smile.

"Leave it to me! I'll keep Washuu-san occupied!" He turned to Hanbee, who had watched his mentor's exchange silently. "You'll help me, won't you, Hanbee?"

"Of course, Suzuya-senpai!" Hanbee replied immediately, and was dragged along behind Juuzou as he raced back down the bloodstained hallways, towards where Washuu Matsuri was no doubt slowly making his way towards them.

Haise made the call to Arima, his earpiece humming with static for a brief moment.

"Haise. Is something wrong? Have you called for a report? Doctor Kanou has been located and arrested already, if that's what you were asking about."

"No, it wasn't," Haise replied, quietly but urgently. "But Arima-san, I've found something else."

"You seem to be a trouble magnet, Haise. Alright, what is it?"

Haise, in a low, urgent tone, explained the situation to him while the Quinx guarded the door, Mutsuki and Urie filling in Saiko and Shirazu what had happened.
Arima was silent for a few heartbeats.

"I don't have unlimited power, Haise. I can't make things happen at the drop of a hat."

"I know that," Haise admitted. "But you have enough political power to stand against Washuu Matsuri on equal grounds. I don't." His voice cracked a little. "Please, Arima-san. I'm not a child-killer. I won't murder innocent babies."

"Arima, Haise," A new voice broke into their conversation. It was Akira. " Those 'glass cages' that you've described are incubators. They regulate the temperature around the infants. If they're broken, the infants may well die."

"I see. Thank you for the information, Akira," Arima intoned. "Alright, Haise. You can have... 'custodial rights' over the infants. I'll give you my permission to be exempt from orders, and to spare their lives. Remove them from the incubators and return to Mission Control." Arima paused. "But whether they live or die isn't up to any of us. It's up to them."

"I know. I understand," Haise exhaled. "Thank you, Arima-san."

They'll live. They're fighters, just like Hide.

Arima didn't say anything, but Haise's comm line went dead, and he gave another sigh of relief.

They're safe. For now, they're safe.

Juuzou had reappeared in the room, just in time for Haise to break open the incubators. Quick as lightning, Juuzou was holding one of them in his hands with surprising gentleness, spinning around and holding the infant out at arms distance, laughing.

"It's so little! Look, Haise, it's smiling! It doesn't have any teeth!" When the baby let out a peal of laughter, Juuzou echoed it, delightedly. "Haise! Haise, it laughed! Do I smell good to you, too, wittle Toothless?" Juuzou crooned at the infant.

Haise wasn't quite sure what Juuzou meant by smelling good (an inside joke?), but he had a feeling it was more than just the one of the odd investigator's strange whims.

"Arima-san is kinder than he seems," Mutsuki said quietly, and Haise realized that Arima had broadcasted their conversation to the kids' earpieces, too. "Akira-san, too. They really care about you, Sasaki."

I know. I'm lucky to have so many people care about me, aren't I?

When Haise walked down the halls, the kids guarding his sides, shielding the infants from the bloodstained, corpse-ridden scene, he didn't need a heart monitor.

They're just like Hide. They've got his eyes, everything from the color to the intelligence, and they've got his laugh. They're fighters. They'll make it.
Even so, the two tiny hearts, and the two tiny sets of lungs, beating and breathing in unison, were a welcome reassurance.

Maman was truly amazing when he chose to be, Saiko thought, watching as he faced down Washuu Tsuneyoshi, Yoshitoki, and Matsuri, all while unflinching. It was as if he was on trial, all eyes on him.

"First Class Sasaki Haise," Tsuneyoshi said, his old voice croaky and weak. "What were you thinking, sparing the lives of Kanou's experiments?"

Haise lifted his chin, meeting his gaze levelly. "I was thinking that such small children didn't deserve to die. They may be Kanou's experiments, but they haven't been corrupted by him yet. They're innocents."

"They're ghouls, are they not?" Matsuri said flatly. "They've probably killed countless people already, by consuming human meat. They aren't innocent. They're killers, or they'll grow up to be."

"That isn't true," Haise replied, voice perfectly even and posture impeccable. "They're only half ghoul. And according to Kanou's notes and Hide's autobiography, natural born half-ghouls can sustain off of only human food, with no ill side effects, though in order to be truly healthy they do need a supply of RC Cells. But even then, Hide's research into a synthetic meats would mean that nobody needs to be harmed for the children to be fed. RC Cells can be drawn from donors, and fed directly to the infants in bottles."

Yoshitoki spoke up now, eyes much softer and kinder than his father's and his son's.

"Your explanation is plausible," he accepted. "But why should we spare children who could one day be a grave threat to humanity? Even if they're innocent now, they won't always be bright-eyed children who are wet behind the ears. One day, they'll be able to use their kagune, and pose a serious threat to humanity."

Haise's tone was completely even, and just respectful enough to be talking to a superior. "On a personal view, I believe that their lives should be spared simply because they are children. There isn't any use in hypothesizing about what they might do, because there's always a chance that they won't do as we predict." Haise paused, for just a heartbeat's span of time. "On a professional view, I would like to point out why I am alive at the moment. I was the victim of Doctor Kanou-- aren't these children the same as I am? More human, in fact, because they can consume normal food still, whereas I cannot. They'll be powerful one-eyed ghouls someday, that's true, but wouldn't you rather have two more powerful half-ghouls on the side of humanity?"

His eyes narrowed, just a little, and it sounded like there was a threat in his voice. "With the way that people are voicing their opinions, which are currently an estimated eighty-to-twenty in terms of siding with ghouls versus the CCG, if the information that the CCG murdered two infants, half-ghoul or not, leaked... it wouldn't end well, on our end. The riots have just calmed down to a manageable
level." Haise managed to look perfectly innocent. "Not that I would ever imagine doing such a horrendous thing, of course. I'm nothing but your loyal quinque, to use as you like."

Though the sentence unnerved Saiko (Maman had essentially just called himself nothing more than a weapon to use and manipulate) it had the desired effect on the board of Washuus.

"Say we were to accept your... proposition," Yoshitoki said the word carefully. "Who would care for these children? The Junior Academies already have their hands full with human children. They won't be able to care for half-ghoul children, who would need special care."

"I would take care of them," Haise replied, without hesitation.

"You're decision is being made based on an emotional attachment to their relative, Nagachika Hideyoshi, and spontaneous, emotional decisions are not acceptable," Tsuneyoshi rasped.

"I beg your pardon, but this isn't a spontaneous decision," Haise refuted. "I am twenty-three, of sound mind and body, and I have a stable home. I have a steady income that is more than enough to support two growing children. I am perfectly able to raise two children." He paused, briefly, then added, "I'm also very familiar with the set of rules they'd need to live by, and the consequences for breaking them. I'm the only one who could teach them how to control their kakugan, and how to use their kagune."

Yoshitoki nodded. "I'll accept your basis as sound. I'd like to dismiss you and your squad, First Class Sasaki. We'll call you back with an answer before the day ends. Thank you for your time."

With that, Haise bowed and exited, with Saiko, Shirazu, Mutsuki, and Urie following him. Saiko wondered why they'd even been requested to come, too-- nobody had even spared a glance at them.

"That was amazing, Sasaki," Mutsuki admitted, as soon as the large doors to the Washuu's chamber had shut. "I... I wouldn't have been able to stand up the them like that."

Haise slumped down onto one of the benches in the hallway, exhaling and seeming to deflate. He had lost the fearless, confident air, and looked more like the Maman Saiko knew.

"I was terrified," Haise admitted, and he sighed, pulling at his tie. "I'm just glad I didn't stutter."

Urie had gone to one of the vending machines, and now he offered the can of coffee to Haise, who accepted it with a grateful smile.

"Ah, thanks, Urie." He cracked the can open, and Saiko noticed that his hands were shaking. "I really need this."

Footsteps became audible, and from the end of the hallway, Arima and Akira appeared. They'd been watching Haise speak with a panel of board judges, to help decide the fate of the infants. But because of their personal connection to Haise, they'd been dismissed.

"You spoke well, Haise," Arima praised, in the same flat tone as always, but with a small smile.

"You're arguments were all logical and concise," Akira agreed. "You'd make a fine lawyer."

Papa would have made a good lawyer, I think.

It seemed like Haise had thought the same thing, because his smile was just a little sad.

"No, I wouldn't be able to hold up under the pressure," Haise admitted. "Hide would, though. Hide
was always great under pressure."

There was a deep silence, and finally, Akira said, "Nagachika did always work well under pressure. Even when he was just an intern, he aced everything, always had a smile. I still can't believe he managed to hack into our database and change his records. I thought he looked like the assistant I had with Amon, but then, when I checked his profile, it was completely different." She shook her head with a fond smile. "He was a jack-of-all-trades."

"Expect instead of 'master of none' it seemed like he was 'master of all'," Saiko giggled. "Papa was great at everything-- except for romance sims. He sucked at those."

"He did a decent job wooing Haise," Arima shrugged. "Computer programs don't have emotions. Nagachika probably couldn't predict them as well as real people."

Mutsuki smiled. "He did, didn't he? Hide-san... it's still strange to think about him as Pierrot. He was... he was..."

"Dorky," Haise suggested. "Loyal. Sweet. Strong. Romantic. A nerd. A movie fanatic-- he even had Hannibal Lecter posters in his room, when we were in college."

"...dorky?" Urie echoed. "And, college?"

"Oh yeah, dorky. He learned English just so that he could understand the music-- He loved I Want It That Way, by the Backstreet Boys, especially." Haise's eyes widened fractionally. "Ah... I never told you all, did I? I... knew Hide as a kid."

"You mean, before you lost your memories?" Mutsuki asked curiously.

Haise nodded. "He was... my best friend, but he was so much more than that. Hide was... Hide. There's just no other way to put it." He opened his mouth, like he was going to say more, but the door swung open and Washuu Matsuri, looking very irritated, stalked out.

"Sasaki. They have your answers," Matsuri spit the words with venom, and walked away angrily.

"That was... fast..." Haise swallowed, draining the rest of the coffee with shaking hands before he composed himself and threw away the can. "I guess... I'll go, then."

_I want to go with him, to support him. I couldn't support Papa-- I want to support Maman._

But Saiko remained in place beside Shirazu, watching her surrogate mother walk away, with a heavy heart. Because she knew better than to follow him.

Some things needed to be done alone.

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Haise emerged, less than a half-hour later, looking absolutely terrified.

"Haise. What happened?" Akira asked immediately, just a half-second before everyone else.
"I have custody," Haise whispered, the terrified look never leaving his face. "According to my
Family Registry, they're my kids. Not adopted, because then Kanou would need to be listed as the
biological father. They're my kids, Mom."

Akira didn't protest her nickname, for once.

"Why do you look so scared, then?" Arima asked, mildly concerned and mildly amused.

"Because now I legally have two children," Haise said, eyes the size of dinner plates. "Two infants,
that don't even have names yet. Oh my god, what if I do something wrong, what if I accidentally
hurt them, they're so tiny--"

Arima laughed. Actually, physically laughed, and that alone was enough to stop Haise's freak-out in
it's tracks, because he was certain that hell had just frozen over and the apocalypse was about to
begin.

"Haise, what happened to all that confidence that you showed the Washuus?" Arima's lips twitched
in what Haise knew to be a smile, and he continued. "You'll be fine. But now there are two children
waiting for you to pick them up from the Junior Academy, and it wouldn't be polite to keep them
waiting any longer."
Epilogue - Part 3

Chapter Notes

Okay! This is the very last 'real' chapter-- the only thing left are the letters! Oh, and @YODELS-- I said that the CCG would deal with Hide's identity in an interesting way, didn't I? Here's where they deal with it.

I mentioned back Amon and Haise/Ken being able to have that conversation, and here it is! The very last part of it, anyways.

Look! Hide's funeral picture, courtesy of nm@da!

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?
story_fbid=789741891160526&id=656446584490058

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Hide had changed the world, whether he knew it or not,* Haise thought, placing the flowers on the grave. They were bright, fresh sunflowers, and they stood out against the bleak grey grave with sharp contrast.

At his feet stood two children, barely old enough to walk on their own, holding onto the legs of his pinstripe slacks with small, chubby hands. They were just older than a year old now, and in their short lifespan the world had made a drastic change.

The riots had gotten so bad that the CCG was forced to pass new laws protecting ghouls, making exceptions, giving trials. The synthetic meat from Kanou's experiment that was then given to the CCG in Hide's letters had been made public knowledge, and RC Cell Drives had been set up worldwide, ran by volunteer groups like Red Cross. Ghoul attacks had gone down drastically in just twelve months, to a record low. Ghouls had the opportunity to receive monthly packages of the synthetic meat, with the biggest requirement being proof of identity, so that nobody received more than their share of food. A ghoul could apply for a Family Registry without fear, obtain legal citizenship, and have the opportunity to get a real job.

There were downsides to it. In order to obtain a Family Registry and monthly food, a ghoul had to have a record at the CCG, and have routine check-ups, to check RC Cell Count and ensure that they hadn't hunted. There was an official online database of all recorded ghouls, and some places refused to hire or house ghouls-- though, there were some that recruited ghouls, and the media called them the 'pro-ghoul' faction, which had over twenty-five percent of the population behind it.

Some jobs, like policing, firefighting, and medical care had also welcomed ghouls on as employees, though the CCG was not one of them. Policing and firefighting for the sheer strength and speed of ghouls, with the added bonus of regeneration, and medical care for a surprising reason: the ghoul's sense of smell and attunement to the scent of blood, able to find injuries that the naked eye couldn't spot.

That didn't mean that the CCG wasn't out of work, either-- too many ghouls were still hunting humans, and even the ones that didn't needed aide in integrating into human society. The CCG took charge of this.
And the laws weren't perfect. There were still loopholes that allowed for violence and discrimination against ghouls, and the kinks were slow to be worked out.

Haise led the metaphorical charge.

Sasaki Haise, or by his former name 'Kaneki Ken', had become a very famous person in society as of recently, as had Nagachika 'Kanou' Hideyoshi. Haise's because of his unique situation (legally he was still listed as a human, under 'species') of an artificial half-ghoulification, done without his consent, and Hide's because of the drastic changes he'd made in the world-- of course, his species was an added bonus in his fame. Their names were taught in schools as the people that had made the world change, along with Takatsuki Sen-- or, as she was also known, Yoshimura Eto.

Just because the One-Eyed Owl had joined up in the movement for changing the world, however, didn't mean that the other Aogiri Ghouls had-- though, most of them did. Tartara and Takizawa were still on the Wanted List, and were still an active threat to society. Naki and Three Blades still controlled portions of the Eighteenth Ward. And progress with them was slow and painstaking.

*But it was progress.*

There was a medal around Haise's neck, and it seemed heavier as he stared at the gravestone. It was Hide's medal, but as his only living relative (he'd tried to convince Uta and Itori to take it, but they had declined, saying that 'his spouse was the one to wear it') the medal was given to him.

The *Ryuukistu* Medal. The highest medal the CCG could ever award a person. Given to Hide (*with the accompaniment of a two-rank postmortem promotion-- and if anyone deserved to be a Special Class, it was Hide*), for giving his life to act as the catalyst for change. The entire exchange was done live, on the news, at one of the many press conferences that had been held over the years. Haise remembered it vividly-- it had been just a few days before the twins would hit the sixth-months old mark.

They hadn't actually had a birthday, and so Haise had given them the date he'd found them as their birth-date, the one that used to be his: December 20th. They hadn't had names, either, and with a little bit of help from just about everyone from Akira and Arima to Ui and Kuramoto, Haise settled on a set of names: Ryouta for the boy, and Sakura for the girl.

(*Haise picked names that both used the last kanji from Hide's name '良': 良立 and 咲良*)

"You were always so amazing, Hide," Haise mumbled, brushing his fingers across the gravestone. "Now, at least you got the recognition you deserve."

"Mama," the girl mumbled, tugging on the the leg of his pants. "Go home?"

The words were still faint and a little bit hard to understand, but Haise was used to the butchered toddler-speak. The name did bring a smile to his face though-- perhaps that it was Saiko's use of the French endearment, but the twins had picked up on it, and it had stuck. Haise let it happen without complaint; 'Mama' had been both of their first words, and he certainly wasn't going to protest the name they had given to him.

"Yeah, time to go home," Haise informed them, casting a glance to the sky. Dark grey clouds, heavy and wet, concealed the mostly-set sun. It looked like it was going to snow soon. "Sorry, Sakura, Ryouta. I lost track of time. We'd better hurry home, or it'll be bedtime."

Ryouta gave a tired shrug, and noting the tired lag in their steps Haise swung the two of them up, balancing them on his hip with a practiced ease.
Haise hated the snow.

Haise remembers vividly the night that the twins had first asked about their father. He was reading them a story, an old fairytale, and Ryouta had sleepily asked, "Mama, where's our Papa?"

Everybody in the room had frozen.

"Where did that come from?" Haise had tried to brush the question off.

"The other kids have two parents," Sakura had elaborated, just as sleepily. "But we don'. Saiko-nee talks about Papa sometimes. So where is he, Mama?"

*What am I supposed to tell them? 'Your father is the man that made you in a lab-- he's rotting away in prison now.' I'll be damned if I tell them that. It's not true. It's just like with Hide-- Kanou is nothing like a father to them, and it'll be over my dead body that he is.*

"He's..." Haise's eyes drifted to the framed photo on the wall, the day that seemed so long ago, of the award ceremony. Hide had his hands on the back of Haise's chair and was giving the camera that sun-bright smile that the twins could mimic without fail. "He's somewhere far away."

"Where?" Ryouta had pressed, yawning. "When will he come back?"

*Never,* Haise thought, and wondered how he was supposed to explain that to a pair of toddlers.

"Not... right now," Haise answered eventually. The vague answer seemed to sate their curiosity temporarily, and they crawled into his lap, still small enough to be held.

"What's Papa like?" Sakura asked, tugging on a strand of his snowy-white hair, twisting it in her fingers.

*It had never grown back in black.*

"He was... brave," Haise began, unsure of where to start. "And happy. He was always happy and smiling, like he was a sun in his own right."

"He was strong," Urie spoke up, eyes dark. "The strongest person I'd ever met."

"And he was admirable," Shirazu said, offering them a sad, shark-toothed smile. "The best teacher I'd ever had."

"He was kind," Mutsuki said firmly. "The kindest, most caring person I'd ever met, to this day."

"He was compassionate," Saiko said, and she swiped at her eyes to brush away tears. "Papa was loving."

"He was loved, just like you both are," Haise told them. But their eyes were already slipping closed,
They reminded Haise of Hide, as they grew. Golden-blonde hair with dark brown roots, brown eyes, a warm smile. They did everything early, be it crawling, talking, walking, or even reading—according to both Itori and Uta, at about the same pace Hide had.

Haise had honestly never done much about it— he praised them for it, nurtured them and encouraged them, but never sat fit to do anything more than that. And in the KG1 and KG2 years (Haise enrolled them in the reformed Junior Academy, now much improved, mostly due to the Quinx's efforts), nothing seemed too out of place. Haise knew this, because he was on the PTA board both years and participated in every event he could, along with ending up as the board president the second year. He figured that everything would be alright, even if they learned a little quicker than the others.

Until their first year in grade-school, when Haise was approached by Ryouta and Sakura's teacher during lunch, just after a PTA meeting had let out.

"Excuse me, Sasaki-san? May I have a moment of your time?" She asked him, perfectly polite. "It's about Ryouta-kun and Sakura-chan's progress."

"Of course," Haise said, even though he had a meeting that he should have been getting to. Arima would make up some excuse or other for him. "What's wrong? Are they struggling in a subject?"

"Oh no, it's nothing like that," the teacher assured him. "They're doing too well."

"Too... well?"

"Yes, that's right," she confirmed. "I was wondering if you'd ever thought about advancing them—that is, letting them skip grades?"

"Skip grades?" The thought was baffling and mildly concerning. "Wouldn't that cause issues in the social aspect of their lives? Stunt their development, emotionally?"

"I don't think it will," The teacher admitted. "It's early enough in the school year that it should be fine. There will probably be an adjustment period, but then I'd even make the guess they would fit in better with the older children." The teacher hesitated. "I'm sure you noticed, but they don't mesh very well with their peers. Well, that's not true-- they do, but not closely. They're friends with everyone, but best friends with no-one. I think that they would fit in better with children more intellectually on par with them."

"I'll ask them when we get home tonight and see what they think," Haise promised.

And he did, when they were eating dinner.

"Skip grades?" Urie echoed, confused, but neither Sakura nor Ryouta seemed bothered in the slightest.
"I'd like to," Ryouta said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, but Haise didn't have it in him to scold the boy for it. He would just scrub the stain out later. "Wouldn't you, Ra?"

Sakura nodded, swatting her twin's hand away from his mouth before he could wipe his mouth on his sleeve again.

"Don't do that, Ryou," She scolded, then continued. "I want to, too. The work is too easy, Mama."

"I wanna challenge," Ryouta agreed, then he tugged at Urie's shirtsleeve. "Those are good, aren't they, Urie-nii?"

"Challenges are good," Urie agreed, after a moment. "But make sure you're ready to skip grades first."

"It's a big step," Mutsuki agreed. "Don't feel like you're pressured into it."

"It's perfectly fine if you want to stay in your grade with your classmates," Saiko chimed.

Shirazu voiced his two cents, as well, as Haise sat down with a hot mug of coffee in his hands. "That's right. Ain't supposed to be something you'd leave yer friends behind for. If ya skip a grade, do it 'cause ya wanna."

Sakura smiled at them, and Ryouta echoed it, the beaming, charming smile that Hide had always worn.

"We know, Mutsuki-nii, Saiko-nee, Shirazu-nii. But we want to do it. Class isn't any fun if everything is too easy."

_They get more and more like you every day, Hide._

"They didn't skip one grade, but _three_ grades," Haise informed. "Anne was delighted, since the Third Grade classes are only two hallways away from the Fifth Grade classes. They even have the same recess period."

Uta and Itori seemed delighted with the news, and Touka, Nishiki, and Yomo seemed amused. Banjou seemed a mix between amazed and elated-- Haise recalled Banjou had never gone to a proper school, so such matters seemed to confuse or amaze him.

"They are your children," Touka said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "And his. Of course they'd be little brainiacs."

"Our grandbabies are growing into wonderful children," Itori said happily, plucking Uta's coffee from under his fingers and swapping it for her empty one. "Oh, bring them next time, Haise!"

"I promise I will, Itori," Haise agreed. "Sakura and Ryouta miss you all. They said to say hello, but since Ryouta's sick, I didn't want to bring them out."
"Is the brat feeling any better?" Nishiki asked, and Haise nodded, knowing not to take the term as an offense-- it was more of an endearment.

"Much. I'll tell him you asked, though. Saiko's watching them for me."

"Shouldn't you say she's spoiling them for you, Oniichan?" A new voice broke into the conversation, and Haise found himself staring at Hinami, twenty-three now and with a wedding band on her finger, beaming at them from the door, Ayato just behind her.

Haise remembered, fondly, Sakura throwing petals from a woven basket, and Ryouta holding a pillow with rings. He remembers walking Hinami down the isle in the place of her father, trying not to cry and failing miserably.

"Hina's right, she dotes on them," Ayato agreed. "You'll go home to find out they're all hopped up on sugar and playing video games past their bedtime."

"That only happened once," Haise said, but he didn't refute the claims. "Saiko promised not to do it again. And I left Shirazu there, too."

Touka just laughed, and Nishiki snorted.

"With how much of a doting mother you are, I'm surprised you let anyone watch them for you," Nishiki declared, swirling the last bits of coffee around in his cup absentmindedly.

"I'm a busy person, and the twins have plenty of capable and loving caretakers to babysit them when I'm away," Haise said, but he tried to avoid recalling the fact that he'd almost had a panic attack when he first left them with someone else. "Besides, I don't dote."

"You do, though, Kaneki-san," Banjou said, and Yomo, ever silent, nodded his agreement.

"You spoil 'em," Nishiki grinned.

"Like your one to talk," Haise muttered. "Don't you have to leave soon? Kimi-san gets angry if you stay out too late."

"Ah, shit-- is it already that late? Kimi's going to kill me!"

Haise still had flashbacks, sometimes. Nightmares were a nightly thing, but he didn't scream, anymore. He'd grown too used to them.

*Grown too used to coping on his own, now that Hide was gone. There was nobody to keep the nightmares away now, nobody to hold him after a bad one, nobody to dry his tears.*

*But that was okay, because Haise was strong enough to do it on his own.*

A lot of times, they weren't about his torture anymore. Instead, they were about Hide's death, and Haise would have preferred the dreams of torture. Because these dreams were always much worse.
He was holding Hide's body gently, cradling it, when Touka called out a warning and Eto strode down the stairs. She held up her hand.

"I'm alone. I came to talk with Kaneki Ken, or Sasaki Haise."

"Let her come," Haise said, his voice still raspy from crying.

Reluctantly, they did, and the Quinx watched her ghost over the stairs with footsteps as light as a wraith's. She halted just beside them, and of all the things to do, she bowed.

"I'm sorry. We'll retreat for today, and leave you to mourn in peace."

"Eeeetttoooo~!" T-Owl (Takizawa Seidou, Haise realized later) protested. "That's no fuuunnn! I want' their brain jam~!"

"Not today, Takizawa," Eto ordered sharply, then called out, "Tartara! We're leaving-- call for an immediate retreat!"

"Why would you do that?" Haise croaked. "Why would the One-Eyed Owl spare us to... mourn in peace?"

There were indentions in the bandages that gave the impression of a faint, sad smile.

"Because Furuta blackmailed me into doing this raid. I want equality, a good world for ghouls, but it won't happen in an extermination like this. And because... Nagachika-kun and I were alike. Maybe once, we were even something like friends. Even if it didn't work out for our friendship, he was the only other person who truly understands the horrors of being a natural one-eye." Eto blinked at him from behind her bandages, her eyes eerily mismatched. "He could have been something like my brother, if we hadn't had such different goals. Nagachika-kun was the closest thing I had to family, once, and I won't forget that."

And leaving him in confusion, she would sweep away, with her childish air and tattered pink cloak.

On good nights, that's all he would dream, and after a cigarette (or two, depending on the day), he could go back to sleep. Rarely, they'd be about centipedes and severed fingers and toes, and Haise would wake up counting backwards from one thousand by sevens, and then he'd go and smoke two (sometimes it took more) before he could fall back to sleep.

Sometimes, he saw Hide die in his arms again. After that, he'd go downstairs and make coffee, and sit on the balcony until morning, and his entire pack would be gone, and he'd need a shower to wash off the reek of smoke so that nobody found out about his habit.

(The torture was so much better.)
One rainy spring morning, Haise set off with a fresh bouquet of flowers. Sometimes, after a particularly bad nightmare or tough day, he visited Hide's grave alone, and someone would watch the kids for him. Who in particular, it varied. Once, it was Ui, and a handful of times, Kuramoto. More often, it was his older children that would volunteer, or Arima and Akira, or Touka and Yomo, or Hinami and Ayato, or Itori and Uta. Roma and Nico had both volunteered, but Haise had politely declined unless somebody more responsible (and less psychotic) was with them. Eto had also offered her services, but Haise declined her, too. He would rather not have her watch his young, impressionable children. Sometimes, Banjou volunteered, though he had his hands full with the Sixth Ward, and after they had returned from America, Tsukiyama and his purple-haired servant Kanae had both volunteered once or twice.

Haise was a little bit hesitant to allow them to watch the twins, as well, because whenever he did let them he always came back to find them in brand-new and frighteningly expensive clothes, and it always took a few days before Ryouta and Sakura would stop using seemingly-random words in their speech that appeared to be either German or French.

Today, it was Arima and Akira. Haise hoped that when he returned they wouldn't be teaching them how to throw knives with an archer's precision-- because that's what happened last time, and it resulted in a broken window and Haise dragging not only Ryouta and Sakura over to apologize to the neighbors, who were already used to the family's odd antics at this point, but also Arima and Akira. And Haise would prefer not to repeat that ordeal.

Haise entered the cemetery quietly, holding his umbrella tightly in his hand and the bouquet in the other. The rain fell against the umbrella, and sometimes the wind would blow some onto his clothes, but he didn't mind so much. His current case weighed in his mind heavily, and he'd had the nightmare (Hide dying in his arms) again last night. There were dark circles under his eyes, but Haise didn't mind. Visiting Hide would clear his mind, like it always did.

There was a bench that was sat back-to-back with another bench, just across from Hide's grave, and Haise sat down on it, ignoring the slightly damp stone. There was someone sitting quietly on the bench opposite him, which wasn't all that surprising, but what did surprise him was the fact that the person spoke to him.

"Eyepatch. It's been a long time." The voice was deep, but not quite as low as Yomo's. It made faint memories stir in the back of Haise's mind, memories from years and years ago, when he was just turned into a ghoul and he fought an investigator for the first time. "Or, I suppose I should call you by the name you've chosen, Sasaki Haise."

"You are..." I thought I killed you. I didn't? How... how did your arm grow back? I cut it off! Didn't I? A weight that he didn't know he was holding was released from Haise with his next breath. "Amon Koutarou."

The man, who had eyebrows that were strangely curled at the ends and a huge-shouldered, muscular build, inclined his head.

"That is my name, though I suspect it isn't the alias the CCG has given me." Amon sighed. "For such a famous Special Class Investigator, you sure are hard to track down."

Haise thought it was a faintly creepy statement. "I like my children to have privacy. Just because Hide and I are very public figures doesn't mean that they shouldn't have a normal childhood. They deserve that, and I'm going to give it to them."

At least, as normal as it can get.
"You sound like a good father," Amon said, and Haise thought that he might have been smiling. "And your children adore you. They follow you everywhere-- that's why it's taken me so long to approach you. I apologize it had to be during such a private moment, but this is the first moment I could catch you when you aren't on the clock or with your children."

"I like to spend every moment I can get with them," Haise said carefully. "But that's a bit besides the point. Why did you track me down? And, I do hate to ask, but why aren't you...?"

"Dead?" Amon supplied, with a wry smile. "I owe that to Doctor Kanou, I suppose. He made me into a monster. And then, much later on, Nagachika saved me. He helped me to find... food... through means that I didn't have to kill or cannibalize ghouls, and he introduced me to some good people. Admittedly, I... didn't know him as Pierrot for very long, though he was my assistant at the CCG."

"I know about him being your assistant," Haise said simply. "I've read the records. I would like it if you would elaborate a little on the other part, though."

"Of course," Amon nodded, and Haise saw a faint glimmer at his throat. "A cross? I had been... cannibalizing, for years, to avoid killing. But Nagachika recruited me, more or less, when I confronted him, and he arranged a new life for me. One of the people he introduced me to, one of his followers, she showed me a..."

Haise had gotten the gist of it now.

"A suicide hot-spot. I understand now, I think. But that doesn't answer my first question," Haise continued, adjusting his grip on his umbrella and setting the flowers down on his lap. "Why did you track me down?"

"I'm not in Pierrot's group anymore," Amon admitted. "I left after he died. I have... bad blood, with Rabbit and Daughter Ghoul-- or rather, Yotsume-- and as much as I respect them for all they've done for me, I can't forgive them for killing my mentor. But I do owe much, including my sanity, to Nagachika. And as a favor to him, I came to warn you."

"Warn me? About what?" Haise asked, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing his cigarettes and lighter. He paused with the cigarette already in his mouth and his lighter halfway to it. "Ah, excuse me. Do you mind?"

Amon waved a hand, and Haise continued on, lighting his cigarette and taking a long drag. It helped to soothe his growing headache.

"The Washuu Clan-- Tsuneyoshi and Matsuri in particular. They're working with V, an organization striving for 'balance' between ghouls and humans." Amon's hands fisted, and his eyes were fiery with anger. "The Washuus are working with ghouls. And V-- V is a danger. Although their experimentation has halted now, with the new peace, they experimented in creating half-ghouls and ghouls." His voice was rising in urgency, now. "I'm going to bring justice to them. I'm going to fix this wrong world."

Haise didn't answer him right away. He watched the tip of his cigarette glow red as he took another drag and held it in until his lungs burned in protest.

"I already knew that. Amon-san, have you ever contacted Akira-san? She'd like to know you're alive."

Amon shook his head, eyes downcast. "I don't want her to see me like this. I'd rather her think that I
was dead, than to see me how I am now. To let her find out I'm just another monster."

"Amon-san, please allow me to give you some advice in return. This world is wrong. I know that, and I tried to change it on my own, once, and I didn't get far. I lost myself and my sanity in the process, and lost sight of what was really important-- those closest to me. I lied to myself and told myself that I was making a difference, that I was protecting those I loved by continuing down my dark path, and I think that the worst part about it was that I knew that I was just disillusioning myself. I wasn't protecting my loved ones at all. I was just hurting them." Haise paused, taking another drag off his burning cigarette and sighing an exhale of smoke. "One person isn't enough to change the world completely. Not even Hide did that, although he played a large part in it. Change only happens with time, and for this wrong world to change, it's going to take longer than I'll be alive. Much as I hate it, the world will probably only be truly, mostly good, at the rate it's going, when Sakura and Ryouta are grown and have children of their own. Many more people will be needed to help steer the world along than just you."

"What are you saying, Sasaki-san?" Amon growled, with narrowed eyes. One of them was the color of coal and blood. "Are you saying that I should just give up?"

"Not in the slightest," Haise said, flicking ash off the end of his cigarette. "Forgive my bluntness, but I'm saying don't fool yourself into thinking you can do it alone. You can't. You won't make change happen on your own, because it's physically not possible. I'm saying go and find your loved ones, and reconnect with them while you still have time. Because we're all on a timer, Amon-san, and nobody knows when we're going to run out of time. Don't die before you reconnect with the people you love. It'll only hurt you and them more in the end." Haise gave another drag on his cigarette, eyes dulled. "Don't make my mistakes. Don't live in ignorance, blissful though it may be."

"I want to make this world right," Amon protested. "The only way to do that is--"

"--is to realize the truth that you can't do it all at once," Haise said, patiently. "We're all going to die someday. Do you really want Akira-san to mourn you early, for no good reason? She misses you. Don't make her unhappy. Go and make her happy while you can, before it's too late."

"You're thinking is morbid," Amon said, sighing, leaning his head against the damp stone of the bench. "If we're all going to die anyways, then what's the point in it all?"

"For me, it's protecting and spending as much time with the people I love as I can, and to ensure they'll be happy and remember me fondly when I'm gone," Haise said, flicking another piece of ash to the ground. "But don't get me wrong. I don't intend to spend any longer in this wrong world than I must."

"You'd commit suicide?" Amon gave a short, harsh laugh. "That goes against everything you just said."

"Not suicide," Haise corrected. "I wouldn't do that. Hide gave his life so that I could live, after all, and Sakura and Ryouta still need me, as do my other children. I won't leave them until they can stand on their own feet, proudly, and help change this world. But when they can, well..."

Haise and Amon were both silent. Haise watched his cigarette burn out, and with a twitch of his fingers, he flicked the last pieces of ash away.

"I intend to die in such a way that I'll be remembered by everyone, fondly, and I'll help give this world a push in the right direction, while I'm at it. But I won't keep Hide waiting."
Thank you all, so much, for reading *The Last Laugh!* It's been a long ride, and I wouldn't have ever been able to finish this up without all of your encouragement!

Oh, and hey! That medal? That's actually a real thing in the TG universe! Ishida wrote a little bit about it, and also drew it! Here's the link:

Dear Saiko,

I never, ever want you to see what's in this letter, and that's how I'm starting every single one of these. Because if you see this letter, then it means something went wrong and I'm probably dead. That, or something else is preventing me from talking to you face-to-face, and this is the next best thing. I'm only writing these letters because I've got a terrible feeling about the raid, and my instincts have never let me down before.

I'm sorry. I never meant for you to know I was Pierrot, but you were always so much smarter than anyone ever gave you credit-- I don't know why I was ever surprised that you saw through me. You aren't some lazy shut-in who didn't pay attention in class-- you're so much more than that.

You're rebutting my previous statement in your head. I know, because I know you, and when you look in the mirror, you don't see potential. You see failure, and that's not true in the slightest. I'm being brutally honest when I tell you that you can be someone great, if you really want to be. Every parent tells their children, "you can be anything you want to be" and I hate to say it, but they're lying. Not every kid can be a doctor or a scientist, or a politician.

But I'm going to tell it to you, and I swear that I'm not lying. You can be anything and anyone you want to be. You've got powers like the protagonists from your favorite animes and mangas, and you'd be the bonus character that gets unlocked at the end of a boss battle. And I know that my death might hurt now, but I'm glad that it hurts. Because that means that you're still brave enough to wear your heart on your sleeve in this messed-up world, and that takes bravery. So for every death that you go through, I hope that it hurts just like this. I never, ever want you to be numb to death, because even when someone calls you weak for crying, I'll know your strong and brave, and you'll make it through this stronger than before.

Want to know how I know?

Because you're strong. You're strong, and smart, and funny, and kind, and I don't care that I just wrote a run-on sentence because everything I said is true. I promise.

I just want to say a few more things, I promise.

Take care of your Maman for me, okay? He tends to withdraw into himself, blame himself for things that aren't his fault, and after I'm gone... it won't be pretty. I can tell you what it'll be like. He'll withdraw into himself, he'll blame himself for my death-- which certainly won't be his fault, probably only cry when he's alone, won't ever show what he thinks is his weakness-- his heart. He won't open up anymore. He might smile like he always does, but it won't be as bright, and his eyes will be colder, more distant. He'll get stronger, and try to protect everyone, spread himself too thin until there's just nothing left.

He'll try to hold the weight of the world on his own, but Saiko, he's not Atlas. He can't do it alone, and if he tries, he'll end up breaking.

So watch out for him. Don't pressure him to talk, because that'll only make him withdraw more. But if you see him breaking, don't try to hold him together. Let him break down and help him pick up the pieces, and give him a shoulder to cry on. Please, just make sure he's not alone.
He said, once, that my existence was something he depended on like his own heart, did you know that? He’s always been a sap.

And Saiko? Thank you, for not being afraid of me when you figured out who I was, and supporting me. Thank you for accepting me for who I was.

I love you. I’m sorry that you had to hear this through a letter.

Sincerely,

Kanon-Nagachika Hideyoshi, aka Pierrot
Dear Ginshi,

I never, ever want you to see what's in this letter, and that's how I'm starting every single one of these. Because if you see this letter, then it means something went wrong and I'm probably dead. That, or something else is preventing me from talking to you face-to-face, and this is the next best thing. I'm only writing these letters because I've got a terrible feeling about the raid, and my instincts have never let me down before.

I'm sorry. I never wanted you to find out I was Pierrot through a letter. But it's true: I am the ghoul, Pierrot, and I am Doctor Kanou Akihiro's son. Though, there wasn't any lost love between us-- he was my father biologically, and only biologically. The people that raised me are my parents, and they loved me more than he ever tried to.

My proof? I am-- or rather, if your reading this, was-- waging a war against Kanou. And why, you ask, was I doing that?

Because he said he'd kill you, Saiko, Mutsuki, and Urie. He said that he would kill my children and make Haise's life utter misery. All because I wouldn't follow his orders, and tried to sever my ties with him.

But that's not important right now, if I'm dead. What is important is that you know this: I never, ever just messed with your feeling, you and the others. I really enjoyed my time with you all. It was probably the happiest I've ever been.

I never lied about that.

Listen, Ginshi. You're a good guy. You love your sister, and you've supported her in your parents places, even when you were just a kid yourself. You're just like Saiko is-- you wear your heart on your sleeve, and after everything you've been through, that takes bravery.

Please don't ever stop. I don't care if you cry and others call you weak-- you're strong, you hear me? You care about your comrades, and that's why you make such a great Squad Leader.

In your head, you're saying, 'But I'm not a good Squad Leader'. Don't try to deny it. I know you are. I know you too well, Ginshi.

Well, stop it. Because you're lying to yourself, and that's never a good thing.

You're an amazing Squad Leader. One day, I hope that you can look at yourself and think that, too. Because even if you don't see it, I do. And sure, Urie has the potential to be a great Squad Leader, too, but do you know why you'll always be the better choice?

You make decisions based on your heart, not your head, and that's what makes you so great. So don't ever be like Washuu Matsuri-- don't be like me. Please don't ever see numbers instead of people. Please, please, keep on wearing your heart on your sleeve, and keep on leading with your heart.

And whatever you do, do not look down on yourself. Ginshi, your biggest flaw is the fact that you
don't believe in yourself. You don't have enough self-confidence, and if I could change that, I'd do it in an instant. Because you've got every reason to be confident in yourself-- you're an amazing person.

Know how I know?

Do you remember, Ginshi, when your mentor mother lost control during the Serpent fight? When he went all-out to save us? I was drugged up on RC Cell Suppressants, and I couldn't do a thing but calm him down afterwards. But that's not why I brought that up-- do you remember how you looked afterwards, the expression that was on your face?

Mutsuki was afraid. Urie was envious. But you, Ginshi? Yours was reverence.

Do you know how much that surprised me? You had just seen your kind, sweet, soft-hearted, doting mentor mother lose control and shriek his head off incoherently, but you were in awe of him, because you knew that he was aware of what was at risk should he lose control like he did, but he did it anyways. You didn't see a monster, a ghoul. You still saw him for who he was, and I knew then that you were a great person, with a good heart.

So on that note, Ginshi, I'll say my goodbye. I've said everything I wanted to.

I love you. I'm sorry you had to learn this through a letter-- that I won't be there to train you anymore. But it's okay, because your strong enough without me now.

Sincerely,

Kanou Nagachika Hideyoshi, aka Pierrot
Dear Kuki,

I never, ever want you to see what's in this letter, and that's how I'm starting every single one of these. Because if you see this letter, then it means something went wrong and I'm probably dead. That, or something else is preventing me from talking to you face-to-face, and this is the next best thing. I'm only writing these letters because I've got a terrible feeling about the raid, and my instincts have never let me down before.

I'm sorry. I never wanted you to find out I was Pierrot through a letter. But it's true: I am the ghoul, Pierrot, and I am Doctor Kanou Akihiro's son. Though, there wasn't any lost love between us-- he was my father biologically, and only biologically. The people that raised me are my parents, and they loved me more than he ever tried to.

My proof? I am-- or rather, if your reading this, was-- waging a war against Kanou. And why, you ask, was I doing that?

Because he said he'd kill you, Saiko, Mutsuki, and Shirazu. He said that he would kill my children and make Haise's life utter misery. All because I wouldn't follow his orders, and tried to sever my ties with him.

But that's not important right now, if I'm dead. What is important is that you know this: I never, ever just messed with your feeling, you and the others. I really enjoyed my time with you all. It was probably the happiest I've ever been.

I never lied about that.

Moving past my explanation, though, and we're coming to the personal part of this letter. And don't give me that face-- that face that says, 'ugh, emotions'. Your act doesn't fool me, Kuki. You really do care.

You're just afraid to show it.

I'm not going to criticize that decision. That's your decision, influenced by your personal experiences. Some people just aren't meant to wear their heart on their sleeve-- I know, because I'm one of them.

Please take my advice: don't be afraid to show that you care. Kuki, I've been doing that same thing for my entire life, and I regret every single second of it. There's no reason to hide the fact that you care about people.

It means you're human.

Kuki, you're pretty amazing. You're an Academy Scholarship Student, you've memorized the entire hand-sign alphabet, and your IQ is probably the highest of the Quinx Squad. When it comes to field maneuvers and strategies, you're the best. If you weren't so battle-capable, you'd make it in Division II with no problem.

And I respect your privacy. I never asked why you hate Kuroiwa Takeomi like you do, though I think it's got something to do with your fathers, but whatever it was, it had to be some sort of traumatic
experience. Because Kuki, people call you cold, but you aren't. You're afraid. Afraid of loving someone and getting hurt.

Well, don't be. I was, and look at how I turned out, in the end: dead, with a lifetime full of regrets.

You know the only thing I don't regret?

Loving your mentor-mother. I've never regretted that, and you know what, Kuki? I never will.

So don't be afraid. Please, please, Kuki, don't be afraid to love. Not even the kind of love I have with your mentor-mother, because that's a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love-- one that not everyone experiences. It's rare, and I was lucky enough to be able to experience it, but no, I'm talking about all kinds of love here, be it eros, storge, agape, or philia. Any and all of them.

Sure. Sometimes it will hurt. I won't sugarcoat that.

But, Kuki, it'll be so worth it. I promise. It's like seeing the world in dull greys, all in black-and-white, and suddenly everything will be in color, as bright and vibrant as the sun, and it'll take your breath away. It'll be worth every time it hurts, tenfold.

I'm sorry I'm writing you such a sappy letter. I'm sorry that you have to see this letter at all. I'm sorry for telling you all of this through a letter. I'm sorry for so, so many things. I'm sorry for leaving you before I got to see you grow all the way, to bloom into what I know you can and will be. I'm sorry for lying to you.

I'm sorry that I can't be there anymore.

One more thing, Kuki. I love you, please never forget that. Like you were my own child. And I'm sorry that I couldn't show that more.

Sincerely,

Kanou Nagachika Hideyoshi, aka Pierrot
Dear Tooru,

I never, ever want you to see what's in this letter, and that's how I'm starting every single one of these. Because if you see this letter, then it means something went wrong and I'm probably dead. That, or something else is preventing me from talking to you face-to-face, and this is the next best thing. I'm only writing these letters because I've got a terrible feeling about the raid, and my instincts have never let me down before.

I'm sorry. I never wanted you to find out I was Pierrot through a letter. But it's true: I am the ghoul, Pierrot, and I am Doctor Kanou Akihiro's son. Though, there wasn't any lost love between us-- he was my father biologically, and only biologically. The people that raised me are my parents, and they loved me more than he ever tried to.

My proof? I am-- or rather, if your reading this, was-- waging a war against Kanou. And why, you ask, was I doing that?

Because he said he'd kill you, Saiko, Shirazu, and Urie. He said that he would kill my children and make Haise's life utter misery. All because I wouldn't follow his orders, and tried to sever my ties with him.

But that's not important right now, if I'm dead. What is important is that you know this: I never, ever just messed with your feeling, you and the others. I really enjoyed my time with you all. It was probably the happiest I've ever been.

I never lied about that.

And now that that's out of the way, I can move on to the more personal part of this letter.

Tooru, you think that you're weak. You're very insecure about things. You tend to not take the initiative in things. At least, that's how you used to be.

Look back for me, won't you? Back to the beginning of the Torso case. Think about how different you were back then, and wouldn't you be able to say that you've changed for the better? I can see it in you. You certainly aren't weak. You take the initiative in situations.

But you're still insecure. And you know what? You've got no reason to be. You're one of the funniest, smartest, well-mannered, sweetest, bravest kids I've ever met. And I know you-- in your head, you're saying, 'I'm not brave' aren't you? Okay, think back even further, then. Before anyone else would, you stood by your mentor mother, didn't you? Back when Saiko wouldn't leave her room, and Shirazu followed Urie around like a lost puppy, and Urie did only solo investigations. You were the only one who put forth the effort to get to know him, at first, despite the rumors circulating that he was a half-ghoul.

I can't thank you enough for that. You made sure he wasn't alone in this world, when I wasn't able to.

I wish you could see what I can see. You've got no reason to be insecure, or afraid. You're an amazing boy, Tooru, and you always have been. You've had it rough in life-- you drew the short stick, so to speak, on just about everything. Losing your family to ghouls, being tormented at the
Junior Academy, even being born in the wrong body-- it was all terrible luck on your part. Terrible, horrible luck.

And I know that it was hard. It would have been so easy to give up and throw in the towel, but guess what, Tooru?

You didn't.

You grew stronger instead of giving up, and that's real strength, right there. You didn't break. You learned how to bend instead. And in this world, that's something not everyone can do.

You're special. Not because you're a Quinx or anything like that. Just because you're you. Okay? Just trust me on it, and someday down the road you'll look back, and I promise, you'll be able to see what I see.

Any girl would be lucky to get a boy like you.

Well, that's all I wanted to say, I guess. I'm sorry that I won't be able to be there with you, to watch you continue to grow and to guide you. But I know that you'll do just fine without me-- you're just that strong, Tooru.

Sincerely,

Kanou-Nagachika Hideyoshi, aka Pierrot
Dear,

I don't know where I should even begin this. I'm sorry if it's a little disorganized. My thoughts are a little jumbled, and writing all of these letters are messing with my emotions.

Look, I know that we have to write our Last Will and Testament, but that isn't the same thing. This is something just as much for me as it is for you-- to give us both closure, should I die.

So what I'm about to say is going to be really damned hard, but I'm going to say it. If I'm dead, then it's already been uncovered already, and your memories are already back. If I die, it'll serve as a trigger, I don't have a doubt.

So I really hope I don't die, because I don't want your memories to come back. I'll get back to that in a second.

I am Pierrot. I am a half-ghoul, and I was born that way. The incident at the hospital, how I pulled it off, that's all in the other letter-- who am I kidding, it's an autobiography. Do you know how many hours that thing took to type up? Sheesh, I haven't slept at all. But I wanted to confirm that, and say that I'm sorry for a lot of things, but for lying to you, especially. And man, have I lied about a lot. I'm sorry that you had to find this out from a letter, too.

But I never lied about loving you.

So, now that your memories are back, I'm pretty sure you'll hate me. Especially after you read what's in the autobiography. And god, that hurts, but it's okay. Hate me to your hearts content-- hate me, curse me with a burning passion, spit on my grave, whatever it takes for you to get closure.

I hate me too.

Please don't hate the time I spent with you, though. I really loved spending time with you and with the kids. It made me a better person, gave me the courage and the strength to finally sever my ties with Kanou and try for my revenge. It made me be able to look back and realize just how fucked-up I am. I ruined your life. I made you into a walking tragedy. You would have been better off without having ever met me.

I know that, but damn, seeing it written down hurts.

I hope that I did something good, at least. You were never alone, ever. I tried to protect you from the bullies. I bandaged up your cuts and bruises, made sure you ate, tried to make you smile. I was always there, watching, keeping tabs, even after you left me.

I wish that I hadn't ever let Kanou touch you, or let Yamori even hear your name. I should have killed him. I should have marched right into Aogiri and killed everyone there, rescued you, said screw it to my secret and Kanou. None of it was worth what you went through.

I'm sorry. I can never say sorry enough.
But I only have so much room to say what I want to, and I'll have to move past that for now. The rest of it can be explained in my autobiography, but I pray to whatever god will listen that you won't ever see this letter or that book.

I never, ever want you to remember your life before. And that hurts, it hurts so bad, because I miss you, miss you so much. You can be sitting right next to me, and you're the same person-- I love you just as much, because names don't matter-- but I can never laugh with you like I used to. I've got to be careful, keep myself in check, make sure I don't let anything from our childhood slip.

But hurting is worth it. Because, Ken, when you're living as Haise, you're so much happier. Before, I used to be able to glimpse a real smile, a real laugh, only when I surprised one out of you. You were always so sad, so very sad, no matter what I did.

Once, I thought to myself that your eyes change colors. Sure, they're always grey. But they're different shades of grey. When we were little, just kids, your eyes were like misty rain. It would vary, then, like it was shifting with your mood, sometimes guarded, sometimes open. After your mom died, they were the color of the grey skies, always a little distant and a little darker than before. Just after you had turned, they were the color of grey pearls, gleaming and bright, but always with a glassy tint. After Aogiri, they were like monochrome or steel, colder, and you always held your emotions an arms length away.

And that's why I don't want your memories to come back. I don't ever want to see your eyes like that again. I don't ever want you to be cold like that, distant like that, again. So no matter how much it hurts, I refuse to bring your memories back.

Because right now, Haise, your eyes are the color of a dove's feathers, ironic as that statement may be. You laugh and love without restraint, you aren't afraid to wear your heart on your sleeve, you aren't guarded. You're the freest, the happiest, that I've ever seen you. And I've known you for most of my life, Ken.

I'm sorry. I'm using both of your names like this, switching between the two. I'm not doing it on purpose. But both of the names are yours, and I love you by both just as much, so I can't bring myself to cross one out.

Listen to me, Haise. If your reading this and I'm dead, then I need you to listen to me very closely. Because I know what you're going to do, but you don't. You don't ever realize what you're doing until it's far too late, and I'm not going to let that happen this time.

You'll blame yourself for my death. You'll withdraw into yourself. You'll only cry when you're alone. You won't ever show your feelings. You'll put up a mask to hide behind. You won't open up to anyone. You'll give everyone a smile that's painfully fake, but they won't be able to tell, because they don't know you like I do and you're a good actor, just like I am. You'll be colder, more distant, because you think you have to be to be strong, that your feelings will make you weak. You'll try to protect everyone on your own until your spread too thin, and there isn't anything left of you. You'll try to hold the weight of the world.

My death won't be your fault, however I die. It'll be a consequence of my actions, Ken, and certainly not your fault.

Please, please cry. **Let it all out.** Crying will help you get closure-- it'll make you feel better, and I'm sorry that I won't be there to dry your tears.

Show your feelings, if not for yourself, for the kids. **Let them know they aren't alone in grief.**
Let your mask drop, fall away, and don't ever pick it back up.

Never, ever give anyone that fake smile. It only hurts you, Haise. Don't be an actor.

Don't be cold. The kids need you, more than ever. They don't need the cold, distant you. They need the warm, caring you, the one that you'll try to smother and kill in your struggle for 'strength'. That kind you, the feelings you're going to try and disconnect from, they make you strong. You're weaker without them. They give you the power to fight harder. So keep them close to your heart and please, don't be distant.

You aren't Atlas, Ken. You can't hold the weight of the world on your own, and I won't be there to help you shoulder it anymore. So share the burden. That's what the people you love are there for--they want to help you, support you. And you've got so many people that love you, that are willing, wanting to shoulder some of your burden.

You won't ever be alone again, not even when I'm gone, because so, so many people love you. You've got family and friends that would do anything for you, and they'll never leave you on your own.

You'll never be alone. So don't be afraid, when I'm gone. You're strong enough to walk on your own now--you don't need me to support you, anymore.

You never really have.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

Sincerely,

Kanou Nagachika Hideyoshi, aka Pierrot

Chapter End Notes

And, that's it! That's the very last of The Last Laugh! Thanks for reading, and for all of your support!

The next in this series, the book of shorts, will be called Curtain Call, in keeping with the Clown/Performer-esque naming theme. If you want any questions that are still unanswered to be answered in one of those, or if you want to see a specific short story written, drop a comment and let me know! I'll do my best to make it happen!

*curtain call: noun
the appearance of one or more performers on stage after a performance to acknowledge the audience's applause

In essence, returning to the stage. I thought it was fitting.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!