### The Shadows Linger

**by** vivav

**Summary**

It's just another day at work for Futaba, doing her part to fight cyber-terrorism. Until she comes across a mysterious police file from 2012, which she can't help but investigate. But once Futaba goes down that rabbit hole, she won't find Wonderland at the bottom.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Mature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Gen</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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The Forgotten Hijacking

Working in cyber security for the Japanese government had been good to Futaba. It paid good money, it let her keep on top of her skills, she got to play with some advanced computer tech long before it hit the market, and it let her take down bad guys and work for the good of people. Technology was getting more advanced all the time, which meant that cyber attacks were growing more dangerous and more complicated to combat. But Futaba always managed to come through in the end. Still, for as brilliant as Futaba was, sometimes her job could be a headache. For example, her most recent assignment. There had been an attack on the Tokyo Haneda Airport’s computer systems, and all flight information had been scrambled. Times, gates, flight numbers, and destinations were all mixed up, causing total chaos. No planes could come in or out, and all flights had been cancelled.

Futaba was one of several experts tasked with solving the crisis, which included finding out the nature and the origin of the attack. While her colleagues pored through lines of code and scoured the airport’s network and the networks of the airlines, Futaba decided to take a different approach. She got the idea to plunge through past cases of terrorist attacks on airports in recent history, see if there were any previous offenders who could be at large and possessing any kind of computer skills. She knew it was likely a fruitless search, but if it could provide any leads, it was worth a shot. It’s not like it would take long to research. Crimes in airports were few and far between. Shoplifters in the stores by the gates. The odd lunatic trying and failing to sneak in a weapon. There was one guy who tried to smuggle in a homemade bomb, and he didn’t even make it TO security before somebody reported how suspicious the wires poking out of his suitcase were.

The people who tried to pull shit at the airport were grade-A losers. The dumbest of the dumb. Well, almost. While Futaba was researching past instances of potential airline-related terrorism, one of her colleagues discovered the culprit behind the current airport hacking situation. It turned out that the info scramble was not the result of any malicious attack, but one incompetent employee using airport computers to access some seedy websites. A virus was downloaded onto the airport’s outdated network, which caused an entirely unique phenomenon that resulted in putting one of Tokyo’s major airports out of commission for three days. So that was it, case closed, problem solved, time to put all of it to bed.

Oh, how Futaba wished it were that simple. And to be fair, it totally could be. Nothing required Futaba to do any more work. Nobody was asking any more of her. But something stood out in her investigation. Nothing that had to do with the glitch, that case was actually closed for real. While Futaba was researching past airport-related crimes, most of them were pretty minor stuff. But there was one major incident. One actual instance of genuine terrorist activity that very nearly resulted in the loss of lives. And it happened 15 years ago.

May 1st, 2012. A commercial airliner bound for Kagoshima was highjacked before it left the tarmac. Several armed men took over the plane before all the cargo had even been loaded, making no demands. The Special Assault Team apprehended the hijackers, and the situation was defused with no casualties, although their report did make mention of an old man being taken to the hospital due to a cardiac emergency. And that was it.

That was everything Futaba could glean about the incident. Only that.

The report had a ton of redacted information. The names of the hijackers, the SAT members involved, and the passengers had all been scrubbed from any records. There were no details about how they actually managed to get on the plane and make the arrest without anybody getting hurt.
And the news hardly covered it at all. Even the airport’s security footage had largely been scrubbed. Frankly, it didn’t seem possible. Something big must have happened on this day. It was the first attempted hijacking of an airplane in Japan in roughly a decade, and yet for how cut and dry it all seemed to be, there was very little known about it.

Futaba knew she should probably just leave it alone. It didn’t have anything to do with her. It was just some weird thing she came across while doing her actual job. Some weird, mysterious thing the government covered up that happened 15 years ago. The world was full of mysteries, and the government kept a lot of secrets. Hell, sometimes it was Futaba’s job to help those secrets stay secure. She came across a lot of files with redacted info in her work. It’s not like she was compelled to solve every mystery she came across or anything. But for some reason, that hijacking stayed on her mind. Futaba didn’t know why. Maybe it was a lack of satisfaction in her work. Sure, she could take pride in a job well done, but nothing she had done in her adult years was on the level of exposing Shido and his conspiracy. Sometimes Futaba felt like she had peaked when she was a teenager. And so, for a number of reasons, including pride, curiosity, and boredom, Futaba decided to investigate the mysterious hijacking from 15 years ago.

The first thing any investigation needed was a lead. Which would be hard to do, considering how all of the information was totally buried. Futaba sat hunched in her chair at home, reviewing the details of the incident. Or rather, the lack of details. Every name was struck from the record. Criminal names, passenger names, police names, the name of the guy who filed the report, even the name of the man taken to the hospital.

“Hospital, huh?”

There it was. Futaba’s lead. Well, maybe. She knew the date and time of the hijacking, as well as its location. Which meant she could find the nearest hospital, which would be the most likely place the man was given treatment. The only details the report gave were that the man was older and suffering from some kind of heart illness, so Futaba pulled all the names of all male cardiac patients over 40 checked in that afternoon. Of course, knowing which one of the half-dozen candidates it was would take more hacking. More specifically, she’d have to go into their financial records and see if any of them purchased an airline ticket before May of 2012. Which prompted Futaba to ask herself a question:

“Do I really want to do this?”

Even in her more mischievous days, Futaba had never hacked into anything without a good reason. Sure, sometimes she’d mess with her friends, but that was silly innocent fun, kids’ stuff. Futaba was a hacker for good. She brought down bad guys and exposed evil. Sure, she accessed peoples’ private information a lot, but it was usually bad people. Here she was already breaking into medical records for no reason other than she was curious about something. This was an invasion of privacy, and she had no justification for it. Yeah, sure, she was looking into some kind of cover-up, but not all cover-ups were bad. Sometimes they were necessary. It’s not exactly like Futaba was rushing to tell the world about the Metaverse and Cognitive Psience. That kind of information in the hands of the masses would probably cause a panic.

“Huh…”

An airplane hijacking. Normal guys with guns doing the crime. Arrested by the Special Assault Team, just like police arrest people very day. Why on Earth would this require a cover-up? Sure, it’s not the kind of thing that happens every day, but it’s all so ordinary. So routine. Unless it wasn’t. What if the Metaverse wasn’t the only incredible thing out there? What if there was other stuff like it? Shido and his people knew about the Metaverse, maybe there were other people in a
position of power who knew about similar stuff. Maybe magic was real. Or demons. Or aliens! And as somebody who had fought on the front lines against the supernatural (ok, not the front lines, but Futaba still helped as best as she could), wasn’t it Futaba’s right to know about such things? Nay, not right, duty. If there was something else incredible out there, Futaba needed to know so she could help protect the world from it. And so, with her actions justified to herself, Futaba began hacking into credit card records.

Sure enough, one male cardiac patient that day had made a purchase to Japan Air Network — the airline the hijacked plane belonged to — a month before the incident. Futaba had to do a little research, but it seemed to be about the same amount a flight from Tokyo to Kagoshima would have cost back then. The man’s name was Kihei Ando, and he was 68 at the time. Thankfully, he survived his incident, and was even still alive now. Ando was currently living in a nursing home, and seemed to be in the early stages of dementia. It wasn’t an ideal situation. Futaba would have to visit him in person, and she wasn’t exactly a fan of nursing homes. They were already kind of a depressing environment in general, but it also reminded her how Sojiro was starting to get up there in years, and that’s not something she liked to think about. In addition, the fact that this guy’s mind was starting to go meant he might not have whatever answers she was looking for.

But it was Futaba’s only lead. And so, as uncomfortable as it made her, she was going to pay Kihei Ando a visit.

Futaba was not used to these clothes. Even long after she had graduated college, she preferred to lounge around in really casual clothes, usually tee shirts and shorts. Honestly, her wardrobe hadn’t radically changed from when she was in high school, but considering the nature of her visit, she had to appear professional. Futaba was wearing an olive-green suit with a pencil skirt, a white shirt underneath, and black heels on her feet that she did not have as much practice walking around in as she’d like. She had her long hair tied up into a bun, although it took her a lot of tries to make it passable. She also decided to forgo leggings, since old guys were into younger girls, so if she didn’t seem respectable enough to get what she wanted from the old man, maybe she could charm it out of him. Of course, Futaba had zero experience in seduction, so she was really hoping it wouldn’t come to that. The way she looked didn’t match the way she felt at all, but it wasn’t exactly like feeling awkward was anything new for her, so she soldiered on.

The staff was hesitant to let Futaba in since she wasn’t family, but when Futaba showed them that she worked for the government and said that she was there to discuss a confidential matter, their protests quickly ended. A nurse led her to Ando’s room. The door was already open, and Futaba saw a short, thin, bald old man in a brown suit standing next to a bird cage, feeding a little yellow bird inside of it and whistling a happy tune.

“You’re in luck.” The nurse turned to Futaba, smiling. “He seems to be having one of his good days! He even has pants on.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s… uh… good.” Futaba had seen a few residents roaming the halls in robes. “So, do I just go in, or do you introduce me?”

The nurse knocked on the open door. The old man turned towards them, surprised eyebrows just barely rising past the top of the biggest, thickest coke-bottle glasses Futaba had ever seen in her life.

“Ando-San,” the nurse said, “you have a visitor.”

“Eh?” Ando pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. When he lowered his hands, he squinted at Futaba. “Iza-Chan?”
“No, Ando-San, this isn’t your daughter. This is Sakura-San. She’s from the government, and would like to ask you some questions.”

“The government?” Ando closed the birdcage and walked over to his bed, sitting down on it. “What for? I’ve paid my taxes.”

“You’re not in any trouble, Ando-San.” Futaba took a step forward and bowed. “My name is Futaba Sakura. What I’d like to discuss with you is a kinda sensitive matter, so I can’t exactly talk about it in front of others. Do you mind if we speak privately?”

“Well…” Ando hummed and scratched his chin. “It’s not like I had other plans, so I don’t see why not.” Ando looked up at the nurse and smiled. “Ai-Chan, could you please close the door behind you?”

The nurse nodded and left, shutting the door behind Futaba.

“Have a seat, Sakura-Chan.” Ando gestured to a chair in front of a desk. Futaba had to fight every instinct of hers to take her usual squatting position as she lowered herself into it. Not only would it look weird, but it’d be impossible to balance like that in her heels. “What brings a nice young lady like you to my door?”

“Well, Ando-San, I suppose the easiest way to explain it would be to say that it’s a matter of national security.” Futaba sat rigidly, every muscle in her body feeling tense. “I’d like to discuss something that occurred 15 years ago.”

“15 years?” Ando gave a short whistle. “That might be a tall order, Sakura-Chan. Sometimes I can hardly remember what happened 15 minutes ago.”

“Oh boy.” Futaba started to feel disheartened, but quickly snapped out of it. There was no point in treating this like a lost cause before she even asked her questions. “I'm hoping you will recall this, because it was probably a very big day for you. Do you remember being hospitalized for cardiac illness in 2012?”

“I’m afraid after the diagnosis, I was in and out of hospitals quite frequently.” Ando shook his head. “You'll have to be more specific, Sakura-Chan.”

“May 1st, 2012.” Futaba stared directly into Ando’s eyes. “Do you remember that day?”

“May 1st? May…” A glimmer of recognition appeared in the orbs behind those thick glasses. “Ah, I see. The plane hijacking…”

“Yes!” Futaba’s muscles relaxed a little and her mouth stretched out into a big grin. She leaned forward in her seat. “Can you tell me what happened that day!?”

“I remember some of it.” Ando frowned. “You must understand, I was in a lot of pain at the time. My chest felt like it was going to explode, and my senses were not fully with me.”

“Please tell me as much as you can remember.”

“Alright…” Ando closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I was in the front of the plane. There were men with guns. And then, the stress caused my heart to start acting up. And then… Hm…” Ando’s brow furrowed. “There was some kind of racket… Men in black suits… And…” Ando grunted and opened his eyes. “And then I was taken to the hospital.”

“That’s it?” Futaba’s grin sagged into a frown. The only things of interest were the racket and men
in black suits, but those were way too general to be useful. “Come on, you’ve gotta remember something else! Anything!”

“I’m trying, but it was so long ago, and my mind isn’t what it used to be…” Ando held his head in his hands, trying to recall anything else. He stopped when he heard the sound of chirping, looking up at the bird cage.

“Ando-San?” Futaba waited for a moment, but got no response. Ando’s eyes were pointed at the bird, but he seemed to be staring off into space. “Ando-San? Hello?”

“Hm?” Ando looked back down at Futaba. “Oh, yes. My apologies, Sa…. Sanada-Chan, was it?”

“Sakura. Futaba Sakura.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Sakura-Chan.” Ando nodded with a slight smile on his face. “What were we talking about again?”

“The hijacking 15 years ago.”

“Right. Right…” Ando looked at his bird again. “Metal angel…”

“Oh… sure.” Futaba scratched her head. She was clearly starting to lose him. “The metal bird, if that’s what you want to call it.”

“No, not that.” Ando’s eyes widened and he looked at Futaba with a big smile. “I remember now. There was a metal angel.”

“Huh?” Futaba cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean? Is that some kind of symbol or something?”

“No, there was a young lady.” Ando looked at the yellow bird again. “She was with the men in black suits. She was not Japanese. She had beautiful blonde hair and these mysterious blue eyes and… some sort of strange headwear resembling earphones. She checked to see how I was doing, and spoke in a very calming way. She was like an angel…”

“Ok…” Futaba scratched her head. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something. A blonde-haired blue-eyed non-Japanese woman, possibly working for some secret government agency. There couldn’t be a ton of those, right? “What about the metal part?”

“That's what she was.” Ando returned his attention to Futaba. “It was the strangest thing, Sakura-Chan. The young lady grabbed my wrist to check my pulse. She was wearing gloves, but through them, her hands did not feel warm and soft. They felt hard, like metal.” Ando chuckled. “Her voice was soothing, but the way she said words was a bit detached. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was a robot.”

“A robot!?”

“Yes, it sounds preposterous, I know. I don’t think modern technology can create a robot that could pass for human, so I doubt it was possible fifteen years ago.” Ando shrugged. “Perhaps it was simply a prosthetic hand. Though I don’t know how she could have checked for my pulse with it…”

“Uh-huh…” The gears in Futaba’s head started spinning. True, she didn’t know of any advancements in robotics that could create a convincing android, even at the government level. But if there WAS some secret men-in-black agency, who knew? And the theory of a robot dispatching
the hijackers just made sense. Well, more sense than an entire police team storming the airplane did. It was also entirely possible that the girl being a robot was some kind of weird hallucination of a sick, agony-stricken old man, but Futaba wanted to believe. Either way, it was worth investigating.

Airport security footage of that afternoon had been wiped clean, but Futaba wasn’t giving up on finding a picture of this “metal angel”. The nice thing about the modern world was that there were cameras everywhere. Well, maybe some people wouldn’t consider it nice, but for Futaba’s information-gathering purposes it was a great boon. Even back in 2012, smart phones were already all over the place. Futaba just had to hunt down any pictures on social media from that day geo-tagged as having been at the airport. If she was lucky, her mystery blonde may show up in at least one of them.

It was easier said than done. Futaba had no problem collecting photos from that place and time, but there were thousands of them to comb through, and she was looking for one very particular individual. As the metal angel continued to elude her in photo after photo, Futaba had to keep her spirits up by looking for anything interesting at all in the pictures. In one photo she actually noticed a famous person; the original “Detective Prince”, Naoto Shirogane. That was kind of cool. Another thing she noticed while looking for blonde hair was a photo with a young girl in the background who Futaba was 90% sure was a 12-year-old Ann, her mouth sporting some very unflattering braces. Futaba saved that picture for herself so she could bug Ann about it later. Overall, it took three days for Futaba to search through all the photos taken at the airport during the 3 hour stretch before, during, and after the hostage situation, but she finally found something.

There was a photo of a young couple kissing at the pick-up area. In the background of the photo, Futaba spotted a young woman — no older than 20 by the look of her — who matched Ando’s description VERY closely. She was wearing a black suit, had blonde hair, blue eyes, and some very strange thing on her head. It could’ve been headphones, but it also kind of looked like whatever the thing over her ear was, it was a part of her. What was especially interesting was her gloved hand holding open the door of a long black limousine, and a woman with long reddish-brown hair and a very expensive-looking white fur coat. Futaba couldn’t see the other woman’s face, but she didn’t lose hope.

This was a solid start. Either one of those individuals would draw attention just about wherever they went. If the two of them were ever seen in public together, somebody had to have posted about it. Most likely, it would have been within a short period of time surrounding the hijacking. Futaba ran a program that used every search engine online to look for dozens of terms like “blonde robot” and “rich lady red hair” and “fancy limo”, all separately and in every combination, across every Japanese webpage within a day before and after the hijacking. It took a long time for the program to complete its task, and when it did, it didn’t return any usable results. Futaba expanded the search to a week before and after, and while the wait was agonizing, eventually, she did find something.

It was a post on a forum for students who attended Yasogami High, a high school in the small country town of Inaba. It was talking about the strange limo that had been seen around town a few days earlier and a bunch of bizarre people having a party at the food court of the town’s Junes department store. Somebody even snapped a picture, and sure enough, it was a gathering of freaks. There were a few normal looking high-school students, but there was also some scar-covered shirtless guy in a cape, the Junes mascot Teddie (which was weird, because Futaba was pretty sure they didn’t introduce that mascot to stores until a few years later), some delinquent (who looked familiar to Futaba, but she didn’t know from where, maybe he just reminded her how delinquents looked on TV in general), an albino Shiba Inu, and-
WHOA, IS THAT FEATHER PINK!?

Yup, sure enough, that was Pink Argus from Phoenix Ranger Featherman Victory. And not just some person cosplaying. That was the actual star of the show, Yukari Takeba, THE Pink Argus herself. She was chatting and laughing with some guy in a baseball uniform and the blonde from the airport photo. And the blonde wasn’t in black clothes this time. Her entire body was visible, and there was no doubting it, those were robot parts.

“Oh my god! She really IS a robot!”

On closer inspection, it looked like one of the high school students was ALSO a robot. For a second, Futaba wondered if maybe this was some kind of Featherman cast party. Of course, she knew it couldn’t be. She had seen every episode of Featherman V multiple times, and no robot girls like the two in the photo were ever seen on the show. Still, if for no other reason than it’d make things a lot simpler, Futaba kind of wanted to believe the cast party theory. It would certainly explain the outfit of the woman in the fur coat. Yup, she was there too, and under the fur coat was this sexy catsuit. Again, it would make a lot of sense if this was a character in Featherman, though Futaba knew it wasn’t. The skintight outfit kind of reminded her of the Phantom Thieves’ female members. She remembered how embarrassed Ann and Makoto always got by their appearances in the Metaverse. It’d really take a lot of courage to wear something like that in public.

Futaba took a close look at the catsuit lady. Her face was very clearly visible in the photo. She had a beautiful smile. And while she seemed friendly in the photo, the way she carried herself gave Futaba the impression this was not somebody to be messed with. She had this queenly aura about her, in spite of her crazy outfit (and maybe even a little because of it). She had all the refinement of Haru but all the commanding presence of Makoto. And Futaba could swear she’d seen her before. But where? Was she an actress, maybe? No, Futaba couldn’t remember any characters she’d ever seen played by this woman. It’s just not the kind of thing that you’d forget.

And then it hit her like a ton of bricks.

Futaba knew exactly who that woman was. Everybody in the intelligence community did. She was younger than Futaba was used to seeing her since the picture was so old, but there was no mistaking her identity. And it banished all doubt from Futaba’s mind over whether those girls were robots. If anybody in the world had access to realistic-looking humanoid robots, it was her. The woman both the public and Futaba's bosses called the most powerful woman in Japan.

“Mitsuru Kirijo…”
Following the Thread

Chapter Summary

Futaba's investigation takes her to a textile shop in Inaba.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mitsuru Kirijo. Sole heir to the Kirijo family fortune and current leader of the Kirijo Group, the largest conglomerate in Japan and an international economic powerhouse in its own right. Once Takeharu Kirijo had died, there were a lot of people who had a vested interest in not letting his daughter seize the corporation’s reigns. The Kirijo Group had a bad reputation ever since the Port Island laboratory explosion, but the company’s power and influence could not be denied. Mitsuru had a stated desire to atone for her grandfather’s sins and redeem her family name, and some higher-ups in the group feared that this would lead to them losing their status in the world. Ultimately, their concerns did not matter. Through cleverness, fearlessness, doggedness, and scariness, Mitsuru rose to take control of her family’s company, and stayed in the top spot despite numerous attempts to knock her off the throne. She was known for being a shrewd businesswoman who was impossible to overcome, and everyone who knew her either respected or feared her. Usually, it was both.

Futaba, like the rest of the nation, was no stranger to the name 'Kirijo'. Their companies had stretched out into pretty much every industry. Home electronics, engineering, agriculture, medicine, construction, education, entertainment, you name it, they did it. It seemed half of everything in Japan was either Kirijo brand, had Kirijo parts in it, or made use of Kirijo patents somehow. Of course, Futaba was also familiar with the name because Mitsuru Kirijo was the subject of frequent griping among her superiors. Although she never knew the exact nature of things, it seemed that the Kirijo Group had a certain sway over matters of public security, and that annoyed her bosses to no end. There were frequent complaints about how 'that woman' could get away with doing whatever she wanted, flagrantly disregarding governmental authority. And Futaba had definitely been a little curious in finding out what her bosses meant by that, but she hadn’t for two reasons.

The first was that she had no real reason to investigate the Kirijo Group. Yeah, the name 'Kirijo' was spat like venom by some folks in the government, but it seemed less like the Kirijo Group was doing anything actually bad and more that there were people in power who were pissed that there was somebody they didn’t have total control over.

The second was that Mitsuru Kirijo was really scary. Of course, Futaba had never met her, but just looking at pictures of her on the covers of business magazines sent chills down Futaba’s spine. Investigating this woman likely meant incurring her wrath, and frankly, Futaba was not in a rush to do that.

Which presented her with a choice. Futaba had discovered the existence of robots that looked like real human beings, and presumably acted like them too. One of these robots had probably been responsible for stopping an airplane hijacking 15 years ago, and the government had a vested interest in keeping this information a secret, quite likely at Mitsuru Kirijo’s request. On the surface,
this didn’t seem like a thing that was a problem. It was just a private citizen using her immense power and influence to have robots who are superior to humans in every way dole out justice where and when she saw fit. That’s fine, right?

“No. It probably isn’t.”

Investigating the Kirijo Group was a bear of a prospect. True, Mitsuru Kirijo was not technically above the law. From what Futaba had heard, there were even some special individuals in public security who actually did have the job of overseeing her group’s activities. The problem with this was that, again, from what Futaba had heard, all of the people in government tasked with managing Kirijo were wrapped around her little finger. Some colleagues of Futaba’s had gotten curious about the Kirijo Group and started investigating them, mostly in the hopes that they could win the favor of the higher-ups. Instead, a lot of them found themselves out of jobs for prying where they ought not to be, and they didn’t even have any good information to show for it. Kirijo had power, influence, and a near-unparalleled ability to hide what she wanted hidden. If Futaba was seriously going to do this investigation, she had to be smart about it. No fancy tricks, no MedJed/Ali Baba/Oracle calling cards, leave no reason to suspect her behind. No involving anybody else. Obviously not her colleagues, but no asking Makoto for help with an investigation or Haru for some corporate connections or Ren for a political hook-up. If Futaba was found out, anybody helping her would be brought down with her. She couldn’t even tell her friends what she was getting up to. They had to remain completely in the dark about it.

In fact, to totally minimize risk, Futaba decided to do as little hacking as needed. It would do her no good to try and break into the Kirijo network and be found out before she had any idea what to look for. She had to start by doing basic research. Find out as much as she could through the same avenues any non-genius could, see what she could use as a base for her full investigation. Right now, there was no reason to believe the Kirijo Group would be onto her. She didn’t even KNOW she was investigating them until two minutes ago. That meant she had an edge, for now at least. Futaba decided that if she was going to investigate Mitsuru Kirijo, she had to go back to the beginning. Specifically, back to the beginning of her control of the Kirijo Group.

This much was easily accessible public information. Mitsuru Kirijo assumed control of the Kirijo Group in 2009, when her father died of a sudden illness. Mitsuru was only 18 at the time, and still a senior at Gekkoukan High School on Tatsumi Port Island, where she was the student council president. Gekkoukan was built by Mitsuru’s family where the Kirijo Group once had a laboratory until a disastrous explosion ten years prior. Though as Futaba began to review this information, she learned that 2009 was a particularly eventful year for Port Island and Gekkoukan High School especially. People would go missing regularly around this time, and those who reappeared alive usually had ‘Apathy Syndrome’, a medically-inexplicable condition in which they were basically turned into zombies, shambling around and moaning all the time. Most people afflicted by this seemed to be Gekkoukan students or residents of the immediate surrounding area. In addition, a number of people died unexpectedly during that year. It wasn’t just Takeharu Kirijo. There was 18-year-old Shinjiro Aragaki, a former Gekkoukan student whose death was mourned by the school. Takaya Sakaki, ‘high priest’ of the Cult of Nyx, a fatalist death cult that rose in early 2010. Chidori Yoshino and Jin Shirato, known associates of Takaya Sakaki. The last of the mysterious deaths seemed to be that of Makoto Yuki, a 17-year-old Gekkoukan student who suddenly passed away on the school rooftop in early 2010. But none of these young peoples’ names interested Futaba. There was, however, one name that did stand out:

Shuji Ikutsuki, Chairman of Gekkoukan High. Futaba knew that name all too well. But not from any science journals or news articles, nor from information she’d come across in her job. Chances are, very few people in the scientific or intelligence communities would take much interest in the man’s name. But Futaba would. Because she saw that name in her mother’s earliest research notes,
notes that predated the term 'Cognitive Psience'.

Wakaba Isshiki had somehow gotten her hands on some of Ikutsuki’s research materials from the mid-90s. Futaba never knew how her mother got access to these documents, nor had she ever read them firsthand. But from her mother’s description of the materials in her own research notes, Shuji Ikutsuki, before he was chairman of a high school, was researching Shadows. Yes, the capital S kind. The kind that the Phantom Thieves had fought in the Metaverse. The materials Wakaba had gotten ahold of seemed more theoretical than anything, but they provided the basis for Wakaba’s own research: A plane of existence formed from human consciousness. Beings that lived there, born from humanity’s darker impulses. Individual humans somehow being able to draw power from their own darker impulses. For Futaba, this was big. Ikutsuki’s research was the catalyst for everything that defined Futaba’s mother for as long as the girl had known her. Those notes had set in motion the events that would lead to Wakaba’s death. Not that Futaba necessarily blamed Ikutsuki for it, of course. Not only had the man died several years before Wakaba did, but Wakaba’s death could be pretty squarely placed on the shoulders of Masayoshi Shido and Goro Akechi.

But Futaba had never known about the Kirijo connection. Her mother’s notes never mentioned it. Years ago, Futaba had searched Ikutsuki’s name and indeed came across it in connection to Gekkoukan High, but at the time she hadn’t known of the school’s connection to the Kirijo Group, so she had no reason to suspect it was anything but a man with the same name. Frankly, this raised a lot of questions. Had the Kirijo Group been researching Shadows? Could they have had something to do with the Metaverse? Public record had Ikutsuki’s death reported as happening within days of Takeharu Kirijo’s, and there was no way that was a coincidence. And was this tied to Mitsuru Kirijo’s robots? Yes, given the woman’s age, Futaba knew all this Shadow research was long before her time, but surely she must have known about it. In fact, was it possible that the Shadow research had something to do with the Port Island explosion? There had to be something there. This couldn’t all be coincidence. But what?

“Who is this lady!?” Futaba rubbed her temples as she stared at the old picture again. The one taken in the Junes in Inaba. The Junes where Mitsuru Kirijo and her robot girls had been photographed with Yukari Takeba, who upon further research, had ALSO gone to Gekkoukan High. And also there was a kid in the photo whose uniform matched that of Gekkoukan’s Middle School. But this obviously wasn’t some Gekkoukan reunion, because there were a bunch of students in the uniform of the local Inaba school, Yasogami High. Including one of the robot girls.

“What does it all mean!?” Futaba groaned and spun around in her chair, letting the swirling world match the whirlpool of frustration building in her head. When her chair stopped its rotation, she was facing away from her computer, her eyes drifting around her room. She looked at her Featherman figures, as if the little facsimiles of Yukari Takeba and her teammates would provide an answer. Because right now the facts weren’t making any kind of sense. How did it all connect? Shadows possibly in Port Island. Mitsuru Kirijo and a robot in an airport. Both of them and another robot in Inaba…

“Inaba, huh?”

What did that town have to do with anything? As far as Futaba was aware, Inaba wasn’t hiding any dark secrets or shadowy research facilities, but to be fair, it’s not like she was an expert on the place. The only thing Futaba knew about Inaba was that there were some really good craftsmen there. Ren had custom-ordered an engagement ring for Makoto from a blacksmith in Inaba. Futaba’s eyes slowly shifted their focus to her bed, where her own little piece of the country town lay: A small crocheted bunny in her old Oracle costume sitting on top of her pillow. She had commissioned it a few years ago from Makoto’s friend Kanji, who she met at a convention where
he was selling his handmade dolls. He was big and kind of awkward, like his natural impulse was
to be scary and he was trying to suppress it, but-

It felt like a lightbulb went off over Futaba’s head.

“It can’t be!”

Futaba spun back towards her computer and looked at the picture again, focusing on the delinquent
at the party. She studied his face closely. Futaba thought she had seen him before, but couldn’t
place it from where. And now she knew why. When she had met the man, he wasn’t a teen, but a
young adult. He was dressed in less-rebellious clothes, his hair was black, he didn’t have any
piercings, and he was wearing glasses. But the shape of the face was the same. Those harsh eyes
were the same. And that scar was the same.

“That’s Kanji Tatsumi…”

“This is idiotic.”

Futaba’s knuckles were white thanks to the death grip she had on the steering wheel.

“This is the worst idea ever.”

Futaba remained hyper-aware as she drove on the highway. Every car she passed felt like it might
contain a gunman.

“What am I doing!?”

What Futaba was doing was driving to Inaba. It was only three hours from Tokyo, so she could
make it there and back within a day. It was an incredibly risky move, but it was the only move
Futaba had. Kanji Tatsumi was one of those guys who didn’t use technology much. He had a
phone and an e-mail account she could hack into, but Futaba didn’t find anything connecting him
to Mitsuru Kirijo. Futaba knew it was incredibly unlikely that the owner of a small-town textile
shop was in cahoots with the most powerful woman in the country, but Kanji was in the picture
with the robots, so he was the only real lead she had. If Futaba wanted to learn anything, she
figured her best bet would be to talk to him directly.

Which was not smart. Futaba knew this. Because if Kanji wasn’t connected to Kirijo at all, it
would be a waste of 6+ hours. And if he was, it’s possible he’d tip her off to Futaba’s probing. And
if that happened, well, Futaba didn’t know what she’d do. Still, Futaba made sure to take
precautions. She fixed her phone so the location data would place her at home, making it look like
she never left Yongen that day. She was also using Sojiro’s old car, since it didn’t have GPS in it.
Futaba had made absolutely certain that her activities that day couldn’t be traced. If she could get
even one scrap of usable information from Kanji without tipping him off as to what she was doing,
she could maybe get away with this.

Futaba had just enough common sense to stop herself from slamming her head on the steering
wheel because of how dumb the rest of this was. The only reason she was doing it at all was
because there was no way to pursue this that didn’t involve a ton of risk. If the Kirijo Group had
sentient robots as far back as 15 years ago, that must mean they would have the kind of advanced
computer tech that would let them know the second Futaba broke into their systems. Once Futaba
made the decision to pry, she would have minutes at best before she was locked out. And probably
not much longer after that before somebody came for her. Futaba needed to know what she was
looking for so she could grab the information immediately and get it to one of her bosses or a
newspaper or something. If Futaba could get the Kirijo Group’s dastardly secrets to somebody
important enough, then maybe she could avoid retaliation by creating a bigger problem for them to
deal with.

Of course, what information she was going to get from Kanji, and how she was going to get it, was
completely beyond her.

Futaba parked the car on the street, near the south end of Inaba’s central shopping district. It
wasn’t really the kind of place Futaba would ever want to visit. While she was still a bit of a shut-
in, Futaba was used to Tokyo. She kind of liked the density of people and the urban sprawl. It was
a place where something was always happening. Thousands of faces passing each other by,
buildings that stretched up so high you couldn’t see the top if you were standing in front of them,
lights everywhere and life playing out in all its forms. Comparatively, Inaba was like a ghost town.
Back when she was still reforming after her change of heart, this quiet little place would’ve been a
dream for Futaba. Now, it was just pleasant. Oh so boringly pleasant.

Still, there were some nice things about it. It was kind of cool to see a bunch of mom and pop
shops, and the few people she saw were all happily stopped to talk to each other, even while
running errands. There was a real sense of community to this town, the kind you just didn’t get in
the big city. Who knows, maybe if Futaba had grown up here, she’d have a better appreciation for
it all. But even then, she imagined she’d probably want to get out of this place the second she
became an adult. To be fair, Inaba wasn’t any less lively than Yongen-Jaya was, but at least
Yongen had LeBlanc. Futaba doubted she could get a cup of coffee half as good as Sojiro’s out
here in the sticks, so really, what was the point of it all?

Besides, you know, the investigation.

Tatsumi Textiles was right next to the town’s shrine, and it was as old-fashioned as you could
expect a shrine-adjacent building to look. Futaba hesitated as she reached the door. She could still
stop. Still turn back. Still give up on this cockamamie scheme of hers to dig into the Kirijo Group’s
secrets and go back to her normal life. All she’d have lost was a day’s worth of driving, right?

No, not right. This wasn’t just about robots anymore. If the Kirijo Group was messing with
Shadows and that had anything to do with the Port Island explosion and the countless deaths that
followed it in the subsequent decade, she HAD to do something about it. Not only was she one of
the only individuals in the world who knew the danger that Shadows presented, but this was a
textbook case of somebody powerful using their power and influence to cover up their horrible
crimes. Futaba had dedicated her life to fighting people like this. If Futaba walked away, she’d lose
her self-respect. And so she slid open the door.

An old woman in a kimono was sitting in the middle of the store, dyeing floral patterns onto a large
strip of fabric with the aid of a stencil. She paused in her work and looked up at Futaba, giving her
a big warm smile.

“Welcome to Tatsumi Textiles. How may I help you?”

“Uh…” Futaba lingered in the doorway, staring at the work in progress. She wasn’t sure if it was
going to be a robe or something else, but it seemed far from done. “I’m sorry, you look busy. I can
come back later if-“

“This yukata can wait a moment, it’s not going anywhere.” The old woman put down the brush.
“What can I help you with, dear?”

“I’m looking for Kanji. Is he here?”
“Let me check.” The old woman stood up. “He may still be asleep.”

“This late?” Futaba looked at a clock on the wall. “It’s two in the afternoon.”

“My son just returned from the mountains this morning. He was out collecting materials to make our dyes with.” The old woman slowly made her way into the back of the store and chuckled. “I’ll see if I can get that mountain bear to come out of hibernation.”

Everything was quiet as Kanji’s mother disappeared into another room. After a moment, Futaba could make out voices coming from the back.

“Oh, Kanji, you’re awake.”

“Yeah, Ma” a gruff voice said. “But I’m going right back to sleep. Just had to take a leak.”

“I don’t suppose you could spare a moment of your time, could you?”

“What, do you need me to reach something high up?”

“There’s a young lady in the store asking for you by name.”

There was a very sharp grunt.

“Can’t you tell her to come back later? I’m too tired to deal with customers right now.”

"I would, but the young lady seems rather worried, and I would feel so terrible turning her away right now.”

“Ma…”

“Also, she’s very cute. It’s not often that pretty girls come calling for you by name, you know.”

“MA! Come on! How long are you gonna harp on about stuff like that!?”

“You’re 31 and I still don’t have grandchildren! I’m getting impatient, Kanji!”

“You’ve been impatient for ten years, you old bag!”

“Don’t speak to your mother that way! Oh… I…” Futaba could hear Kanji’s mother gasping.

“Here we go again.”

“God? Is that you?” Her voice sounded weak. “What’s that? My husband is with you? Tell him I’ll be coming soon. My poor old heart… just can’t take this… harsh treatment… anymore.”

“Alright, fine! I’ll talk to her! Just knock it off, wouldja!” The gruff voice let out a heavy sigh. “Just gimme a minute to get dressed.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Kanji’s mother came out of the back and returned to dyeing the yukata. “He’ll be with you in a moment, dear.”

“Thank you…” Futaba was feeling very awkward now. When she drove all the way out to Inaba, the last thing she expected was for this sweet-looking old lady to try setting her up with her son. After a minute, she could hear heavy sandal-clad footsteps growing louder.

Kanji emerged from the back, yawning. He looked largely as Futaba remembered him: Tall, well-
built, black hair, glasses, facial scar. His harsh eyes were there too, but with notably pronounced bags hanging under them. He was wearing a blue work uniform with the words “Tatsumi Textiles” written on them. The one big difference between Kanji as Futaba had previously seen him and now was the short, thick, bushy black beard covering the lower half of his face. If there had been any doubt as to whether this man had recently been on a mountain, it was banished from Futaba’s mind. This was the look of a man’s man who hadn’t had access to a razor for at least a week or two.

“Welcome to-“ Kanji yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Welcome to Tatsumi Textiles. What can I do for ya?”

“Hi there.” Futaba looked up at Kanji and gave a little wave. Even sleepy, he was still a pretty imposing figure.

“Hm?” Kanji looked Futaba up and down. “Have we met before?”

“Yeah.” Futaba nodded. “I’m Futaba Sakura, Makoto’s friend. We met a few years ago when you came to Tokyo for that convention, and I commissioned a doll from you.”

“Oh yeah!” Kanji grinned, and seemed to wake up a little. “Orange bunny rabbit, floppy ears, black and green sci-fi suit with red goggles.”

“You remember that!?” Futaba’s jaw dropped and she loosened up a bit. “But that was seven years ago!”

“Heh, yeah.” Kanji puffed out his chest and stood proudly. “Every doll I make is special. I never forget a custom order.”

“That’s incredible…” For as smart as Futaba was, not even she could remember every bad guy she had taken down in her line of work. At least, not off the top of her head like that.

“Yeah, well, I was never all that good at school, so I guess I got a lotta room up here.” Kanji tapped on his head with a cheeky grin. “So, what brings you all the way to Inaba from Tokyo?”

“Road trip?” Kanji raised his eyebrow. “To here? There’s not much to see around here.”

“Are you staying at the Amagi Inn?” Kanji’s mother asked.

“Oh, no, I’m just passing through town. I’m on my way to Niigata.” Yeah, that sounded plausible. Now Futaba just needed a reason she’d be here. “When I realized I was gonna be near here, I figured I’d stop by and see if I could get a look at how the sausage is made.”

“Sausage?” Kanji scratched his head. “I mean, we’re pretty well known for our beef around here, but I don’t think there’s anything all that special about Inaba sausage.” Kanji looked at his mother. “Is that even a thing?”

“It’s an expression, dear.” Kanji’s mother shook her head. “I believe she was referring to your dolls.”

“Oh!” Kanji looked back at Futaba excitedly, all the tiredness vanishing from his face. “You came to see the dolls, huh!”

“Yeah! Totally!” This was a perfect in. Kanji seemed really excited by his work. That kind of
excitement led to a lot of talking. If Futaba played her cards right, maybe she could find a tiny clue towards what she came here for. Futaba looked around the shop and saw a stack of shelves half-filled with dolls. “Is that them?”

“Yeah! Come take a look!” Kanji walked over to the shelves excitedly. “Usually I try to keep these shelves full, but I couldn’t exactly make any new dolls while I was camping out in the mountains.”

“I see…” Futaba grabbed a bear off the shelf. It was dressed in a white shirt and pants with a white headband, had red sideburns and a mustache, and a big X over its entire face. “This bear’s got a… uh… unique design.”

“Oh, that?” Kanji laughed. “Yeah, I guess he looks kinda weird to an outsider, huh?”

“An outsider?”

“Sometimes I like to make dolls based on familiar faces. I call ‘em my ‘Inaba series’.” Kanji pointed at the bear in Futaba’s hand. “That one’s based on Master Daidara, our town’s blacksmith.”

“Oh, cool.” Futaba’s eyes scanned the shelves. There were a lot of dolls with really specific designs. “Are there others like that?”

“Yeah, lemme see…” Kanji pointed to a thin white cat with a head of light-brown hair that had been combed back. “That one’s Naoki Konishi, he runs a liquor store.”

“Blacksmiths and liquor store owners?” Futaba gave Kanji a confused look. “You’re selling these characters to kids?”

“They’re not characters, they’re our neighbors. And there’s people that kids would run into too.” Kanji pointed to an ox with a bandage over its nose wearing a red track uniform. “That one’s Daisuke Nagase. He’s the gym teacher at Yasogami High School.”

“Cool.” Futaba put the Daidara Bear back and grabbed a green lizard with brown hair in a police uniform. “Who’s this lizard?”

“That’s Chie-Senpai. She’s a cop.” Kanji crossed his arms. “Also, she’s not a lizard. She’s a dragon.”

“A dragon, huh? Is she all like…” Futaba started wiggling the doll back and forth and put on a goofy raspy voice. “Ssssttrop right there, evildoer, or I’ll barbecue you!”

“Kinda.” A twinge of fear appeared in Kanji’s eyes. “But, uh, don’t let her hear ya talking about her like that.”

“’What’sssss wrong, Kanji?’” Futaba held the doll in Kanji’s face. “‘Are you ssssscared of me?’” Before Kanji could answer, the doll slipped out of Futaba’s hand. “Oops. Let me get that.” Futaba stepped back from the shelf so she could bend over and grab the doll, but accidentally kicked it in the process. It slid under the shelf. “Double oops.”

“Don’t worry about it” Kanji said. “I’ll get it later.”

“No, if somebody comes in wanting to buy it you should have it ready for them.” Futaba got down on the ground and started feeling around under the shelf. It was dusty down there.

“You need some help?”
“Nope!” Futaba felt something soft at her fingertips. “Almost… got it… Just a little more…” Futaba managed to pinch something substantial. “Bingo!” Futaba pulled her arm out from under the shelf. There was a doll in her hand, but it wasn’t the dragon cop she just dropped. It was old and dingy, covered in a lot of dust. But the features could be made out. Yellow hair. A white body. Weird little head thing.

It was the robot girl from the pictures.

“Whoa!” Kanji’s eyes widened at the dusty old doll in Futaba’s hand. “That’s not Chie-Senpai.”

“Yeah, looks old.” Futaba stood up and looked at the doll closely.

“I’ll say. It’s 15 years old.” Kanji’s eyes were still wide. “Has it really been under there all that time?”

“I told you to vacuum under the furniture” Kanji’s mother said.

“Who is she?” Futaba looked at Kanji, watching his face closely. “Someone from in town?”

“Uh…” Kanji’s eyes shifted to the side. He was about to lie, and very poorly. “N-no… she’s just something I made up.”

“Oh yeah?” Futaba poked one of the doll’s arms. It was made of some shiny material. “These limbs look robotic. Is she a cyborg or something?”

“Uh, no, just a robot girl.”

“Cool.” Futaba brushed some of the dust off of it. “Does she have a name?”

“A name?”

“Yeah, like ‘Cutiebot’ or ‘Roboko’ or something?”

“Uh… I just call it ‘Aigis’.”

“Aigis’?” Futaba looked at the doll suspiciously. “That’s an interesting name. Sounds Greek.”

“I dunno about that…” Kanji was being very shifty at the moment. “It’s just something I heard somewhere. Thought it’d be a good name for a robot girl.”

“Neat.” Futaba looked back up at Kanji. “How much?”

“Huh?”

“For Aigis. How much do you want for her?”

“You sure you want it?” Kanji looked at the doll sadly. “She’s kind of old and dirty. If you really want it, I could knit you a new one. I’ve got a few things I need to take care of ahead of time, but I’d mail her to you when she’s done.”

“No, that’s fine!” Futaba hugged the doll close to her chest. She didn't want there to be any record of her purchasing something called "Aigis". Kanji gave her a peculiar stare. “I mean, how old it is is part of what I like about it! It’s like, Aigis has been waiting under that shelf all these years for me to find her or something. That’s kind of cool, isn’t it?”

“I mean, I guess…” Kanji looked at Aigis and sighed. “It’d be a real shame to just throw her out.
You really want her?"
"Totally!"

"Alright." Kanji smiled. "No charge then."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It’s like you said. You two were destined to be together or something.” Kanji grinned. "Besides, I wouldn’t even know she was still there if you hadn’t found her, so it’s not like I was gonna make a profit anyway.”

"Thanks, Kanji!"

"You’re welcome.” Kanji walked over to a table and grabbed a pencil and notepad. “She actually seems to have held up pretty well, but you’ll need to be really careful when you wash her. Let me jot down some instructions for-“ Kanji was cut off by another yawn.

"Oh no, that’s fine.” Futaba shook her head. “I don’t wanna take up any more of your time. I can just look up how to clean her when I get home.”

"You sure?” Kanji rubbed his eyes. “It’ll only take me a minute.”

"You seem really tired. I should let you get back to your rest. And I’ve gotta hit the road anyway. Niigata awaits!” Futaba bowed to Kanji’s mother. “It was nice meeting you!”

"And you as well!” Kanji’s mother bowed her head. “Come back any time, dear!”

"Sure!” Futaba opened the door and ran out, waving back at Kanji. “Bye Kanji! I’ll tell Makoto you said ‘hi’, ok!?”

"Sounds great! Bye!” Kanji waved as Futaba closed the door behind her. When she was gone, he yawned and headed for the back. “I’m going back to sleep, Ma.”

"She was a nice girl, wasn’t she?"

"GOOD NIGHT, MA."

The sun was still in the sky when Futaba got back home. As she walked in the front door, she heard Sojiro’s voice call out to her from the kitchen.

"Futaba, is that you?"

"Yeah, I’m home."

"Great. You hungry?"

"Hungry?” Come to think of it, Futaba hadn’t eaten since breakfast. She was tempted to grab a steak skewer on her way out of Inaba, but she wanted to get home and follow up on the Aigis lead as soon as possible. Still, it could wait a minute. “Yeah, sure. Can you grab one of my instant noodle packets from the cabinet?”

"You’re not eating that crap. I’ll make us dinner.”

"You’ve been working all day, haven’t you?” Futaba groaned. Dr. Takemi had told him to get
more rest, but he was not following the doctor’s orders. “Let me make dinner!”

“You had a big road trip today, right?” Sojiro’s voice was slightly muffled by the sound of pots and pans being moved around. “That can be draining. I’ll handle dinner.”

“Sojiro, you can’t wear yourself out like this!” Futaba was halfway to the kitchen when she heard a knock on the door. “Just let me do the cooking!”

“Can’t hear you, I’m already turning on the stove!”

“Sojirooooo!” Futaba whined as she opened the door. All of her concerns about Sojiro vanished as a gloved hand wrapped around her wrist and jerked her forwards.

“Futaba Sakura, right?”

Futaba found herself at eye-level with a woman’s chest. The woman was dressed in a fancy black suit. Futaba looked up and saw the woman’s face.

It was Mitsuru Kirijo.

“You need to come with me.”

Chapter End Notes

IT’S YA BOY
Futaba was completely overcome with fear. The aura of scariness that surrounded Mitsuru Kirijo in pictures did not do the genuine article justice. Futaba had never been this terrified in her life. Not when she was in mortal danger in the Metaverse, not when she was recovering from her trauma and forcing herself to engage with the world, not even when Makoto would give her the ultimate Nijima glare. All of that paled in comparison to the red-haired empress of the business world standing before her.

“Mi… Mi… Mitsu-“

“Yes, I am.”

Mitsuru slipped a simple metal ring onto Futaba’s finger. The cold steel touching her finger brought the younger woman to her senses, and she prepared to scream as loud as she could. There was no way this woman could abduct her from her own front door in broad daylight. Not if she put up some kind of fight. Futaba took a deep breath.

“Now!” Mitsuru cried.

“Got it!”

Standing a few feet behind Mitsuru was a lanky man with light brown hair, a short goatee, a black suit, and red goggles. He was holding a black box with a button on the top, which he pressed. Futaba could feel a shift in the atmosphere. The sky went dark and all of the lights in the house shut off. Futaba managed to pull out of Mitsuru’s grasp and immediately ran for the kitchen.

“Sojiro, call the police!” Futaba heard no response. “Sojiro, this is an emergency, we have to-AAAAHHH!”

When Futaba entered the kitchen, Sojiro was not there. Instead, in the dark room was a glowing red coffin standing upright in front of the stove.

“Sojiro! Are you in there!?” Futaba ran up to the coffin and pulled on the lid with all her might, but it wouldn’t budge. After exerting what little stamina she had, she wiped the sweat from her brow,
feeling the metal of the ring that had been forced on her finger against her forehead. Futaba had no
idea what this steel ring was for, but she doubted it was anything good. As she began to take it off,
she heard the clicking of heels approach from behind her.

“Your adoptive father is unharmed” Mitsuru said. “I would not advise removing that ring.”

“L-like I’m gonna listen t-to you!” Futaba glared at Mitsuru, but beneath the eyes trying their
darndest to be angry was a powerful undercurrent of fear. “I don’t know if this ring’s gonna shock
me or inject me with something or blow up, but I’m not keeping it on for one more second!”
Futaba tore off the ring and sloppily chucked it at Mitsuru’s head. Mitsuru caught it effortlessly,
and a very slight tinge of surprise appeared on her face.

“So you have the potential. Interesting.” Mitsuru pocketed the ring and reached into her jacket,
pulling out a thin object that looked like the hilt of a sword. “You will come with me for
questioning, Sakura. I would advise against resisting. I have no desire to hurt you, but if you decide
to put up a fight…” Mitsuru assumed a fencing stance and pointed the hilt at Futaba. A thin blade
extended from it, resembling a rapier. “I will not hesitate to fight back.”

“I… I…” Futaba’s heart started racing. She hadn’t even hacked into the Kirijo Group’s database,
and yet somehow Mitsuru Kirijo was already in her home and pointing a sword at her. And Sojiro
was trapped in some kind of creepy coffin. And all the lights had been turned out. And also the
sun, somehow. At this moment, Futaba was really wishing she’d taken up Makoto’s many offers to
teach her the basics of self-defense. The situation seemed hopeless. Futaba’s voice began to waver.
“I don’t wanna…”

“Your compliance is not a factor.” Mitsuru took a step towards Futaba. “Come with me peaceably.
This is not a request.”

“No… Please…” Futaba fell to her knees and clutched her head. This couldn’t be happening. How
were these people onto her so soon? Just what did they have at their disposal that allowed for this
situation? And what was going to happen now? They had come there to kidnap Futaba. Where
were they going to take her? What were they going to do when they got there?

“I don’t wanna go…”

Was she going to be killed?

“I will say it only one more time: Come with me or I will use force.”

Or tortured?

“No… Please…”

Was this the end of Futaba Sakura? No, it couldn’t be the end. It just couldn’t.

“I’M NOT GOING!”

There was a flash of blue light around Futaba. When it was over, she looked up at Mitsuru, who
had taken a step back and looked alarmed and confused. At first, Futaba wasn’t sure just what had
her aggressor so spooked, but then she realized that the entire world had turned a shade of red. She
looked down at her hands. They were covered in black skintight material, with green lines running
all around it.

And then she felt a very familiar presence within herself. And she knew the time for freaking out
was over. Futaba rose to her feet, smirking at Mitsuru.
“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to thwart your plans now.” Futaba snickered and laced her fingers together, cracking her knuckles.

“What is going on!?” Mitsuru went from being scared to far more hostile. She took another step towards Futaba. “What are those clothes!?”

“They’re just something I put on when I’m feeling rebellious.” Futaba raised her hands and pinched the ends of her goggles. “But I think I’ll ditch the goggles. They look too much like your henchman’s. Don’t wanna give anybody the wrong impression.” Futaba began to pull at the goggles. It had been a long time since she’d done it, so it was a bit tough. Agonizing, as they slowly started to lift off her face. Finally, she decided to rip them off like a band-aid, a spurt of blood flying off her face as she did so. “PERSONA!”

“What did you say!?”

Mitsuru didn’t get an answer from Futaba. As she got ready to strike with her sword, a technicolor flame swirled around the girl and she vanished into thin air.

“Uh… Mitsuru-San…” The brown-haired man called out to his boss from the doorway, looking at the sky. “You should see this!”

Mitsuru stormed out the front door and looked up. Hanging in the dark green sky was the largest Persona she had ever seen: It was a pitch black orb wreathed in rainbow fire, with multicolored lines of flame running along its surface forming a smiley face. And it was the size of a house.

“Well, it was nice meeting you and all…” Futaba’s voice reverberated from Prometheus like a loudspeaker. “But I’m already friends with enough scary ladies, so I think I’m just gonna take off!” Prometheus turned around and began to float away.

“What do we do!?” the brown-haired man asked.

“Chase her” Mitsuru said.

“How are we supposed to do that!?”

“Think, Hanamura!” Mitsuru stared daggers into to her agent. “You’re the one with the wind powers! Get creative!”

“Oh! Right!”

Futaba laughed as Prometheus soared over the buildings of Yongen-Jaya. She was aware that she should be far more worried about this situation than she currently was, but just being in control of her Persona for the first time in over a decade was a high too good to let be ruined by crushing reality. And besides, a part of Futaba was already considering her next move. If Personas were back, that meant it was time to get the Phantom Thieves together. Whatever Mitsuru Kirijo did to the world, it didn’t seem to affect Futaba because she had a Persona, which probably meant the others were now surrounded by coffins and totally confused. First she’d pick up Ren, because the Phantom Thieves needed Joker’s leadership. Then she’d grab Makoto for strategic purposes, and then-

Futaba’s train of thought was interrupted by a warning light flashing inside Prometheus. A rearview screen popped up revealing a bizarre Persona in red, green and gold baggy clothes with some kind of giant shuriken/halo things spinning around its shoulders and beneath its feet and a giant fiery afro on its head that looked like the sun. It was flying through the air, propelled by wind it was generating all on its own.
“Damn it, no!” The thing was closing in on Futaba fast. “This is not a disco ball! Go away!” She tried to send Prometheus into its maximum speed, but that just wasn’t very fast. Futaba barely maneuvered out of the way right before the Disco thing rammed her, but with a couple bursts of wind it was turning around fast. She started typing away furiously at a holographic keyboard in front of her. “Ok, let’s see if I remember how to do this…”

The Persona was about to catch Futaba when she pressed a button. It was immediately surrounded by a flash of green light.

“POSITION HACK!”

The Persona appeared back at the Sakura house’s front door. The brown-haired man looked at it in confusion, then turned to Mitsuru.

“I have no clue what just happened.”

“It seems her Persona is capable of things we’ve never seen before.” Mitsuru held her hand up to a communicator in her ear. “Number 5, the target is reaching the edge of the Dark Zone. Prepare for aerial interception.”

“Understood.”

Prometheus rose higher and higher in the sky as Futaba distanced herself from her pursuers. She was very rusty at using her Persona and had no idea how long she could keep flying, but she figured if she vanished into the skyline she could start finding the others from there.

“Alright, first up is Ren. Plotting a course for Nagatach-“

Prometheus vanished. The sunlight was back. The world below had electricity again, and Futaba’s Phantom Thief outfit was gone. And also she was a hundred feet in the air, unsupported by anything, about to fall to her death, the last bit of upward momentum from Prometheus’s flight quickly draining.

“Oh…”

Futaba shut her eyes and screamed as she plummeted to the ground. After falling about fifty feet, something came at her from the side. There was the sound of rockets and the feel of metal around her, and Futaba’s trajectory quickly changed from vertical to horizontal. After a few seconds, the movement came to a stop, and whatever grabbed Futaba seemed to be on solid ground.

“What the…” Futaba looked around. It felt like she was being held by a person, and that person was standing on the roof of a building a couple blocks away from the Takemi Clinic.

“Are you at all hurt?” The voice that questioned Futaba was serene, but spoke in a stilted fashion. Futaba looked up to see the robot girl she’d been investigating, giving her a reassuring smile. The girl who, assuming Kanji hadn’t made up a name on the spot, was called…

“AIGIS!?”

“You know my name.” Aegis frowned. “This is unexpected.”

“You’re real!” Futaba wrapped her hand around one of the metal arms still holding her. “I don’t believe it! I’m talking to an actual robot! This is so cool!”

“I take it from your enthusiastic manner that you are unharmed.”
“Oh, uh, yeah.” Futaba blushed slightly. “And… thanks for saving my life.”

“You are most welcome.” Aigis smiled at Futaba, but there was some sadness in her eyes. “And I would like to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For this.” One of Aigis’s fingers popped open and a needle came out of it. She jabbed it into Futaba’s neck. Futaba didn’t even have time to scream in pain before the drowsiness started to take over. “I hope you have a good rest, Sakura-San.”

When Futaba came to, she was very groggy. And she couldn’t see anything. The world was pitch black. Slowly, muffled voices fell upon her ears.

“…found in her car.”

“A doll?” Futaba recognized Mitsuru’s voice. “Did she make this herself? How long has she been stalking us?”

“Nah, that’s Kanji’s handiwork.”

“Are you certain, Yosuke-San?” Aigis asked.

“Oh, definitely.” That was the the brown-haired guy’s voice. Apparently his name was “Yosuke”. “I’d recognize it anywhere. That’s a Tatsumi original.”

“It is a rather endearing recreation” Aigis said. “I shall have to send Kanji-San my compliments.”

“It’s something else, alright.” Yosuke paused for a moment. “Hey, do you think Labrys would like one?”

Futaba started to be more aware of her surroundings. Her eyes were definitely open, but she only saw blackness. Her face was hot and she felt something soft pressing on her cheek, so she probably had some kind of bag over her head.

“My sister?”

“Yeah. I mean, they’re pretty cute. And I’ve been trying to think of a good present to get her for her birthday. She’d probably like a tiny soft version of herself, right?”

Futaba was lying on her side on a plush surface, and she could feel vibrations like she was in a car or some other vehicle. Her hands were cuffed together behind her back, and her ankles had been tied together as well.

“Perhaps…”

“Will both of you focus!?” Mitsuru sounded agitated. “Why does she have this!? Did Tatsumi tell her about us!?”

“Who, Kanji? No way.” Yosuke hummed in thought. “That doll looks pretty old. He probably had it in storage or something. Maybe this girl broke into his house?”

“It is possible, but to what end?” Aigis asked. “If she was already aware of my existence. I fail to understand how acquiring a doll resembling my person would prove advantageous to her.”
“I mean, she’s some kind of super geek, right? Maybe Mitsuru-San's right about her being a stalker?”

“I’m not a stalker!” Futaba yelled.

“She is awake” Aigis said.

“Where am I!?”

“On the move” Yosuke said.

“Where are you taking me!?”

“Well if we wanted you to know that, your head wouldn’t be in a bag, would it?”

“Is this a joke to you!?”

“Silence.” Mitsuru’s voice cut through the air, sending a chill down Futaba’s spine. Though at the moment, she was more concerned about her body getting cut by the sword tip that was gently pressed against her skin. “You are our prisoner. We are asking the questions here, not you. You are to remain silent until we reach our destination, and even after that you are not to speak unless spoken to. Is that clear?”

Futaba was freaking out. Her home had been broken into, she had been drugged, and now she was kidnapped and being spirited away to some secret location to be interrogated by the most terrifying woman in the world. And this time, she had a feeling she wasn’t going to be able to get out of it by summoning her Persona.

“ANSWER ME!”

“Yes! It’s c-clear!” Futaba started to panic, tears leaking from her eyes and her breath going rapid. With each breath, she could feel the bag being sucked down onto her face and then pushed away again.

“Holy crap!” Yosuke yelled.

“Mitsuru-San, please stop this!” Aigis finally had some emotion to her voice, and it seemed angry. “Your actions are highly unnecessary!”

“Yeah, put the sword away!”

“This woman presents a danger to our operations” Mitsuru said. “I’m simply ensuring that she understands her situation.”

“What danger!? She’s 90 pounds soaking wet and has the muscle mass of an elementary schooler! And look at the wet spots on the bag! I’m pretty sure she’s crying!”

“I’m doing this to protect Aigis! Do you have any idea who she works for!? What would happen if she told the wrong people about your existence!?”

Futaba’s breaths grew more rapid. The inside of the bag felt hotter and hotter, and she started to feel dizzy.

“I believe she has lost control of her breathing” Aigis said worriedly.

“Outta the way!” Yosuke yelled and there was the sound of metal pushing against metal. Futaba
felt the tip of the sword move away from her body.

“Hanamura, what are you doing!?”

“She can’t answer your questions if she suffocates!” Futaba heard a tearing sound and for a second another metal object bumped against one of her lips. Thankfully, it didn’t break the skin. When it pulled away, she could feel air against her mouth and it was easier to breathe. After Futaba got better control of her breath, she heard Yosuke’s voice again. “Are you ok?”

“I can breathe again, but…” Futaba’s voice was still shaky. “No, not really.”

“Yeah, uh…” Yosuke sighed. “I guess that was kind of a dumb question.”

“That’s enough, Hanamura.” Mitsuru’s voice was followed by the sound of a door opening. Futaba didn’t even realize that the vehicle had stopped. “We’re here.”

“‘If my sister’s in some kinda trouble, I wanna be part of this!’

Futaba was seated in a soundproof room in a Kirijo Group facility. On the other side of the door, Yosuke, Mitsuru, and Labrys were all standing around, discussing how to handle her interrogation.

“I’ve already made my decision, Labrys.” Mitsuru folded her arms. “Hanamura and I will be conducting the interrogation. We’ll be doing ‘good cop, bad cop’.”

“Yeah, about that, Mitsuru-San…” Yosuke lifted his goggles to his forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What is it?”

“I think maybe ‘good cop, bad cop’ may be a bit too much for her. At least if you’re the bad cop.” Yosuke looked through the one-way glass at Futaba. She was crouching on the chair they provided for her, curled up and hugging her knees to her chest. She was the picture of fear itself. “Maybe Labrys and I should do ‘good cop, good cop’.”

“You need to stop coddling her.” Mitsuru scowled at Yosuke. “She’s not a child. She’s an adult woman who works for the Japanese government. She’s an accomplished member of the intelligence community, and her recent actions concern me for a multitude of reasons.”

“Hey, I get it. I’m a member of this team too. And you’re the boss, so if you really wanna go in and scare the pants off of her, I can’t stop you.” Yosuke kept staring at Futaba, his face full of pity. “But I just have this feeling about her, is all. Like maybe she’s not the villain we think she is. I think we should wait to get her side of the story before deploying the heavy artillery.”

“I see. So, in the interest of not ‘deploying the heavy artillery’, you would like for me to stay back. And in my place, you’re sending…” Mitsuru’s eyes shifted to the robot girl next to Yosuke. “Labrys.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm a livin’ weapon, we all get the irony.” Labrys rolled her eyes. “Will ya just let us try things our way before the kid wets herself and we have to get a clean-up crew in there?”

“Alright.” Mitsuru smiled. “I would like nothing more than to be wrong about Futaba Sakura. Let’s see what you two can get out of her.”

“Alright!” Yosuke turned to Labrys. “You ready?”
“Sure.” Labrys opened the door. “Let’s go.”

Futaba looked up as the door opened. She wasn’t surprised to see Yosuke walk in. Of the three people who had abducted her, he was definitely the people person among them. What did surprise her was instead of Mitsuro Kirijo or Aigis, it was the other robot girl from the Junes picture accompanying him. The two of them sat down at the other side of the table.

“Hi there” Yosuke gave Futaba a smile. “I’m Yosuke Hanamura. We’ve… kind of met already.”

Futaba stared at Yosuke warily, saying nothing.

“This is my partner, Labrys.” Yosuke gestured to the girl next to him. “You probably guessed, but she’s a-“

“Robot.” Futaba said. “A real robot. Two in one day.”

“Big day for you, huh?” Labrys asked.

“Yeah” Futaba said. She looked back and forth between Yosuke and Labrys. “So, what are you guys gonna do to me?”

“Well, that depends on how you answer our questions” Yosuke says. “Personally, I’m hoping this whole ordeal is just one big crazy misunderstanding, and that we can all become friends.”

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind being friends with a robot.”

“What about me?”

“Hm…” Futaba looked Yosuke up and down. “Eh.”

“Harsh.” Yosuke started to sulk.

“There, there.” Labrys put her hand on Yosuke’s shoulder. “So, Futaba-Chan- Ya mind if I call ya ‘Futaba-Chan’?”

“That’s fine.”

“Futaba-Chan, why exactly were ya lookin’ up my sister?”

“How did you guys know about that?” Futaba let her feet down to the floor and leaned on the table. “I had barely even gotten started investigating her before you were kicking down my door and sticking cheap jewelry on me! What was with that ring anyway? And how did you create a pocket Metaverse like that!? Sojiro was stuck in that coffin and- OH GOD WHAT HAPPENED TO SOJIRO!? What did you people do to him!?”

“Hey Sojiro!” Labrys’s mouth moved, but instead of that Kansai accent coming out, Futaba heard a perfect recreation of her own voice. Labrys held up her hand to the side of her head, mimicking a
phone. “Sorry I took off suddenly like that, but I got a call about this big emergency situation at work and had to run into the office immediately. It’s a super-top-secret crisis situation, so I can’t really tell you anything about it. I might be staying at the office for a few days, so I’ll talk to you later!”

“THAT’S SO COOL!” Futaba’s jaw dropped. “How did you do that!? Did you have a synthesized voice program for me already prepared, or can your vocal processors mimic any sound on the sp-WAIT A SECOND, NO!” Futaba slammed her hands on the table. “That’s identity theft! What gives you the right!?”

“You know, for somebody in an interrogation room, you sure do ask a lot of questions” Yosuke said.

“Yeah, you don’t really get how this works, do ya?” Labrys added. “You’re s’posed to be answerin’ OUR questions.”

“What are you gonna do, torture me?” Futaba tried to put on a tough face, but it was easy to tell she was scared.

“Not us, no…” Yosuke looked uneasily back towards the door, where he knew Mitsuru was waiting on the other side. He shook his head and looked back towards Futaba. “Look, we’re not bad guys here. And something tells me you aren’t either. So, how about as a show of faith, we tell you how we found you, and then you answer our questions? Deal?”

Yosuke held out his hand. Futaba looked at it for a moment and then nodded.

“Deal.”

“We picked up your scent when ya accessed those police files about the airplane hijackin’” Labrys said. “There are a few cases like that we’ve been involved in, so we have a little alert set up whenever somebody starts to look into ‘em. Usually it’s no big deal, so we just leave it alone.”

“This time we didn’t ignore it because of who was looking us up.” Yosuke gave Futaba an impressed look. “A highly-skilled cracker working for Public Security, AND the daughter of a woman who was researching Shadows. Given our line of work, that’s a noteworthy combination.”

“You know about my mom’s research!?”

“Mitsuru-San’ll wanna talk to ya about that later.” Labrys clasped her hands together. “After learnin’ ya were lookin’ into a case involvin’ my sister, we broke into your computer to see what ya were up to. When we learned ya were on the verge of discoverin’ Aigis’s existence, we decided to do somethin’ about it.”

“No way!” Futaba’s brow furrowed. “Do you KNOW how advanced my security is!? You couldn’t just access my files without setting off like 100 alarms and countermeasures!”

“Oh, you’re good, Futaba-Chan, there’s no doubt about that.” Labrys smirked. “But no security coded by a human is gonna outdo me. I’m a computer that can think. Your firewalls were some of the trickier ones I’ve dealt with, but you’re outta your league, kiddo.”

“That’s…” Futaba’s head drooped and she muttered something.

“What’d she say?” Yosuke asked.

“Yes.” Labrys continued smirking. “I AM so cool.”
“Anyway, we also saw that you hacked into Kanji Tatsumi’s communications. And then there’s that doll…” Yosuke’s face got a little angry. “Did you do something to Kanji? What does he have to do with this?"

“I didn’t hurt him or anything!” Futaba was taken aback by the sudden shift in Yosuke’s mood. The guy had been pretty jovial so far, so while he was nowhere near as terrifying as somebody like Mitsuru, it was still unsettling to see him mad. “I just know him and recognized him from the picture! He was my only lead to learn more about the Kirijo Group’s robots, so I went to visit him. I just happened to find that doll and asked about it. He made up some lie about it being a character he created and told me her name was ‘Aigis’, but that was it. He had no idea I was investigating anything.”

“Yes, sounds like Kanji.” Yosuke sighed. “A girl shows interest in him and he just starts running his mouth and saying stuff without thinking.”

“So, what was it all for?” Labrys leaned forward. “What were you hopin’ to find, Futaba-Chan? And who are you workin’ for? Did somebody in public security ask you to do this?”

“No, this was all me.” Futaba stared telling them the whole story. About the airport systems failure, and her looking into past airline-related incidents, and about how the lack of information about the highjacking seemed really suspicious and she couldn’t ignore her curiosity. She moved on to how she talked to Ando, and then how she discovered Mitsuru in the photos. “…then when I made the Ikutsuki connection and realized the Port Island explosion might have something to do with Shadows, I knew I couldn’t just leave it all alone.”

“And why’s that?” Yosuke asked. “What do you know about Shadows?”

The door opened.

“Yes, Miss Sakura…” Mitsuru stepped into the room, holding a large envelope. “What?”

“Mitsuru-San-“ Yosuke was cut off by a finger held up to his face.

“You two are dismissed.”

“What?” Labrys stood up. “But we’ve barely gotten started-“

“You’ve gotten everything out of her I wanted you to. Now I have some questions I’d like to ask her personally.”

Yosuke and Labrys stared at Mitsuru warily for a moment.

“I’ll say it once more.” Mitsuru glared at the pair. “You’re DISMISSED.”

Yosuke and Labrys shuddered and looked at each other. The two left the room without saying another word. Mitsuru sat down at the table and looked at Futaba, her eyes softening a bit.

“I would like to apologize for our rough treatment of you earlier.” Mitsuru’s voice was still harsh, but her face seemed to show genuine remorse. “You must understand, Aigis and Labrys are very precious to me, and their existence in a closely-guarded secret.”

“You sure didn’t talk to ‘em like they were precious” Futaba said meekly.

“Yes, well, I suppose it would seem that way.” Mitsuru actually seemed a little embarrassed. “I’m told that I don’t have the best people skills.”
“You could start by talking to people without pointing a sword at them.”

“Yes, I’ll consider that.” Mitsuru chuckled for a moment, but her expression quickly sobered. “Still, all of the Shadow Operatives are like family to me, and—”

“WHAT!?” Futaba jumped up in her chair a little. She had heard of the Shadow Operatives, of course. Everyone she worked with had. They were supposedly a secret group within the Public Security department that took on the strange and weird cases nobody else was equipped to deal with. In the early days of her work, Futaba had heard the rumors and investigated them, but never found any concrete proof of their existence, so she figured it was just some rookie hazing thing. “YOU’RE the Shadow Operatives! They’re real!”

“That’s right.” Mitsuru nodded. “Security Department, Shadow Response Unit. An unofficial task force founded by myself in cooperation with the police to combat Shadows and stop the threat they present to humanity. And like I said, the closest thing I have to family.” Mitsuru’s eyes narrowed. “And I would do ANYTHING to protect my family. I’m sure you must feel the same.”

“I mean, yeah, kinda…” Futaba gulped. “I mean, I care about Sojiro a lot, but I’m not that strong. If somebody was threatening him I could dig up their secrets, but I could never do anything like kidnap and drug them.”

“Are you certain about that? There’s nobody you’d go to any extreme to protect?”

“Not the kind you would.”

“Really? Nobody at all?” Mitsuru opened the envelope and took out a photograph. It was a screenshot from the Phantom Thieves’ televised calling card for Shido all those years ago, a group shot showing them all in silhouette. “Not even the other members of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts?”

“Whaaaaaat?” Futaba started laughing nervously. “That’s not… I don’t…” Futaba looked into Mitsuru’s eyes. The woman clearly wasn’t buying her obvious lie. Futaba decided to press forward anyway, pointing to Makoto’s silhouette. “I mean, I guess I see the resemblance a little, but that’s not me.”

“Of course not. That is.” Mitsuru pointed to Futaba in the lineup. “Before your claim otherwise, I will remind you that I saw you wearing this outfit when you summoned your Persona.”

“Oh… right.”

“I must admit, I’m impressed.” Mitsuru leaned back in her chair, scanning Futaba’s face with her eyes as if she was trying to read her brain. “The changes of heart were of great interest to us. but we could never begin to understand how they worked. We assumed it had something to do with… what was that term you used? ‘Metaverse’?”

“Yeah.” Futaba was much less scared of Mitsuru than she had been before. Which didn’t mean the fear was gone, far from it, but there was something oddly liberating about having somebody new to talk about the Phantom Thieves with. “We also call it the ‘Cognitive World’. It’s—”

“Another plane of existence formed from the collective human consciousness.”

“So you’ve read my mom’s research.”

“Yes. But also I have personal experience dealing with it.” Mitsuru rubbed her chin. “The ‘Metaverse’, as you call it, manifests in a different form every few years. When I first dealt with it,
it was ‘the Dark Hour’, an extra hour of the day that would fall upon the world at midnight, during which only a select few people could move, and everybody else would be replaced by garish coffins.”

“Like what happened when you came to my house!”

“Yes, that was a Dark Zone. It’s something we can generate that recreates the Dark Hour in a localized area.” Mitsuru smirked. “The ring I placed on your finger was designed to keep normal people awake in it, though it seems you didn’t need it. It’s much easier to extract a person without witnesses.”

“And that’s… safe?” Futaba couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “There are no negative side effects?”

“Well, the first time one was activated, a man without a Persona was attacked by Shadows. But seeing as there were four Persona users present in the area, I don’t think we were at any kind of great risk.”

“Four?” Futaba started counting off on her hands. “There was me, and that Yosuke guy, and you I’m guessing, so that’d make the fourth… NO WAY!” A large grin formed on Futaba’s face. “Aigis can use a Persona!”

“Yes. Labrys too. They are Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapons designed by the Kirijo Group. Machines created with a sense of self so they could develop Personas and combat Shadows in the Dark Hour.”

“That’s incredible…”

“The second manifestation of the Metaverse was an incident in Inaba. It took form of the ‘Midnight Channel’, a world inside of television sets. There was a series of murders and kidnappings involved, and a group of Personas users would travel inside of the TV to combat Shadows and save human lives.”

“Waiting for midnight and going into the TV…” Futaba stared at the ceiling. “Those sure are unconventional ways to get into the Metaverse.”

“And how did YOU enter it?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” Mitsuru shook her head. “The incidents in 2016 were galling. We were certain that Masayoshi Shido was using the Shadow World to orchestrate the Mental Shutdowns and that the Phantom Thieves were using a similar method to cause their changes of heart. But without a way to access the Cognitive World ourselves, we were unable to investigate the methods by which these activities were carried out.” An annoyed look appeared on Mitsuru’s face. “Even after Shido’s change of heart, our probe of his communications and files revealed no method of entry.”

“That’s because Shido didn’t have a method of entry.” Futaba glared. “His errand boy did.”

“I take it you’re referring to Goro Akechi.” Mitsuru looked at Futaba curiously.

“Yes.” Futaba’s glare intensified. “That freak killed my mom.”

“I’m sorry.” Mitsuru frowned slightly. “I lost my father in a similar fashion.”
“Were you blamed for his death?”

“By some members of the Kirijo Group, yes.” Mitsuru scoffed. “They were very resistant to a teenage girl taking ownership of the company and would try to fabricate any reason they could to prevent it. I knew the truth, so I didn’t let it bother me.”

“That’s better than I had.” Futaba closed her eyes. “My mom's killers forged a suicide note and said that she killed herself because of me.”

“Well, I don’t know about 'better.'” Mitsuru had a sullen look on her face. “I knew the truth because my father died right in front of me.”

“Oh.” Futaba’s eyes shot open, and she looked around the room awkwardly. “Maybe we should talk about something else.”

“Yes, let’s get back to the subject at hand.” Mitsuru returned to her professional demeanor. “How did the Phantom Thieves and Goro Akechi gain access to the Metaverse?”

“Smart phone app.”

“Oh. That’s…” Mitsuru was actually baffled. Evidently, she had not been prepared for Futaba’s answer. It was considerably more mundane than the previous methods she had mentioned for accessing the Metaverse. “It wasn’t available to download, was it?”

“No, it downloaded itself onto our phones. Like malware or something. We couldn’t delete it until the Metaverse collapsed, then it erased itself on its own.”

“‘Collapsed’? Meaning you became unable to access it?”

“Yup.”

“Fascinating…” Mitsuru nodded knowingly. “It seems history keeps repeating itself. The Dark Hour and Midnight Channel both went away after certain events transpired as well.”

“Would these ‘certain events’ involve fighting a god?”

“You too?”

“Yeah.” Futaba yawned. “He was called ‘Yaldabaoth’. He said he was made from humanity’s desire to give up control of their lives and end their suffering.”

“Ours was Nyx” Mitsuru said. “It claimed to bring the death that all people secretly wished for.”

“Those sound really similar.” Futaba cocked her eyebrow. “Was the Midnight Channel like that too?”

“From what Hanamura has told me, he faced ‘Ameno-sagiri’, who also claimed to want to lift humanity’s burdens by turning us all into Shadows.”

“That’s a pattern.”

“Yes. That’s why the Shadow Operatives exist.” Mitsuru crossed one leg over the other and brought her hands together, taking a regal stance. “My grandfather conducted experiments on Shadows that led to widespread suffering. My father and I both envisioned a future for the Kirijo Group that involved cleaning up my family’s mess. And for nearly twenty years now, I’ve succeeded in doing just that. The Shadow Operatives were founded for this purpose, but even after
we accomplished that goal, I have kept the organization running because Shadows will always
crop up so long as human beings feel burdened by life’s hardships.”

“So… forever.”

“Exactly.” Mitsuru smiled. “When I was in high school, I had to bring together a group of Persona
users formed from my peers. We called ourselves ‘S.E.E.S.’, and we fought Shadows and brought
an end to the Dark Hour. The Inaba incident had a similar group of high school students come
together. They called themselves an investigation team. I believe you Phantom Thieves are similar,
and I would very much like to compare notes with the rest of your group and discuss the possibility
of working together.”

“Oh. Uh…” Futaba shook her head. “I don’t think that’s happening.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not going to tell you who they are.”

“That’s a shame.” Mitsuru’s smile vanished. “I thought we were beginning to understand each
other.”

“Look, I believe you’re not all secretly evil, but that doesn’t mean I want to drag my friends into
this.” Futaba tried crossing her legs in an attempt to mimic Mitsuru’s pose and even the playing
field. It was very awkward and did not have the intended effect. “I can’t just ask them to drop
everything and help you fight Shadows.”

“Very well then.” Mitsuru’s smile reappeared, but instead of warm and friendly, this time it was
cool and cocky. “If you won’t introduce me to them, I’ll just have my people bring them to us.”

“How are you gonna do that?”

“You doubt our capabilities after all this?”

“I’m calling your bluff, lady.” Futaba smirked. “You only found out I was a Phantom Thief
because you saw me transform into my thief outfit in front of you. You have no way of figuring out
who the rest of us-”

“We took your phone while you were unconscious.”

Futaba shut up.

“You really should change the icon on that group chat room of yours. It’s rather incriminating.”

“I-it’s just an icon…” Futaba’s head hung low. “It doesn’t prove anything.”

“Mmhm.” Mitsuru reached into the envelope, pulling out a small photo of Futaba and laying it on
top of her silhouette. “Futaba Sakura, cracker for Public Security and the daughter of Wakaba
Isshiki, the leading expert in the field of Cognitive Psience.”

Mitsuru reached into the envelope again and pulled out a picture of Yusuke at one of his gallery
debuts. She placed it over Fox. “Yusuke Kitagawa, a prominent artist and former pupil of the
disgraced artist Ichiryusai Madarame, one of the major change of heart cases.”

Then came a picture of Haru in her cafe, taken from a feature run about her in a business magazine.
“Haru Okumura, majority shareholder in the Okumura Foods corporation, Shujin student during
the Kamoshida incident, and daughter of Kunikazu Okumura, a victim of the mental shutdowns.”

A picture of Ann from the set of one of her movies was placed over Panther’s silhouette. “Ann Takamaki, a beloved actress and model, who attended Shujin Academy when the first major change of heart case, that of Suguru Kamoshida, took place.”

Next came a picture of Makoto from her police file. “Makoto Amamiya-Niijima, detective with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, student council president of Shujin Academy during the Kamoshida incident, and younger sister of Sae Niijima, who was a prosecutor with the SIU assigned to capturing the Phantom Thieves for the majority of 2016.”

Mitsuru placed a picture of Ryuji on the table. It was cropped, but from the arm ensnared in his, Futaba was guessing it was from a tabloid article about Hifumi. “Ryuji Sakamoto, yet another Shujin student with a history of turmoil with Suguru Kamoshida, and current bodyguard of…”

Finally, Mitsuru placed a newspaper clipping of Ren right over Joker in the middle of the line-up. “Ren Amamiya-Niijima, husband of Makoto Amamiya-Niijima, Shujin Academy student at the same time as the others, falsely labelled a delinquent for a year thanks to a petty vendetta of Masayoshi Shido’s, and current Diet Man representing Tokyo’s 7th district in the House of Representatives.”

Futaba remained silent, staring at the photos covering the line-up.

“Oh yes, I forgot one.” Mitsuru reached into the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper with several photos of Morgana in Cafe Noir that had been shared on social media. “This ‘Morgana’ you all spoke of never participated in the chat personally, but seeing as this cat at Haru Okumura’s cafe doesn’t seem to age, I’m going to guess it’s the cat-like creature in the Phantom Thieves image.”

“A cat? Really?” Futaba looked up at Mitsuru, trying her best to look incredulous. “Don’t you think that’s a little-“

“We used to have a dog that could use a Persona” Mitsuru said matter-of-factly.

“Oh.” Futaba’s shoulders sunk in defeat for a moment, but she quickly sat up straight. “Well, you still can’t talk to them!”

“There’s nothing to worry about.” Mitsuru shook her head. “I only wish to speak with them. I’m not trying to recruit them.”

“You might not be trying, but that’s what will happen.” Futaba looked at the picture on the table. “We all loved being the Phantom Thieves so much. We were reforming society, and got to do it by fighting monsters with superpowers. It was a rush, and it took us a long time to get over the withdrawal of losing our abilities. But they all moved on. They all have families and jobs and dreams that they’re living out.” Futaba glared at Mitsuru, and for the first time all day, there was no fear in her expression. “If you tell them that Shadows are still out there, they WILL drop everything to fight them. They can’t help it. They’re all unbelievably helpful people who will do anything they can for others, especially if it’s something nobody else can do. And I’m not going to let you tear them away from everything they’ve worked for.”

“I see…” Mitsuru leaned forward, and Futaba’s resolve wavered a little. “And what about you?”

“What ABOUT me?”

“We’ve done our research on you, you know. You have no family. No children, no significant other. And while you’re certainly skilled at your job, you weren’t satisfied enough with it to the
point where you could ignore a suspicious police report, which led to your being here.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You’re a smart girl. I think you know exactly what I’m getting at. But I’ll do you the courtesy of saying it straightforward.” Mitsuru rose and extended her hand to Futaba. “Futaba Sakura, how would you like to join the Shadow Operatives?”
“No.”

“You don’t have to answer right away” Mitsuru said. “I understand if you need some time to come to a decision.”

“I already made a decision” Futaba said. “It’s ‘no’.”

“I won’t accept a decision made so hastily.”

“It doesn’t matter if you accept it or not!” Futaba rose from her chair. “It’s not your decision to make! I don’t care how scary and powerful you are, you can’t force me to join your secret organization!”

“Actually, I could.” Mitsuru crossed her arms. “I could keep you imprisoned in this facility until you agree to work with us. Or threaten to use my resources to buy up your neighborhood, including your father’s home and coffee shop, and turn it all into a Kirijo Electronics warehouse.”

Futaba said nothing, staring at Mitsuru in confounded terror. The domineering woman before her continued.

“Or I could activate a Dark Zone and cast Marin Karin on you, making you quit your job in a way that ensures you get blacklisted from any industry that would hire you—” Mitsuru’s eyes widened and she looked at Futaba awkwardly. “Oh my. I can see why Hanamura called me the ‘heavy artillery’.”

Mitsuru strode out of the room quickly. Futaba stared at the door as it shut behind her, wondering just what the hell was going on. Still, considering the life-ruining scenarios that had just been described to her, she decided to just wait until hopefully somebody came by to let her out. After a minute, the door opened again, and Yosuke and Labrys walked in.

“Sorry about that.” Yosuke smiled nervously. “Mitsuru-San is used to dealing with some pretty tough customers, so she has this habit of jumping straight to the nuclear option.”

“She has asked us to tell ya how sorry she is, and wants you to know that she would never actually do any of those things.” Labrys shook her head. “She can be a real piece of work sometimes.”

“What you have to understand is that Mitsuru-San’s brain doesn’t work the same as other peoples’.” Yosuke shrugged. “I’ve been working for her for ten years now and I still have no idea what she’s thinking half the time.”

“She lives in a totally different world than ordinary folks” Labrys said. “And I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout all
this Shadow Ops stuff. It’s because of her rich upbringin’.”

“That doesn’t give her a right to threaten people like a psychopath” Futaba said.

“No, you’re right” Yosuke said. “It doesn’t. But you have to understand that Mitsuru-San’s life is a stressful one. It’s like that old saying, ‘heavy is the head that wears the crown.’”

“Seriously. Her life is crazy.” Labrys looked Futaba dead in the eye. “I’m talkin’ ‘fightin’ assassins in the nude’ crazy.”

“What!”

The bath hadn’t done much to help Mitsuru relax. This was supposed to be a vacation, but it hadn’t felt like one. The first time in months where she didn’t immediately have to think about Shadows or the Kirijo Group’s affairs, and she’d been hounded all day by tabloid reporters and paparazzi hoping to get a whiff of scandal during her trip to Okinawa. As if she didn’t have enough problems already. The warm water was supposed to calm Mitsuru’s body and let her stress melt away. Instead, it let her stew in her own anger, bringing her frustrations to a boil.

It had only been four months since Makoto’s death. Mitsuru had tried to move on, but it was difficult. Losing someone was never fair, and Mitsuru had lost so many people in the past year. Shinjiro, her father, even Ikutsuki, who — reprehensible traitor though he was — she had respected and even admired until he showed his true colors. But Makoto’s passing hit harder, because they had spent so little time together, and yet he meant so much to her anyway. Being with her when she stood up to boorish suitors, accompanying her on her outings to restaurants common folk went to, and all those little tutoring sessions he would request periodically on nights they weren’t exploring Tartarus.

“Mitsuru-Senpai, I recently made friends with a transfer student from France and want to make him feel more welcome. If you’re not too busy, would you be willing to give me some French lessons?”

“French lessons” indeed. It didn’t take her long to realize that he probably wanted to try “French” with her in a whole different sense of the word, but where she would’ve executed Iori or even Akihiko had their eyes wandered the same places Makoto’s sometimes did, she was oddly tolerant when her navy-haired junior let his worse impulses take over for a moment. Makoto Yuki was someone who let her be something other than responsible. Both during the daytime and the Dark Hour, he was willing to help shoulder Mitsuru’s burdens, whether taking command on the battlefield or simply being a listening ear in a world where everybody else was ready to exploit the tiniest scrap of weakness. He was the rare person she could trust completely, and he had left her life just as quickly as he had entered it. And Mitsuru barely even had time to mourn, because she constantly had a bunch of condescending old men looming over her shoulder, trying to wrest her birthright away from her. Instead of enjoying the springtime of her youth with her first love, Mitsuru had a hole in her heart and was stuck in board rooms shouting her throat raw over how she was not going to allow her family’s company to be reabsorbed into the Nanjo Group.

All of this and more was swirling in Mitsuru’s head as she slowly exited the tub. The night was still young, but she had no desire to try and squeeze any sort of enjoyment out of it. As she wrapped herself in her towel, she elected to seek what little relief she may find in dreams. And so she decided to crack open the balcony door of her hotel room and let the gentle sounds of Okinawa’s sea help carry her to sleep.

When Mitsuru exited the bathroom, any thoughts of rest were quickly banished by the garrote
wrapping around her neck.

There was an instant of panic, and then the adrenaline kicked in, helping Mitsuru find her cool. She had been in significantly worse life and death situations before, face-to-face with genuine monsters with uncanny abilities. This was a regular human being she was dealing with. She wasn’t going to try and grab at the wire or the man’s hands. That would just be a waste of breath, a precious resource that was rapidly dwindling. Mitsuru knew that she had to hurt this man, do something to make him lose his grip on the wire so she could escape his hold. If she had her heels on, this would be a no-brainer, she could just drive one into his foot. But given her current state of undress, she’d have to come up with something else. Thinking quickly, Mitsuru approximated the location of the man’s eyes, using the sensation of hot breath on her neck to estimate where his mouth and the rest of his face was. She stuck out a thumb, tilted her head to the side, and rapidly swung her arm upwards. Her aim was true, and she quickly found her soft, squishy target, eliciting a scream of pain from the man behind her and causing him to let go of the cord around her neck in reflex.

Having only seconds to act, Mitsuru dove to the floor, somersaulting to the other side of the large hotel room. She felt her towel come undone as she did so, but she had far more pressing concerns at the moment than preserving her sense of modesty. Quick as she could, Mitsuru threw open the closet door and tugged at the zipper on her suitcase, reaching inside and feeling around frantically. As she heard the man approach her from behind, she found the object she was looking for, pulling out and unsheathing her rapier in one quick movement. Mitsuru wasn’t sure what galled her more: The fact that a stranger was trying to kill her, the fact that he would likely look back on this moment with perverse glee if he succeeded, or the fact that she was right to bring a sword on her vacation. Either way, she was even more furious than before, and now had a target on which to focus all of her anger.

Right before the assassin could grab her again, Mitsuru turned on her heel and swung wide with her sword. The man jumped back just in time, the tip of Mitsuru’s steel barely cutting into the sleeve of his likely-stolen bellhop uniform. As Mitsuru finally saw her would-be killer’s face, the first thing she noticed was his bewilderment. No matter how professional this man may have been, he clearly was not prepared to have a naked 19-year-old girl pointing a rapier right at him.

“WHO SENT YOU!?”

The man stared at Mitsuru in confusion for a moment, as if mulling over whether to actually answer her question or not. Instead, he rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Well, so much for the quiet approach.” The man reached inside of his uniform and pulled out a knife. He wasted no time ducking down and charging at Mitsuru, closing the distance between them in an instant. With him already too close to use her sword effectively, Mitsuru acted on instinct, planting her free hand on his shoulder and jumping over the knife’s jab and the man himself like she was clearing a hurdle.

Mitsuru landed on the king-sized bed, rolling across the surface of it and planting her feet on the floor as she reached the other side. The man turned around and crawled onto the bed, sticking his knife out at Mitsuru as she approached. She was easily able to parry it as he moved in, and started swinging her rapier quickly in retaliation, forcing him to go on the defensive. The man hastily blocked Mitsuru’s attacks with his knife, barely managing to guard each time. As his reactions got slower and sloppier, he had an idea to regain the advantage.

The man feinted, dropping his guard and moving back on the mattress a bit. Mitsuru took the opening he gave her and thrust with her sword, just as he expected her to. Mitsuru’s blade stuck
deep into the plush mattress, and she started struggling as she tried to pull it out. Seeing his chance, the man pounced forward, a wicked grin on his face.

As he closed in on Mitsuru, he saw her lips curl up into a smirk. Mitsuru stepped back and withdrew her blade from the mattress with ease, flicking it upwards towards his hand. The tip connected with flesh, cutting off three of his fingers, the knife flying out of his grip, severed digits and a trail of blood following it briefly before scattering in all directions.

The man screamed in agony and moved backwards, falling off the other side of the bed. When he rose again, he looked at Mitsuru with eyes full of rage. Mitsuru wasted no time, climbing onto the bed and getting ready to deliver another thrust. Using his uninjured hand, the man grabbed the cord of a lamp on the nearby nightstand and yanked on it, unplugging it and swinging the lamp at Mitsuru like a flail. The lamp careened towards Mitsuru's head.

By the time the shattering of the lamp could be heard, the man was holding a tiny bit of severed power cord in his hand and had the tip of a sword pressed against his throat.

“This is the last time I will ask…” As Mitsuru looked into his eyes with killing intent, all she saw in return was fear. “WHO SENT YOU!?”

“By the time the cops arrived, Mitsuru-San had already gotten a name outta the guy.” Labrys said. “Turns out he was hired by a Kirijo Group board member who was really pissed at Mitsuru-San refusin’ to rejoin the Nanjo Group. Within an hour, the cops were bustin’ down his door and hauled him outta his bed and straight to jail.”

“So yeah, that’s the kind of life Mitsuru-San leads” Yosuke said. “And that’s BEFORE all the stuff involving Shadows.”

“Wow.” Futaba looked down at the floor, processing the story she just heard. “You know, at first I found her really scary and wanted nothing to do with her. But after being told about that…” Futaba looked up at Yosuke and Labrys fearfully. “I wanna get the hell out of here as fast as possible!”

“That reaction is totally fair and I empathize with you a hundred percent.” Yosuke rubbed his temple. “The first time Junpei-Senpai told me that story, I began to wonder if I had made the wrong career choice.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming” Futaba said.

“Here’s the deal” Labrys said. “If ya really, REALLY wanna go home, we’ll take you there. We’re gonna have to blindfold ya for security reasons, but we won’t force ya t’stay here if that ain’t what you want.”

“Still waiting for that ‘but’”.

“But…” Yosuke gave Futaba another nervous grin. “Mitsuru-San HAS asked us to try convincing you to join the Shadow Operatives.”

“I knew it” Futaba grumbled.

“Look, Futaba-Chan,” Labrys said, “we get this has been a rough day for ya, and you’re probably feelin’ really scared and angry right now.”

“We like to call that ‘the Kirijo Effect’.” Yosuke winked at Futaba, then his eyes widened. “Wait, she’s not still listening from the other side of the door, is she?”
“The point,” Labrys said, “is this: So far, all ya’ve seen is the worst we have to offer. Shadow Ops is a great group doin’ important work, and we’d like to give ya the positive sell if ya’d let us.”

“I don’t know…” Futaba’s voice was full of uncertainty. “I really think I just wanna go home and-“

“You don’t have to make a decision today” Yosuke said. “We just wanna give you a tour of the facility.”

“A tour, huh?” Futaba started to mull it over in her head.

“That includes the robotics lab” Yosuke said.

“DEAL!”

When she finally got out of the interrogation room, Futaba was led down a shiny hallway where every surface was made of metal. This sci-fi aesthetic was everything she expected and hoped for from a top-secret facility, which is why the first stop on the tour threw her for a loop.

“This is the lounge” Yosuke said. “It’s a good place to chill when you’re not working on anything.”

Futaba was led into a large, spacious, cozy-looking room. The floor had green tiles, with little clusters of yellow tiles randomly placed around here and there to break up the monotony. There was deep-brown plush furniture in the room, mostly armchairs and couches gathered around a large table, but in a few other spots as well, including near a big-screen TV, which seemed to be the flashiest thing in the room. There was also a large bookshelf on one of the walls, filled with an eclectic mix of reading materials including romance novels, technical manuals, young adult fiction, biographies of sports stars, and even some manga.

The biggest thing that caught Futaba’s eye was a large painted portrait hanging on the wall near the big table. It was a large group of people, all wearing the Gekkoukan uniform, or at least variations on it. Just off to the center was Mitsuru Kirijo herself, although much younger, and with a tiny, dignified smile on her face. To the left of Mitsuru, front and center, was a slightly shorter boy with blue hair and one eye obscured, also smiling, although in a cool and enigmatic fashion. To the right of Mitsuru was Yukari Takeba, and although she wasn’t Feather Pink, she WAS wearing a pink sweater over her school uniform, a big cheerful smile on her face. To Yukari’s right was a girl with light-blue hair Futaba recognized as a young Fuuka Yamagishi, an accomplished engineer and one of Futaba’s personal heroes. Her smile in the portrait was a bit reserved. At the right end of the portrait, next to Fuuka, was a tall, lanky boy in a blue baseball cap, giving a thumbs up. He had a big grin on his face that kind of reminded Futaba of Ryuji.

On the other side of the blue-haired boy, to his left, was Aigis, the same pleasant smile on her face as when she caught Futaba in the air. Standing in front of her was an elementary schooler holding an albino shiba inu, both of them looking very happy. Standing to their left was a tall, well-built boy with silver hair and a bandage on his forehead, standing proud with a confident smirk on his face. And finally, at the end opposite the baseball hat guy, was an even bigger, even taller guy with a black beanie and his hands stuffed in the pockets of his red jacket. He was slouched over a bit, and was the only person not smiling, a grumpy expression on his face.

The one thing these people had in common — besides school uniforms — was a red armband on all of them, even the dog. It had letters on it.
“What’s ’S.E.E.S.’?” Futaba asked.

“They are” Labrys said, looking at the portrait. “S.E.E.S. is what came before the Shadow Operatives. It stands for ‘Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad.’”

“’Execution’!?” Futaba looked at Labrys nervously.

“Yeah, executin’ Shadows. It was a club of Persona users.” Labrys gestured around the room. “They all lived in a dormitory together. This lounge is based off the lounge in that place.”

“Most of them are founding members of the Shadow Operatives, though a lot of them are reserve members these days.” Yosuke pointed to the kid and the guy in the baseball hat. “The only full-time members are Ken and Junpei-Senpai, and even Junpei-Senpai’s away a lot because he volunteers to coach kids in baseball.”

“So Fuuka Yamagishi and Yukari Takeba are Shadow Operatives too!?” Futaba looked at the duo in awe. Yosuke and Labrys exchanged quick grins before turning back to Futaba.

“Yukari’s a reserve member. Fuuka-San never officially joined us, but she’s very important to our operations.” Labrys looked at the portrait wistfully. “Mitsuru-San doesn’t trust any upgrades people wanna add to me or Aigis without runnin’ it by Fuuka-San first.”

“Neither do I” Yosuke said. “I don’t care how heavily the boss vets somebody, I don’t like the idea of some random Kirijo Group scientist secretly installing some remote control thingy inside your head.”

“What about Yukari Takeba?” Futaba asked. “What’s she do?”

“Field operations in times of crisis. Though mostly she shows up to make sure Mitsuru-San gets proper socialization” Yosuke said. “She’s pretty much the only person in the world who isn’t afraid of her at all.”

“Wow…” Futaba looked at the smiling face of her childhood hero in awe. “That’s a superhero for you.”

The next room was a bit more in line with Futaba’s expectations. It was a gym full of all kinds of workout equipment, including treadmills, elliptical, and every flavor of weight machine imaginable. It wasn’t high tech, but it made sense for a top-secret agency to have something like this. Grunting could be heard from the corner of the room, and Futaba looked over to see a man bench-pressing a barbell with some very large weights on the end.

“Looks like someone’s in here” Futaba said. “Maybe we should move on to the robotics lab so we don’t distract him.”

“Hold your horses” Yosuke said. He turned to the man lifting weights and waved at him. “Yo, Senpai!”

“Eh?” The man slowly lowered the barbell onto the rack over the bench he was laying on and sat up, covered in sweat and panting heavily. He was the guy in the baseball cap from the portrait, only with some stubble on his chin, really shaggy hair, and a lot buffer. “Hey, Yosuke and Labrys! And…” The man looked at Futaba curiously. “Is that the hacker Mitsuru-Senpai was talking about?”

“Yup.”
“So since she’s not in handcuffs, I’m guessing she’s not our enemy?”

“Mitsuru-San wants to recruit her” Yosuke said. “We’re giving her a tour of the place.”

“A new recruit, huh?” The man held his hand out to Futaba. “Nice to meet you! I’m Junpei Iori. They call me the ‘Lethal Weapon of the Shadow Operatives!’”

“Nobody calls you that but you” Labrys said.

“Um… Hi.” Futaba took a step back, putting Labrys between herself and Junpei.

“Not a toucher, huh? That’s cool.” Junpei reached down to the floor and grabbed a water bottle, taking a big swig. “So, Mitsuru-Senpai wants you to join our outfit, huh? You a Persona user?”

“Not just any Persona user.” Yosuke grinned. “She’s one of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”

“Whoa, seriously!?” Junpei gawked at Futaba with an equal mix of surprise and glee. “We finally got one of them!? It took long enough! I was beginning to think we’d never find them!”

“So…” Futaba poked her head out from behind Labrys. “Are you a Phanboy?”

“Yeah, I’m a big fan. Ever since that first case of yours.” Junpei’s face soured a bit. “That volleyball guy, Kamoshida? Never liked his face. Always thought he looked fishy. I was really glad when they arrested him. Guys like that give the rest of us coaches a bad name.”

“Oh. I…” Futaba looked down at the ground. “I wasn’t a member when that happened.”

“Oh yeah?” Junpei smiled at Futaba. “Well, you’ll have to introduce me to whoever was responsible for that. I owe them a drink.”

“Junpei-Senpai’s been with the Shadow Operatives longer than either of us have” Yosuke said. “If you have any questions, he’d be a good person to ask.”

“That’s right!” Junpei raised his thumb to his test. “You’re talking to Shadow Operative #4!”

“Is that some kind of ranking?” Futaba asked.

“Kinda.” Junpei took another swig of water and wiped his brow. “Operative numbers are basically saying who joined up first. In the case of us founding members, they’re assigned in the order we joined S.E.E.S., so Mitsuru-Senpai’s #1, Akihiko-Senpai’s #2, Yuka-Tan’s #3, and I’m #4.”

“Officially, in a crisis situation, the member present with the lowest number is in command.” Yosuke slumped over a bit. “Which made things really weird the time Labrys and I were sent on an investigation with Koromaru.”

“Koromaru was a dog” Junpei said. “He was #6.”

“You were taking orders from a dog?” Futaba snickered. “How does that even work?”

“I translated for him” Labrys said. “Koromaru was very bossy. It was his first time leading an operation, so he wanted to make sure everything went perfectly.”

“You can talk to dogs!?”

“Pretty much. Aigis too.”
“Anything else you wanna know?” Junpei asked. “I got nowhere to be a little while.”

“Uh… sure…”

Futaba thought for a minute. Obviously she had a million questions. Did they really fight Shadows that often, how many Shadow Operatives were there, just how legal is everything they’re doing, she was even starting to consider questions you’d ask any employer like details regarding salary and healthcare, as if she was seriously considering taking the job offer. But the thing that stuck out to Futaba most was how kind all of these people seemed to be. Junpei seemed perfectly friendly, Yosuke and Labrys had been really nice to her, and even when kidnapping her, Aigis had shown a lot of concern for Futaba’s wellbeing. Which just made one thing even more unclear to her.

“Why do you all work for Mitsuru Kirijo?”

All three of them stared at Futaba in confusion.

“What do you mean?” Junpei asked.

“I mean, it’s the money, right?” Futaba looked directly at Junpei. “And, I mean, I guess you’ve got some history with her, but it’s because she’s the only person who can fund this operation and deal with the government, right? It’s gotta be really hard working for somebody that scary otherwise, isn’t it?”

“Oh boy.” Junpei gave a tired look to Yosuke. “She used the sword, didn’t she?”

Yosuke nodded solemnly.

“I told Kikuno that was a bad idea. ‘Collapsible pocket rapier’.” Junpei chuckled. “She’s already got a sword in her office, a sword in her bedroom, a sword in her bathroom, a sword in her limo, just how many swords does one woman need?”

“Mitsuru-San doesn’t always give the best first impression,” Labrys said, “but she’s actually very kind once ya get to know her.”

“I don’t believe you” Futaba said.

“It’s the truth, Futaba-Chan.” Labrys frowned and looked down at the ground. “I’ve got a rough history. The people in the Kirijo Group who built me only saw me as a weapon and made me do some really bad stuff. Stuff I still have nightmares about.”

“You have dreams!?”

“Dude, not now” Yosuke said.

“Right, sorry.” Futaba looked at Labrys sheepishly. “Continue.”

“When I wanted to be a person more than a weapon, they shut me down and locked me away for years. A buncha bad stuff happened after that, and when I woke up, I was in another world created by my own Shadow.” Labrys looked up at Futaba. “Oh, I’m not sure how ya awoke to your Persona, so maybe ya don’t know this. A person’s Shadow—“

“I’ve met my own Shadow” Futaba said. “It’s how I got my Persona.”

“Oh, good. One less thing to catch ya up on.” Labrys’s expression became pained. “My Shadow did a lotta bad stuff. Made a lotta people hurt each other. And I came to terms with her— uh, me, I
guess—but I was still out in the world with no idea what to do with myself.” A small smile formed on Labrys’s face. “I thought for sure Mitsuru-San was gonna scrap me, but instead she apologized for what her family had done to me and gave me a place I belonged.”

“That doesn’t sound at all like the woman I met today” Futaba said.

“Well, that’s ‘cuz you’ve only seen one side of her” Junpei said. “Mitsuru-San can come off as cold, and she’s definitely scary, but it’s all because she cares about people. Especially the people close to her.”

“You should’ve seen her when we broke into your computer and saw the photos you’ve found” Yosuke said. “She got really worried about Aigis’s safety. She didn’t even want Aigis to come on the mission to catch you at first, worried that you might’ve had some way to hack into her directly if she got too close. There was even some talk of having Aigis and Labrys locked in a signal-proof room for their own protection, but we managed to talk her down from that.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean she’s a good person!” Futaba scowled at Labrys. “No offense to you and your sister, but if I were a crazy megalomaniacal multi-billionaire, I’d be incredibly cautious about my super-robots too.”

“It’s not like that, kid.” Junpei shook his head. “I get what you’re saying, but you’re completely off base. I know what it’s like to be played. The guy smiles and appears all friendly and tells lame jokes and makes sure to never do anything to make you feel bad about yourself.”

Futaba nodded. She didn’t know who Junpei was talking about, but his description brought Akechi’s face to her mind.

“Mitsuru-Senpai isn’t like that at all. She’s honest. She scolds me when I say something dumb, and when we spar together, she doesn’t hold back because she knows I can take it.” Junpei gave Futaba a warm smile. “But she also sits down with me to chat, talking about what we’re up to and laughing about old times. She notices when something’s bugging me and asks me how I’m doing. One time, she overheard me complaining about how the kids on my team needed new gear, and the next day I had a truck full of new equipment show up at my place with a note from her telling me to make sure my boys won their next game. That’s not the kind of stuff a great schemer does. That all comes from a place of love. And she does stuff like that for all of us.”

“Not just us” Yosuke said. “You must have heard all kinds of stuff about her in the news, right? Ever since Mitsuru-San took over, the Kirijo Group’s gotten more profitable, but it also pays its workers more and does a lot more for charity. Those things aren’t PR stunts, they’re initiatives Mitsuru-San took on because she believes in them.”

Futaba said nothing. She decided to let everyone’s testimony towards Mitsuru’s character settle in her head.

“I think we’ve seen enough of the gym” Labrys said. “You wanna move on to the lab now?”

Futaba couldn’t stop herself from giggling in pure joy. She felt like a kid in a candy store. This is exactly the kind of thing she hoped to see when she began looking into the possibility of secret sentient robots.

The robotics lab was a thing of beauty. There were two big pods with a bunch of wires for Aigis and Labrys to plug in and all kinds of monitors covering them. There was an indestructible chamber with a bulletproof observation window full of advanced machinery designed to test
strength and speed. There were fancy-looking supercomputers the likes of which Futaba had only seen in her dreams, and a tube with this glowing feathery object that looked like it was from an alien planet or something. Futaba ran around haphazardly, asking about each and every thing she saw, and Labrys answered most of her questions with no small level of amusement. Unable to get a word in edgewise, Yosuke sat down in a chair and put on his headphones. After a few minutes, he dozed off, snoring lightly.

One wall of the room was completely covered in locked shelves containing a ton of alternative robots parts, all of which looked like they had different functions.

“What this?” Futaba pointed to a big red, white, and blue axe. “It is a high-tech laser axe or something!?”

“That axe is mine” Labrys said. “It can split into two rocket-powered wings that attach to my back.”

“THAT IS SO COOL!” Futaba pointed to a white robotic hand. “What’s this arm do!??”

“That’s Aigis’s original arm. It shoots bullets from three of the fingers at once.”

“OOH! OOH!” Futaba pointed to some shiny metal legs. “WHAT ABOUT THOSE!??”

“Lightweight titanium legs. They let us go faster. We have better-armored legs, but these are good for catchin’ fast-movin’ targets.”

“Wow, so you’re totally customizable for all kinds of operations, huh?”

“We’ve had 15 years to play around and come up with stuff. Even longer for my sister.” Labrys leaned agains the display case. “Most of this stuff is obsolete, but we like to keep it on display to remember how far we’ve come.”

“That’s incredible.” Futaba looked up and noticed a head on the top shelf. It looked a lot like Labrys’s current head, but the hair was a bit shorter and it didn’t have any of the obviously robotic parts. “What’s that one for?”

“That’s a head I swap out when I gotta be somewhere in public.”

“Oh, I see!” Futaba turned to Labrys excitedly. “You do kinda stand out, yeah. I bet this is good for casing locations where Shadows are gonna be and following suspicious people, right!??”

“I mean, it’s good for that stuff, yeah…” Labrys looked back down at Futaba and smiled. “But I mostly use it for date night.”

“YOU go on dates!??”

“Of course. I can feel happiness and anger and stuff. You think I can’t feel love too?”

“Oh no, I didn’t mean anything by it!” Futaba covered her mouth. “It’s just, I guess I wasn’t expecting that because you’re a Shadow-annihilating super-agent!”

“Well, yeah. That’s what I use it for. Movies, fairs, long walks in the sunset, things like that.”

“Wait a second. Does that mean…” Futaba began to blush as some very particular old fantasies of hers began to run through her head. “Do you have handsome guy robots around here too?”

“Nope. No boybots. Or ‘roboys’, or whatever you wanna call ’em.” Labrys shrugged. “For some
reason, all the Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapons were designed to look like girls. I don’t know the reason.”

“You’ve never wondered why?”

“Oh, sure, but once I started considerin’ the most-likely possibilities, I thought that maybe some mysteries are best left as mysteries.” There was a slight twitch in Labrys's brow.

“So wait, if you’re not dating a guy robot, who are you dating? A girl robot?” Futaba cringed. “Because as far as I know, the only other one is Aigis. And, I mean, I guess you’re not technically biological sisters, but—”

“Ew, no!” Labrys flicked Futaba on the head. It was light by her standards, but still, any force applied by a metal finger was going to hurt a little. “Get your mind outta the gutter! And who said I'm only allowed to like robots?!”

“Ow! I'm sorry, ok!?” Futaba rubbed her forehead. “So, who IS the lucky guy or girl?”

Labrys smiled and looked over her shoulder at the sleeping Yosuke. A little bit of drool was leaking out of the corner of his mouth.

“Seriously!?”

“Yup.”

“But… But… But you’re so…” Futaba threw both of her hands in Labrys’s direction, letting her robotic splendor speak for itself. “And he’s so…” Futaba held her hand flat in the air and wiggled it side to side. “Eh.”

“He’s very nice. And also, it don’t matter what YOU see in him.” Labrys crossed her arms. “I think he’s cute.”

“Really?” Futaba looked at Yosuke suspiciously. “Even the goatee?”

“Well, maybe not the goatee.” Labrys eyed Yosuke’s chin with disgust. “But he never asks me to make any modifications to my body, so I’m not gonna ask him to.”

“That’s fair, I guess.” Futaba looked at Yosuke, then back to Labrys. Then back to Yosuke again. Then back to Labrys again. And then she started blushing again. “So… Do you guys… Um…”

“What did I say about gettin’ your mind outta the gutter?” Labrys held up her thumb and finger, ready to deploy another flick.

“Ok, I’m sorry!” Futaba quickly raised her hands to guard her forehead. “But you can’t blame me for being curious, can you!?”

“Well, ya wouldn’t be the first.” Labrys lowered her hand. “But I only talk about that stuff with people I’m really close to. Even in the Shadow Operatives, there’s only a couple people I’ve ever discussed it with.”

“Wow.” Futaba put her hands down as well. “I’m not gonna lie, that kind of makes me wanna join you guys just so I can learn the details.”

“Glad to hear you’re coming around.”

Futaba and Labrys looked to the door to see Mitsuru enter. As she walked past Yosuke, he began to
“Huh? What’s going on?”

“Clean your face, Hanamura. You’re unsightly.”

“My face? What?” Yosuke touched his chin, feeling the saliva running down it. “Aw, gross. When did I…?”

“I couldn’t say for certain.” Mitsuru looked over her shoulder at Yosuke, her eyes cold. “Perhaps it’s a symptom of ‘the Kirijo Effect.’”

Mitsuru smirked as Yosuke darted out of the room. She turned to Labrys.

“Would you give us a moment, please?”

“That depends.” Labrys turned to Futaba. “You gonna be ok?”

“Uh…” Futaba looked at Mitsuru. She still found her intimidating, but thought about all the things the others had told her about the woman. With all their words of praise echoing in Futaba’s head, Mitsuru Kirijo was just a little less scary. Futaba looked back at Labrys and nodded.

“Great.” Labrys winked as she exited the room. “I’m gonna go make sure that beau of mine doesn’t miss a spot. You two have a good talk.”

“So…” Mitsuru put her hand on her hip and looked at Futaba. “Have you reconsidered my offer, Miss Sakura?”

“I mean, after seeing all this, I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t tempting…” Futaba managed to look Mitsuru directly in the eyes without flinching. “But I still have some reservations.”

“Well, don’t be shy.” Mitsuru sat down in the chair Yosuke abandoned, letting Futaba look down on her for a change. It was a calculated move to make Futaba feel more comfortable, and from the way the younger woman’s shoulders loosened up, it seemed to be working. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I mean, why me?” Futaba grabbed another chair and leaned on its back. “I mean, I know you guys hunt Shadows and I’ve got a Persona, but would you feel the same way if I told you that my Persona wasn’t really suited for combat?”

“No, it’s not suited for fighting.”

“Then what is it suited for? Support and navigation?”

“Yes.”

“My Persona also has such capabilities.”

“Really!? Yours!?” Futaba shuddered at the idea of Mitsuru’s voice being projected into her head.

“Yes. Although it is still better utilized on the front lines than in a supporting role. I have met a few individuals with incredible support abilities, whereas my Persona requires the aid of specialized equipment just for me to be a decent navigator.”

“So you’re looking for a new navigator, is that it?”

“I would be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in using your talents as such now that I know of them, but your Persona is only part of why I wanted to recruit you.” Mitsuru pointed at Futaba’s
forehead. “As much as I’m interested in the power that comes from your heart, I’m equally if not more interested in that powerful brain of yours.”

“Oh. That’s…” Once more, Futaba found herself blushing, but not for the same reasons as before. While somebody with a dominating presence like Mitsuru Kirijo could easily make people feel small, it also meant that praise from such a person felt really, really good. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“I mean it, Miss Sakura.” Mitsuru smiled. “I’ve done my research. Your record in Public Security is impressive, and your ingenuity and codebreaking skills are second to none. As important as destroying Shadows is, I am in equal need of somebody with the capabilities you possess to take action in the human world.”

“I don’t get it.” Futaba scratched her head. “You have Aigis and Labrys, and they were able to hack into my computer and totally circumvent all of my security measures. I didn’t even know you guys were onto me until you came for me, and I was taking precautions then just to be safe anyway.”

“It’s true that Aigis and Labrys are far more capable of breaking into a system than any human, yes.” Mitsuru continued smiling at Futaba, and little by little, Futaba felt just a bit easier in her presence with every passing second. “But that’s only when they know what to look for. Labrys explained to me everything you did to find us, from tracking down the one passenger of the plane whose identity you could discern to the advanced search method you used that resulted in your finding those photographs of us. You even managed to learn Aigis’s name by following the tiniest thread. Your brain may not be a computer, but you have the drive and imagination to do things with technology that the living machines I know couldn’t begin to conceive of doing. C’est magnifique.”

“Yeah, but I got lucky!” Futaba frowned as she considered the myriad of things that could’ve gone wrong. “Do you know how much of that was just me flying by the seat of my pants? If Ando hadn’t still been alive, or had totally succumbed to his dementia, I would’ve been done as soon as I started! And then, if I hadn’t ALREADY known Kanji Tatsumi, I wouldn’t have been able to follow any thread! My investigation would’ve been dead in the water!”

“Luck seems to be the deciding factor in many instances.” Mitsuru tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I was lucky to be born into a family with money. And certainly, some of the hardships I’ve endured and the problems I’ve inherited could be thought to be the result of bad luck, but it is because of my fortune — both metaphorical and literal — that I was able to build this organization and save lives.”

“But aren’t you just proving my point? Circumstance dictates-“

“A great many things. But it is not the luck given to you that makes you extraordinary, Miss Sakura. It’s what you do with it.”

Futaba stared down at the empty seat of the chair she was leaning on. After some time passed silently, her view of the seat cushion was obstructed by a business card. Futaba looked up to see the card was in Mitsuru’s hand, which was currently being extended to her.

“Get some rest. Take your time. This is my personal phone number. When you’ve made a decision, let me know. And if you cannot come to one, I won’t pressure you to do so. If I hear nothing from you, I’ll take that as a ‘no’ and allow you to go on with your life without any further harassment.”

Two weeks had passed, and Futaba was at work, currently on her lunch break. As she ate her
microwave noodles — work being the last place she could do so as Sojiro threw out her entire stash at home — she overheard two of her supervisors having a conversation just outside the break room.

“…insufferable Kirijo woman.”

Futaba stopped slurping her noodles for a second. She closed her eyes so she could focus better on her hearing.

“Who does she think she is? We were building that Yakushima case for two months and then she just waves her hand and shuts down the entire operation!”

“No civilian should have that much power.”

“You forget, she’s no ordinary civilian.”

“Of course not. The way these things seem to go, she’s the empress of the entire fucking planet!”

“If only we could dig up something on her. How nice would it be to make that bitch beg for a change?”

“I can think of a few other tricks I’d like to teach her.”

The two older men started laughing. Futaba found that she didn’t have much of an appetite anymore, pushing the rest of her lunch away from her.

“Well, it’s all a pipe dream anyway. The second we start probing, someone from higher up the chain would have our hides.”

“Yes, well-“ The first man looked through the break room window at Futaba. He banged his fist on the glass, causing Futaba to jump in her chair. “SAKURA!”

“Y-yes, sir!?” Futaba frantically looked at her boss.

“How’s your investigation into the Mitsubishi Financial hack going!?”

“I finished that yesterday. You weren’t in your office so I left my findings on your desk.”

“My desk?” A look of realization dawned on the man’s face, and for a split second he seemed embarrassed. If there was any credence to the rumors Futaba had heard of this man entering the office with different women regularly after hours, she had a feeling she knew where her report — along with the rest of the contents of his desk — wound up. “Well, what are you doing now!?”

“Eating lunch.” Futaba pointed at the noodle bowl on the table.

“I mean what have you been doing since yesterday!?”

“Looking into the irregularities in the Yokohama shipping manifests.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be Matsui’s assignment?”

“Sir, Matsui couldn’t crack open a computer with a hammer. He’s been spinning his wheels for three days now!”

“I don’t want to hear it! You want to jump on somebody else’s case, you run it by me first, got it!?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Good! Now get back to work!”

“What work, sir?”

“That’s… I…” Futaba’s boss’s face started turning red. He took a deep breath. “Keep looking into those shipping manifests until I find something for you to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

The shipping manifests were irregular because of an old man working at the harbor who was royally terrible at data entry. Just like how the airport had been a result of one idiot employee. Just like how the Mitsubishi Financial “hack” was one greedy night janitor accessing a computer an executive had forgotten to log out of. It was all so mundane. So petty. None of it worth her talents.

She wondered what Labrys was up to right now. And Aigis. And Junpei and Yosuke. They were probably doing something exciting. Something meaningful. Saving the world with a smile on their faces, and a rich, eccentric, icy-but-also-kind-of-nice benefactor enabling them to go on all kinds of adventures.

That night, Futaba rifled through her desk at home for the card Mitsuru gave her. It had gotten buried under a bunch of old Loveline trading cards somehow, but she found it. She typed the number into her phone, her thumb hovering over the call button.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Futaba.”

As the phone took time to connect, a lump formed in Futaba’s throat. When she heard the first ring, her heart started racing. When she heard the second ring-

“Hello?”

Oh. There was no second ring. It made sense. This was Mitsuru Kirijo’s personal number, after all. She probably considered any call on it to be of the utmost importance.

“K-Kirijo-San?” Futaba cleared her throat. “Hi. It’s-“

“Miss Sakura.” The older woman’s voice sounded pleased. “Are you having a pleasant evening?”

“Um… yeah. And you?”

“No complaints worth sharing.”

“That’s good.” Futaba clenched her fist. “Look, the reason I’m calling is… is…”

Futaba took a deep breath. She was expecting Mitsuru to interrupt her again. She didn’t. All there was coming out of the phone was quiet.

“Hello? Kirijo-San? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Miss Sakura. Please, continue.”

“Alright.” An image flashed in Futaba’s mind. A black ball surrounded by rainbow fire, sporting a grinning face. Futaba found her own expression changing to match the one in her mind’s eye. “I’m in.”
Chapter End Notes

Oh gee forgot to write notes when I posted initially. Got a lot to say about this one.

1. Conventional writing wisdom says not to include things that don't forward the plot at all. But also I never get to write action scenes in most of my fics, so once I had the idea for one, I decided to indulge myself.

2. A couple people have asked me about me potentially writing smut in the past (one notable example thanks to Evil Queen). I'm probably never going to do it for a number of reasons, and this is the closest I think I'm ever gonna get. So, if naked swordfighting gets you hot, you lucked out.

3. Yeah, I'm going with Yosuke/Labrys. I think one commenter actually mentioned how they ship that on the last chapter and I was just like "boy is that person going to be pleasantly surprised". There's just something I really enjoyed about their dynamic when I played Arena, and so when I decided to make Yosuke a Shadow Operative, I figured I'd run with it.

4. I know somebody wanted to see Ken show up in this story. I did have an idea for a scene with him, but it just would've been padding this out too much, so I didn't write it. He's still around and a Shadow Operative, I just didn't have room for him here. I definitely wanna do more fics with the P3 cast, so he'll pop up sooner or later. Akihiko and Koromaru too (I actually have already started writing a Koromaru-focused story, but I currently have like six different fics in progress and four more I wanna get started so no promises when you'll see that).

End Notes

I always knew I'd come back to do something Futaba-centric, but lemme tell ya, this ain't how I figured I'd do it.

Happy New Year, folks! I have recently beaten P3 and the Arena games. So, I figured to make 2018 special, it was time for me to extend the universe of my fics to Personas 3 and 4. I'm still gonna be writing the P5 characters primarily, but from now on, don't be surprised if S.E.E.S. and the Investigation Team pop up from time to time.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!