Shuffled Deck: Phantom Team

by DaBossMan

Summary

Yu Narukami is on probation for a crime he did not commit. Sent by his father Dojima Narukami to live with the daughter of a family friend, Sae Niijima, Yu just has to live one year without any problems, then all will be well. Except after a freak accident, he discovers an alternate dimension that allows him to change rotten people’s hearts and be a true force for good. Along with Goro Akechi, Shio Suzui, and a strange woman calling herself Morgana, he founds the Phantom Team, established investigators and fighters for justice with the goal of saving society from itself.

Notes

Hello dear reader, and thank you for clicking on my fanfic! This will be the first step in a long tale, and I hope you enjoy reading!
In Tokyo, Japan, a church had its mass in full swing. It was a massive cathedral, easily the size of a skyscraper, with ornate and detailed stained glass windows depicting previous police commissioners and statues of SIU directors from years long past all decorating the exterior. Inside, people dressed in simple robes and blindfolds on were praying at the altar of a man with a police badge in one hand, and a set of scales in another. Suddenly, they heard the bells ring, which only happened if an intruder had breached the inner sanctum. Three men, dressed in armor from the crusader era marched into the room. Curiously, their armor was painted like it was a police officer’s uniform.

“Where is the intruder?” One demanded, pulling out his sword.

Up above them, a man leapt between the rafters. The worshipers looked around, panic starting to settle in among them. The man stopped and stood proudly in the moonlight, his shadow cast for all to see.

“Up there! In the rafters!” Another one cried out, pointing at the man.

The man had short silver hair, a well-built frame, and steely grey eyes. As for clothes, he wore a black tangzhuang shirt with a golden dragon printed on the right side, black dress pants with silver trimmings, dress shoes with gold scales that clinked whenever he took a step, white gloves with golden claws attached. On his face, he wore a silver masquerade mask with the nose curved like an owl, and the Roman Numeral “II” imprinted in gold on the forehead.
The man smiled, turned, and continued on his way when he heard a voice buzz in his ear.

“Seeker? This is Ace. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Didn’t expect the Shadow to pull that. How are the others?” the man known as ‘Seeker’ replied as he made way to an exit directly ahead of him.

“Outlaw, Pariah, and Carmen are too injured to try again. Justicar volunteered to make sure they get out. What about you?”

“I’m fine, got some Shadows chasing me. But I’ll shake them. If what you said is true, then that only leaves you, me, and Skull to try and take on the Shadow. I don’t like those odds.” Seeker replied, climbing up the building, carefully ignoring the crusaders. He found an open window and went through, now on the ledge of a very narrow stone walkway.

“We have no choice, Seeker. If he doesn’t have a change of heart, then we’ll all be dead by tomorrow. Then who will be left to avenge his master’s victims?”
Seeker was shimmying the church from the outside, watching a silhouette of a crusader run by through a stained-glass window. He hid behind a pillar, waiting for the guard to pass.

“Where’d the heretic go?”

“Stay out of sight Seeker. You’ll never get back to the Shadow if you have to fight the whole way up.” Another voice told him.

“Venus? What happened? You dropped out of contact, and I feared the worst.”

“Shadows attacked my position. I was able to lose them, so I can help you out. At least for now.”

Seeker simply nodded and, like he had before, began to climb the massive cathedral in order to reunite with what was left of his team. He entered the church again, and now found himself in the belltower, and there were several bells of various sizes. As he walked along the wooden beams wide enough for three people side-by-side, he heard a voice behind him.

“STOP RIGHT THERE CRIMINAL SCUM!!”

Seeker turned around and saw a crusader. Seeker smiled, sprinted to him, and before the guard could react, leaped high above his head, his feet landing firmly on the guard’s shoulders. Seeker’s clawed gloves grabbed the part of the helmet that shielded the face and pulled hard. The face mask was ripped off and Seeker kicked with all of his strength, launching the crusader forward. The guard hunched over and began to twitch, and soon his entire body dissolved into a puddle of tar. A puddle that soon reformed itself into a minotaur with mechanical legs.

“Analyzing… this opponent is weak. Take him down, and fast.” Venus ordered.

Seeker smiled, and reached for his mask, removing it from his face. When he did, a figure materialized behind him, wielding a massive naginata.

“Tear him apart!” Seeker ordered.

The figure raised his weapon and the air crackled as electricity surged and gathered around the blade as if it was an antenna. Once the blade was coated with enough lightning to power a city, the figure slammed his weapon down, a cascading wave of electricity surging towards the monster in front of Seeker. Once the energy hit, the minotaur let out a scream of agony and vanished into ash.

“Good job, now hurry! The Treasure will dematerialize in a few hours, and the heist will be a failure. Skull and Justicar are already there and waiting for you.”

*How did it come to this?* Seeker thought to himself, and remembered back to when it all began.

Chapter End Notes

Hello dear reader, and thank you for making it thus far! Before we go on, I'd like to point some things out:

First, there won't be any OCs, so if you're worried about the different codenames, don't. It'll be different characters, but they are from Persona 5.

Second, this will be a LONG story, so I don't know how many times I'll update, but I'll do my best to update it once a month, at the bare minimum.
Third, this fanfic was started before the Royal was announced, so don't expect Kasumi showing up
Fourth, since this is my first fanfic, so please let me know if there is anything you feel I should improve on.
With that out of the way, enjoy the read!
Lawful Evil

Yu Narukami sat in his house in the small rural town of Yasoinaba. His father, Dojima Narukami, yelling in the phone, while his sister hugged his arm tightly. Their father was arguing with a man called Sojiro Sakura. Rather loudly too.

“I don’t care if you offer me every yen in your account! There’s no way I’m letting a criminal near my daughter!” Sojiro yelled before hanging up. Dojima slammed the phone down, a defeated look in his eyes. Defeat that quickly turned to anger.

“Except you’re not a criminal, no matter what the courts say.” Dojima grumbled.

Dojima was a man with short, greyish black hair and a three day stubble. He wore a dark grey button up shirt, with a loose red tie and dark black dress pants, and a silver watch on his left wrist. For his job, Dojima was a detective, one of the best, known around Japan as someone who had busted several crime rings and stared down and beaten many Yakuza crime bosses. Which made the current situation even more infuriating. His son, Yu Narukami, was arrested for a crime he did not commit, and the courts ruled him guilty, despite Dojima’s best efforts.

“I appreciate it dad, but what will we do if we can’t find someone willing to take me?” Yu asked, more than worried.

“We will find someone.” Dojima growled.

“But what-”

“We. Will find. SOMEONE!” Dojima exploded, making both his children flinch.

“Please don’t fight.” Yu’s sister pleaded, making both men soften their expressions.

There was a short, tense moment of quiet before Yu spoke to his dad.

“She’s right dad. Yelling at each other won’t get us anywhere.”

“I… I know Yu. But this shouldn’t have happened.”

Yu’s mind flashed back to the incident. He was walking home early because kendo club had been cancelled. It was a cool, clear night, the breezes easily dulling the heat. Yu was just walking through the neighborhood, the biggest smile on his face. He was the top of his honor class, he was the star of the kendo team, he held three part time jobs and on that night, he managed to get a date with the one and only teen idol, Rise Kujikawa. All in all, a good night, and nothing could ruin it. Or so he thought. He heard voices, one male, the other female. He was always a curious man, and he had to see what it was about. He knew his father wanted him to stay out of business between adults, but he also taught Yu that if someone was in trouble, he had to help. On that night, he choose to listen to the latter.

“Let me go!” The woman pleaded.

“Get in the car!” The man ordered.

Yu’s curiosity and self-righteousness got the better of him as he approached the scene. He looked closer and saw a man harassing a woman. He knew what his dad would want him to do, and ran over, intent on doing something to help.
“Please, stop!” the girl cried.

“What are you doing?” Yu demanded.

Due to a mix of adrenaline, the shock of the event, and how dark it was, Yu couldn’t remember what the man looked like or sounded like. But Yu could remember what the man said and what Yu did.

“Gah. See? This happened because you were so slow.”

The man looked at Yu like how one would look at an insect.

“This ain’t a show. Get lost kid!”

“I—I’ll call the police!” The woman threatened.

“Hehe. Really now? Sure, go ahead. The police are my bitches. Now, get in the car!”

The man went back to the woman. Yu decided it was time to show that he meant business. He gently grabbed the man’s shoulder, and he turned around fiercely. Due to how drunk he was, however, the sudden force caused him to lose his balance and he toppled over and fell hard onto the sidewalk, earning a small cut on his forehead. When he looked back at Yu, his stare radiated pure fury. His next words proved to be Yu’s damnation.

“Damn brat! I’ll sue!”

The rest was a blur, but Yu remembered the sirens, being put in a cell, and the banging of a hammer and the yells of ‘GUILTY’ from the trial. He remembers how furious his father was, his little sister crying for three days, and the looks of disgust and horror on his classmates’ faces as he was expelled. The sheer shock of it all along the shame and pain it brought culminated in his attempt at ending his own life to get away from it all. He failed on account of his father. Because of the court ruling, he would have spent his time in Juvie Hall, but Dojima’s reputation and attitude had allowed Yu to have a second chance at a normal life. A second chance that looked like it was getting more and more difficult to grasp. If he couldn’t find someone to be his probation officer, he would have to live on the streets until he could afford an apartment or some place to stay.

“Is there anyone else dad?” Yu asked, still exhausted from the grueling ordeal that hasn’t even truly begun yet.

“..... There is one other person. But I’m not sure she’ll take you.”

“Dad, we’re out of options. Who is she?”

“She’s the daughter of an old friend. Sae Niijima.”

“Then why didn’t we start with that?”

“Because the old friend is dead. And from what I’ve heard, she’s been too busy to even have a real presence in her sister’s life.”

“We have to try.”

Dojima simply nodded and looked through his makeshift office in the living room. Finding a note that simply said “For emergencies”, he picked up the phone and dialed the number on the note. Yu and his sister both visibly tensed up as the phone continued ringing. Finally, they heard a
faint noise from the phone.

“Hello?” it asked.

“Hello, uh, hi. My name is Dojima Narukami…. Yes, that Narukami. …. Well, it involves my son. Is your sister home?.... Alright, I can wait.”

Yu waited for what felt like years, and uneasy feeling seemed to bubble, like a kettle left on the stove too long. Dojima looked back at his oldest child with an apologetic look. His attention was turned back to the phone once another voice was heard.

“Yes, hello Sae. Yea, my son, Yu, has… been accused of a crime he didn't commit. The courts ruled him guilty, and now he has to live one year on probation. Here’s the thing: He’s been expelled from Yasogami and the only school that accepted him was Shujin, and that’s in Tokyo. Yes, exactly. I was wondering if you’d be willing to be his probation officer. I can pay you if… WHAT?! YOU WILL?! Oh, thank you Niijima-san, thank you, I had all but given up hope. Oh? Yes, he’s here. Alright then.”

Dojima turned to Yu.

“Sae wants to talk to you.”

Dojima handed the phone over to Yu.

“Hello?”

“Hello Yu Narukami. My name is Sae Niijima. Listen closely and be sure to write this down, I’m going to tell you where to meet me tomorrow, and how to get there.” The voice on the other side sounded icy, hard, and full of drive.

After the talk with Sae, Yu had head up to his room in order to pack for the upcoming year.

Probation.

Criminal.

Guilty.

Yu felt a twinge of fear and anger in his heart, and he had to take a few deep breaths to calm himself down. This wasn’t fair, this wasn’t right, this shouldn’t have happened. But this was how the world worked. By now, most of his other stuff, which he packed a few days prior, had already left for the address Sae had given them. Yu had finished packing up what was left when his dad knocked.

“Come in.”

“Hey son. How are you holding up?”

“Honestly? Not very good. I always thought that those who do the right thing win because, well, they do the right thing. Maybe I was naive, but… I thought that if I tried to help her, it’d all work out in the end, that I’d be a hero.”

Dojima just stayed silent, before placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.
“I’m sorry you had to learn the hard way: But often times, it’s those with influence, who can grease the most palms and pay the most bribes that come out on top. You’ll find that there’s a lot of scum in this world. Rich, poor, athletic, fat, there are many out there who only look out for themselves. The fight against them isn’t easy, but nothing worth doing ever is.”

Dojima’s hand left Yu’s shoulder, and he gave his son a look he only had when he was ready to give a lecture.

“Why? Why did you have to get involved?"

“Because you taught me that being good was worth it, that being good would attract people that would stand up for me, who would help me in my darkest moments. But Yosuke didn’t stand up for me. None of my former bosses helped me. Everyone in kendo either run or glare across the street when they see me coming. I’m now the most hated man in town, and I’ve done nothing wrong.”

An uncomfortable silence was shared between father and son. Yu decided it was time to change subjects before things got tense.

“Hey dad, when Sae and I were talking, she said that she was doing this to ‘repay a debt’. Any idea what she means?”

“Ah… that. Sit down son, this story isn’t going to be an easy one to tell. But you should probably hear it so you don’t accidentally piss her off.”

Yu and Dojima took a seat, the older Narukami took a deep breath in.

“This happened about ten years ago, before Nanako was born.”

“So mom was still alive.”

“Yea. Back then, I was with the Tokyo PD. My partner was a man called Saoto Niijima. One night, we were at his house, discussing a case. We heard a knock on the door, and when Saoto opened it up, he just barely got out of the hail of bullets just in time. It was Yakuza hitmen. Saoto was able to kill one of them, and told me to protect his daughters, Sae and Makoto. Shortly after, they managed to kill him.”

Dojima had to pause to collect himself.

“I rushed the girls upstairs, killing one of the hitmen. They then cut the power, and chased after me. There were about five left. After a tough battle, I was able to protect Saoto’s kids, but I took a few bullets myself. I was hospitalized and put in a coma. You know the rest. Had it not been for the coma, I would’ve taken in Sae and Makoto. When I got out, Sae had already just started college and Makoto refused to leave her sister’s side.”

Yu’s eyes widened. He knew that Dojima was in a coma for about two years, and about a month after he was first put in it, his sister was born, and their mother died in childbirth. Her last words being the baby’s name: Nanako. For the next two years, the Narukamis had to fend for themselves, giving Yu a good judge of character, decent fighting experience, and excellent observation skills. But these Niijimas were in the same boat as he was once. Maybe they would get along.

“And now, Sae works as a public prosecutor, and Makoto goes to Shujin.” Dojima continued.

“The school I’m attending. What a coincidence.”
“Heh, normally, I’d agree with your skepticism, but this looks like the first time, this really is just coincidence. I’ve already sent the rest of your stuff ahead. Get some sleep, ok? You’ve got a big day tomorrow. And remember; if you get in any trouble, your life will be over.”

Yu nodded and the two said their goodnights and goodbyes, and Yu finished packing his things. Starting tomorrow, Yu had one job, and one job only: Don’t get in any trouble for a full year.
Yu woke up to the sound of Nanako knocking on his door.

“Big bro! Breakfast is ready!” She cried.

Yu got up, got dressed, and walked downstairs, the realization that this would most likely be the last time he got to eat with his family in a long time finally sinking in. It was a delicious rice omelette with some bacon, and the three Narukamis ate in silence. Finally, Nanako spoke up.

“When’s big bro coming back?”

“If all goes well, then… about March.” Dojima answered.

“I won’t see big bro for a year?!” Nanako asked, distraught.

“I’ll send you letters and call you. Don’t worry, I won’t forget you.” Yu responded.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Yaaay!” Nanako cheered, returning to her usual happy self. The rest of the meal went by with a happier mood. Once the dishes were done, Yu got his suitcase and the three went to the station.

“Well, this is it. Good luck son, I know you’ll do great. I love you.” Dojima said, hugging his son.

“Love you too dad. And don’t worry Nanako, I’ll remember my promise.”

“Stay safe big bro.” Nanako croaked as the siblings hugged tightly, tears in her eyes. It took awhile to pry her off so he wouldn’t miss his train.

Yu looked around on the train and saw that it was mostly packed. There was only one spot open, and it was between a boy with frizzy black hair and glasses, and a boy with dark blue hair that covered his left eye who was sleeping with his MP3 playing. He saw on their bags “Property of Akira Kurusu” and “Property of Minato Arisato.” He recognized the uniforms: The blue haired boy, Minato, wore the Yasogami high uniform, his former school, while the frizzy haired boy, Akira, wore the Gekkoukan high uniform, a school that he visited as a culture exchange during his previous school year.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” Yu asked.

The blue haired boy stirred awake, while the frizzy haired boy simply said.

“Go ahead.”

Yu took a seat in between them and the blue haired boy yawned.

“What was our last stop?” He asked, sounding dull and bored.

“Yasoinaba.” Yu answered.

“Aw man, that was mine.” He lamented, but no sorrow was present in his words.
“Don’t worry, you can get off next stop.”

“I think I’ll do just that.”

Yu then noticed something strange. There was a beautiful blue butterfly just floating down the train car. Yu looked around and saw that no one was paying it any mind, except for him. Suddenly, Yu felt sleepy and closed his eyes, the sound of the train car and passengers slowly being muffled out. In his dream, he saw a man sitting behind what looked like a prison reception desk. The man was dressed in a black-collared and long-sleeved shirt under a blue suit complemented with a blue necktie and wore a hat similar to a flight attendant. But what struck out the most was his platinum blonde hair and yellow eyes. The man smiled as Yu approached.

“Greetings. My name is Theodore. Welcome to the Rehabilitation Center for the Troubled. If you wish to utilize our services, please sign here.”

Theodore reached under the desk and pulled out a slip of paper and pen, and slid them across the desk. Yu picked them up and began to read, confused by what this paper had printed on it.

This story is a work of fiction

Similarities between events, or persons, living or dead are purely coincidental

By signing this contract, I agree to dedicate myself completely towards my rehabilitation

Only those who have agreed to the above shall receive aid

Do you accept these terms and conditions?

“Uhhhh…. Sure, I guess.” Yu said, signing his name. After all, it was only a dream. The words on the paper began to shift and form new words.

The contract has been sealed.

The world is not as it should be.

Distortion fills reality, and ruin draws near

Those who oppose ruin are known as Tricksters

You are one such Trickster

The time to act is now

Seek the truth, at any cost, if the world is to survive

You have one year.

Yu woke with a jolt, like someone had zapped him with an electric rod.

“What the hell?” was all he could think.

“Shibuya. This is Shibuya.” the announcer spoke. Yu looked around: The blue haired boy was gone, and so was the frizzy haired boy. Yu simply shrugged and got off and out of the subway, trying to make his way through the throes of people. Once in Shibuya Square, he started trying to make sense of the huge city crowd before him. Everyone was moving somewhere, none taking a
second for granted. That’s when he heard his phone beep. He looked at it and saw something most peculiar: an app he never installed. It was creepy and in the shape of an eye with a black and red color scheme, a star in the center, acting as the iris. Yu pushed on it to try and drag it to the trash bin, but instead, the weird app expanded to the point it covered his entire screen. The world got eerily quiet.

Yu looked up and saw that time had frozen. No one was moving, not even the birds, and in the center of Shibuya stood a pillar of electricity, dancing with wild abandon. Yu had to squint, but he could swear there was a figure in the pillar. And the figure looked like… him? The electricity parted slightly, and Yu saw it for a brief moment: A man that looked almost exactly like him, save for one feature: his eyes were an unholy yellow, and his grin was so wide there was no way it could be natural. The electricity cracked loudly and in a blinding flash, everything was back to normal. Yu looked at the eye on his phone.

“Hope I never see you, or whatever that was, ever again.” Yu muttered as he dragged it to the recycling bin.

He looked at the time, and decided he had to get going to the meeting place. Pulling up his notes, he looked at the directions to the Hachiko statue Sae said would be their meeting place. Yu wondered what she was like. Dojima said she would be about 25 by now, still relatively young, and she had a sister about Yu’s age. Before he knew it, he found the statue. Now all that was left was to wait. Yu wondered about what she was like. If Dojima was right, and she really was so busy that she couldn’t even be with her sister, Yu could only imagine how she’d treat him. There’d be a curfew, no doubt, and that was likely to be the least of his worries. Yu’s analysing was brought to a screeching halt when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Yu Narukami?” A distinctly feminine voice asked from behind.

Yu turned around and saw a tall woman, six feet at least. She had bright beautiful silver hair that was parted to one side and flowed past her shoulders lazily, and piercing red eyes that looked like they belonged to a hawk. She wore almost all black business clothes with golden outlines that seemed to fit her fit body like an extension of herself, the only accessory being a necklace in the shape of a section sign, violet nails and a pair of earrings. The woman exuded an aura of confidence, seriousness, and power.

“Y-Yes?” Yu stammered, feeling intimidated.

“My name is Sae Niijima. Follow me, we’ll be taking my car.” She ordered, turning around and walking through the massive crowds of Tokyo. Yu followed her to her car, a black Cadillac, and got in the passenger seat. As they started to drive, Sae spoke up.

“I trust you are aware of your situation?”

“Yea. I’m going to be with you for one whole year. If I go by without issues, then I’ll have my record cleared and I can go back to my normal life in the middle of nowhere.”

Sae didn’t even show a twinge of amusement, simply nodding her head.

“That is mostly correct. You won’t be living in the same room as my sister and me. You’ll have a separate room right next to ours. Most of your things should already be in there. Sadly, neither of us had the time to unpack them.”

“It’s alright. There are somethings that I’d rather not let you see.”
The car screeched to a halt at a red light and Sae turned her piercing gaze to Yu, who thought he was going to have a heart attack.

“Like what? Drugs? Contraband? Weapons?” She demanded as she seemed to burn holes into Yu’s very soul.

Yu was breathless. He thought his dad was terrifying when he was angry, but this woman was on another level. He opened his mouth, but his mouth went dry and a knot formed in his throat, words refusing to form. Sae scowled.

“Fine. Makoto and I will help you unpack. If we find anything suspicious, I’m throwing you out, debt or no debt.”

She stepped on the gas as the light turned green, the air so tense you could punch it. Yu took in the sights. He had never been in a city before, so everything seemed overwhelming to the teen. The sights of the skyscrapers and the massive ads, the sounds of bustling traffic and street vendors, and the crowds of people packed together like sausages. If Yu had arrived of his own free will, he would have seen this like an adventure. But he was a prisoner, not a tourist, and this was punishment, not a vacation. By now, they arrived at the lobby of the apartment complex. It was rather luxurious, and they soon got into an elevator, Sae still scowling. They went to their room number: 915.

“Makoto will most likely be inside. Treat her with the utmost respect. Understood?”

Yu was too terrified to do anything but nod. Sae opened the door.

“Hi sis! Dinner’s pretty much ready! How’d it go?” A girl asked.

“Fine. For now.” Sae replied tensely as Yu stepped in meekly.

“For now? What does that mean?” The girl asked.

Yu examined her. She was around his height, was still in her Shujin Academy uniform, had brown hair braided across the top of her head. Or was it a headband? Yu couldn’t tell. But he did see the same piercing red eyes that Sae.

“He made a slip of tongue, and now, I’m curious as to what exactly his father shipped us.”

“Oh. I thought he had a knife on him or gave you some trouble.”

“No, and if he did, he’d be covered in bruises.”.

“Umm…. W-what?” Yu could only sputter out.

“Sis here knows kickboxing, and I know aikido.” Makoto stated proudly.

Yu gulped as a bead of sweat made it’s way down his brow.

*This woman isn’t my probation officer, she’s my prison warden.*

“Now, let’s get you unpacked Narukami.” Sae said, grab walking over to a nearby door. She pulled out a key and swiftly unlocked it. Makoto tapped his shoulder.

“Is it porn?” She mouthed.

Yu automatically blushed and furiously shook his head, getting a sigh of relief from Makoto as
they followed Sae into his room. Inside was a simple bedroom for one person, a rack for storing any souvenirs, and tucked in the corner was the door to his bathroom. There were two windows that granted a view of the city, and in between the windows was a workbench, complete with tools and some basic supplies. Scattered everywhere were cardboard boxes.

“Well, let’s begin, shall we?” Sae asked, pulling up a box.

The trio silently went to work, and Yu hoped that he would find the objects of his fears before they did and could discreetly tuck it out of view so Sae wouldn’t get suspicious. He looked over to his new guardian. She opened the boxes and inspected the contents thoroughly, but instead of chucking it to the side or to the floor, she put it in a neat, organized pile. Makoto did the same, mostly unpacking clothes, hygiene products, video game consoles and games, DVDs, and other things. Yu found the box he was looking for and saw it: The objects he knew he could not let Sae and Makoto see. He looked over to the girls, Makoto pointing at a box in a far flung corner. Sae turned her back to get it, and Yu sprung into action. Thankfully, the box made no noise as he skillfully hid it among the pile of boxes that were already unpacked. Shortly after, they finished, Makoto let out a sigh.

“Looks like we’re done here. And, there was nothing out of the ordinary in any of the boxes.” Makoto said, wiping a small drop of sweat.

Mission successful

“All… except the one Narukami moved when he thought I wasn’t looking.” Sae said, glaring daggers at Yu yet again.

DAMNIT!

Makoto turned to him and crossed her arms, her face plastered with disapproval.

“Well?” The older Niijima asked.

Yu sighed and hung his head in defeat. It was time to face the music. He grabbed the box and put it on the table. He backed away after opening it. As the girls moved to investigate, there was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it.” Yu said, wanting to excuse himself from what was to come.

He opened the door and saw a boy about his age. He had shaggy, dark brown hair and wore a tan pea coat with a black tie, black trousers, and black gloves, all of which seemed to clash with his blood red eyes. Yu noted that he had a police badge strapped on his coat, carried a briefcase with an “A” branded on it, and there was an outline in his coat. An outline that looked suspiciously like a gun.

“Oh, hello there. I haven’t seen you……. At all, really. Who are you and why are you in the Niijima residence?” The boy asked.

“Hey Sae-san, do you have a brother or other relative I’m not aware of?” Yu asked, not answering the boy’s question.

“No, why?”

“There’s someone here and he has red eyes like yours. Almost exactly like yours.”

“THIS is what he was hiding?” They heard Sae ask, ignoring his statement.
Shortly after, the two boys heard laughter, and Sae walked out of Yu’s room, a hand to her face. There was a slight blush on her cheeks as she regarded Yu.

“Narukami, I owe you an apology. And I can completely understand why you’d want to hide… that.” Sae said meekly.

“Hello Sae-san. May I come in?” the boy in the door asked.

“Of course. Yu Narukami, meet Goro Akechi, my partner in the prosecutors’ office.”

“Goro Akechi? As in Detective Prince Goro Akechi?”

“That’s correct. Though, please, treat me like you would a normal person. And you are?”

“Goro Akechi, meet Yu Narukami, my ward for the coming year.” Sae introduced.

“Narukami? As in Dojima Narukami?”

“Yea. Though please, treat me like you would a normal person.” Yu parroted.

“As you wish. Sae-san, you said he was your ward?” Akechi asked.

“He’s here on probation. He’s been charged—” Sae began.

“Falsely.” Yu interrupted.

“… of assault. He’s now staying with my sister and me for a year.”

“I see. Well, if anyone can successfully rehabilitate a criminal, it would be you, Sae-san. What was Makoto laughing at?” Akechi asked.

“How do you know it wasn’t Sae-sama?” Yu asked.

“Because Sae-san never laughs or jokes. She’s one of those types who smiles like this.”

Akechi then proceeded to do the most overdone, comical frown that could be mustered on the human face. As if to prove his point, Sae frowned as well, though not as over-the-top as Akechi’s. The red-eyed teen smiled.

“See? Right there. Sae’s smiling right now.”

Her frown grew worse.

“She knows it’s true. Words can’t describe her joy right at this moment.”

She was now giving Akechi the same look she gave Yu when she drove him here.

“And neither can her face.” Akechi added, grinning like an idiot.

“You know Akechi, I just remembered that I have two fat stacks of paperwork that need to be done. Thanks for volunteering.” Sae said, her expression softening with every word. Akechi’s face went from glee to horror.

“Hey Yu-kun do you know if, oh hi Akechi-kun.” Makoto greeted, trying to hold back laughter.

“Hello Makoto-san. What were you laughing at?”
“Well, Yu’s father, for whatever reason, decided it would be a good idea to send along costumes. A butler and panda costume to be specific.”

“A… a panda?” Akechi asked, confused.

“They were from plays.” Yu explained.

“Do they still fit?” Makoto asked, trying to hide her excitement.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I haven’t tried one on.”

“You’ll have to try the panda costume.” Makoto said, a gleam in her eyes and a shine in her smile.

“Maybe some other time. Today’s been eventful enough.” Sae said, shaking her head.

“Speaking of events, I take it Yu’s the reason you missed our celebration?” Akechi asked.

Sae looked puzzled for a moment, then gave a grimace.

“I forgot that was today.”

“Celebration? For what?” Yu asked.

“Don’t you watch the news? Sis and Akechi were able to put that plagiarizing artist, Madarame, behind bars.” Makoto explained.

“Really?”

Akechi did a dramatic pose and began to explain, as if he was in an advertisement for a new TV show.

“Sae-san and I are the top dogs in the SIU. Whenever people tell us ‘the chances of winning are almost zero’ we say ‘so you’re telling us… there’s a chance?’”

“We do not say th-” Sae started.

“Wherever crime lurks, we are there to cut it down like the foul weed it is!” Akechi continued, striking another dramatic pose.

“Ok Akechi, you’ve had your fu-” Makoto tried to interrupt.

“We are… Sae Niijima and Goro Akechi! The Dynamic Detective Duo!” Akechi said striking one final dramatic pose, earning him a smack on the back of the head from Sae.

“In terms you can actually understand, Akechi and I are the best of the best in the SIU. Often times, we are sent on cases that have little to no chance of winning in court because of how powerful and rich the individuals are. Sometimes they are, in fact, innocent, but more often than not, the ones we are charged with bringing to justice are often the social elite. As a result, we often make headlines whenever we succeed.”

“Isn’t Akechi a little young to be doing police work? Especially for the Special Investigations Unit?”

“I may still be in highschool, but my skills are like a fine wine, they only get better with age!” Akechi stated proudly.
The Nijimas rolled their eyes, but Yu smirked at Akechi’s enthusiasm.

“It’s getting rather late. Why don’t you stay with us for dinner Akechi? I can make it up to you this way.” Sae suggested.

“A kind gesture, Sae-san, but I already ate, and it’s getting rather late. You can make it up to me another time. Goodnight Narukami-san, Makoto-san.” Akechi said, picking up his suitcase and heading out after giving a small bow.

“Well… he’s something.” Yu said.

“Oh, you have no idea. I just wish he wouldn’t treat our cases like some game. In any event, let’s eat dinner.” Sae suggested.

The three of them went and sat down. After they were done saying their prayers, the three chowed down their meals like hungry wolves. Narukami nodded in approval as his mouth just seemed to suck in everything on his plate.

“Tish ikh weary guk.” He said

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth Narukami.” Sae ordered.

Yu swallowed and spoke again.

“I said ‘this is very good.’ Almost like I never left home.”

“Thank you, I’m glad my cooking is that good.” Makoto said, beaming with pride.

“You made this?”

“Of course. Sis is often busy with work, so I have to do all the cooking.”

“Wow. Dad wasn’t kidding when he said you were busy.”

“Very. Speaking of busy, after we finish dinner, I want the two of you to go straight to bed. We’ll have to go to Shujin to get the paperwork finalized tomorrow.”

“Alright Sis. You want me to come along?”

“Of course.”

Makoto smiled warmly at that. Yu made a mental note of just how little they get to interact with each other. The trio finished off their meals and Yu and Makoto did the dishes.

“Oh, before we go to bed, we should exchange contact info Makoto. Sae-sama already gave me hers when we first talked back home” Yu suggested. Makoto pulled out her phone and Yu waited for her to give him her number, only to receive a text.

**Makoto:** ‘No need. Sis already gave me your number.’

Yu looked up at Makoto, who had the corners of her lips pulled into a smile. He added her to his contacts and went to his room and changed into his PJs. He shot her a text back as he sat down on his bed.

**Yu:** ‘You couldn’t have told me that in person? We were in the same room.’
Makoto: ‘No, this way you already have my number. Now go to bed, we have a big day tomorrow.’

Yu smiled as he laid down on his bed.

*Not as big as this.*

Yu sat up after hearing a few light knocks on his door.

‘Narukami, it’s me. Are you decent?’ a voice asked.

‘I am Sae-san. I’ll get the door.’ Yu asked, getting up to let her in.

Sae opened the door and let herself in.

‘Or not.’

‘I came to give you this Narukami. It’s your room keys. One leads to the hallway, the other leads to the living room. Makoto and I have the spares so we can come in whenever we wish, so don’t lose either. Understood?’

“Yes.”

*I understand you basically admitted you can invade my privacy whenever you want.*

“Good.”

The two stood in silence, Sae’s determined face melted into a more confused one, like she was unsure of how to start. Finally, she opened her mouth.

“Also… we got off on the wrong foot today and I would like to apologize for that. It was hardly fair of me to judge you after a few minutes of knowing you, and if this is to work, I can’t treat you like a suspect. So, tomorrow morning, let’s start over. That sound alright?”

“... Sure. Give me a chance, and I’ll make sure you don’t regret it.” Yu said, smiling and extending his hand.

“Alright. I’ll give you a chance, fair and square.” Sae said, shaking his hand.

After that, Sae walked off to be and Yu went to charge his phone, and saw something peculiar: The app he thought he deleted was now back.

*That’s odd. Hoped to never see you again.*

Yu tapped the app. Nothing happened. Maybe the stress was starting to get to him. He deleted the app again and started to charge his phone. He then pulled back the covers and began to sleep.
“Master? Are you sure it’s a good idea to bring the guest here so soon after what happened?” A woman asked, her tone almost robotic with how bored it sounded.

“I agree with Justine. We repelled the entity only moments ago. What if it attacks us again while the guest is here?” Another woman asked, her voice laced with uneasiness.

“We have nothing to fear girls. I have taken steps to ensure it won’t find this place again. Besides, we were able to repel it before, and we will repel it again if need be. And should this guest, or any guest for that matter, happen to be here if that happens, I will summon your siblings at once.” A man assured.

“Very well master. We will trust your wisdom.”

The three people waited for a few moments before they heard their guest: Yu Narukami, starting to stir. When he woke he found himself in a prison cell, dressed in a prison outfit. Yu took note of his surroundings. The cell he was in had a bed, a toilet, and the walls were padded, like he was in an insane asylum. Oddly enough, the padding was a velvet blue rather than the snow white.

“Where am I?” He asked, getting up. He walked to his cell door and felt something weighing him down. He looked and saw that he was in cuffs, and his legs were chained to a metal ball. When he approached the cell door, he saw two women before him, they looked like twins.

Both of them were adults and fully developed adults at that, and sported long, platinum blonde hair tied up in a ponytail. The one on his left side had bangs covering her left eye while her right glowed a beautiful golden, with her ponytail thrown over her right shoulder while the girl on his right was like a mirror to the girl on his left; bangs covering her right eye, her left eye glowing with a golden color, ponytail thrown over her left shoulder. The two girls were dressed in warden outfits and had hats that spelled out ‘OXYMORON’. All Yu could think about was how they shared features with that man from his other dream; Theodore.
The girls turned around and stood at attention and Yu looked dead ahead, following their eyes.

In the center of the room stood a large desk standing on a carpet sharing the same velvet blue as the walls in his cell, and with a golden “V” emblazoned on it. At the desk sat a man wearing a
formal suit and gloves, with bloodshot eyes, pointy ears, a bald head with grey hair, and a very wide grin. But most disturbing of all was his nose, his very long, very pointy nose.

*That man could poke someone’s eye out with that thing.*

“Greetings Trickster, welcome to the Velvet Room.” the long-nosed man said in a voice that was somehow creepy and soothing at the same time.

“Where am I? Am I hallucinating again? What did that app do to me?!” Yu yelled, pulling and banging on the bars.

“Inmate, please calm down. This is very real, as was what you saw earlier.” The girl on his left told him, her tone lacking any form of emotion.

“If you want to get out of this alive, you’ll need a resolve of steel. Get a grip!” The one on his right ordered, almost the polar opposite of the other girl in tone.

“Welcome. My name is Igor, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance. These fine young women here are my assistants. To your left is Justine, to your right, Caroline. They will be the wardens of your rehabilitation.” Igor explained, his wide smile never vanishing when he spoke.

“Rehabilitation? Trickster? Get out of this alive? W-what?” Yu couldn’t even form a complete sentence from the huge information dump he was given.

“Inmate, please take a deep breath. Panicking will help no one.” Justine suggested.

Yu tried to do what he was told, but he still couldn’t get over what he’s seeing, or what he heard. His mind began to flash back to that night, and all he could think about was how he could not go through that again.

“Why am I in jail? I did nothing wrong! Let me out! Now!” Yu demanded, pulling at the bars to no avail.

“Don’t talk to our master like that!” Caroline yelled, pulling out a baton and slamming it against the cell walls, sending a surge of electricity that forced Yu back.

“This is the Velvet Room, a place between dream and reality, mind and matter.” Igor explained, completely unfazed by the outburst. The long-nosed man then looked around, his bloodshot eyes examining the room like this was also the first time he’s seen it.

“Still, I am most surprised. The Velvet Room shifts to reflect the state of the heart of its guest. Often times it is something comforting: The living room of a house, the captain’s cabin of a ship, and so forth. I never thought a guest would see their own heart as a prison.”

“Wait, are you saying I’m the reason I’m here?”

“Yes... and no. Only those bound by a contract may make use of our services. You signed one such contract.”

“What? No I didn’t!”

Igor snapped his fingers, despite the fact he was wearing gloves, and Yu saw a piece of paper materialize in front of him. He grabbed it and started to read.

“This story is a work of fiction, any similarities between- wait... this was from the dream I
had before I came here!”

“Correct.”

“B-but… it was only a dream!”

“We told you, inmate, this is very real.” Justine replied.

“What the hell did you trick me into?! I want out!” Yu yelled, grabbing the paper with both hands and trying to rip it, unsuccessfully.

“Don’t bother inmate. Your only choice is to abide by your contract, and give it your all to rehabilitate yourself. Don’t worry, we’ll give you a hand, because we’re your loving and supporting correctional officers! Ain’t that right, Justine?” Caroline asked with a sadistic grin as the contract vanished into thin air.

“Yes, but that will have to come later. Time marches on in your world, and we will have to continue this at a later date.” The woman stated calmly as an alarm bell could be heard.

“Farewell Trickster. I look forward to seeing you again. I hope your rehabilitation goes smoothly.” Igor said, his smile never fading throughout the whole ordeal. Yu’s eyes felt heavy, and he soon fell asleep, his body toppling to the floor and soon disappearing completely. There were a few moments of silence before Caroline spoke up.

“Jeez, what a scaredy cat. Are we sure we picked the right guy? The other guests didn’t have nearly as much of a breakdown when they came here.” Caroline scolded.

“We didn’t choose him, fate did. And if we’re to to be fair, the Velvet Room didn’t transform into a prison for them, and they haven’t gone through the same ordeal he has in the waking world.” Justine countered, tone even and monotone.

“That may be so, but his trials haven’t even begun. Time will tell how much of his potential he will realize and fulfill, and how strong his bonds with his fellow Tricksters will be.” Igor added.

The two girls looked at each other, and immediately looked away, as if both were embarrassed by the other. Unease filled the air as they rubbed their arms. Igor's bloodshot eyes widened when he realized what was wrong.

“Ah, and now we get to the final matter. Girls, do you wish to merge into your original form?” Igor asked, stretching his arms as his gloves glowed blue, as if preparing a spell.

“I… I think not Master.” Caroline answered, causing Igor to raise an eyebrow and the glow to dim from his gloves.

“She’s right. We already introduced ourselves to him. He will no doubt panic again if someone else is waiting for him next time.” Justine added.

“Exactly. For now, I think I can live like this, at least until this scaredy cat has fulfilled his contract.” Caroline agreed.

“Very well. I shall inform your siblings that, for the time being, they have two new older sisters.” Igor replied with a small nod.

“Oh, that reminds me; is the guide up and about yet?” Caroline asked.
“Yes, she is. She has everything she needs, and I’m sure she’ll be very happy and excited to meet him.” Igor said, chuckling.

Yu woke with a gasp and bolted upright. He looked around. He was in his room. He was in the same PJs he got dressed in. The sun was rising, it’s light bathing his room. He clutched his chest, his breathing hard and labored as cold sweat rolled down his forehead.

*It was just a dream. An LSD induced dream. What did that damn app do to me? How did it do that to me?*

Yu looked at his alarm clock. Just about a minute before the alarm was going to go off. And there was no way that he was going to risk going back to sleep even if he had an hour. He made sure the alarm wouldn’t go off and quickly got dressed in his Shujin uniform, brushing his teeth, and decided to start organizing some of his home souvenirs, making sure the butler and panda costumes were tucked out of sight. He then heard a light knock on his door.

“Yu-kun? Are you awake? I didn’t hear an alarm go off.” Makoto’s voice called from the other side.

Yu proceeded to open the door. Makoto too was dressed in her Shujin uniform while Sae was on the phone with someone.

“Yea, I’m awake. Woke up right before my alarm went off.”

“Alright, well come on in, breakfast is ready, and once we’re done, we’re going straight to the school. Come on.” Makoto said.

“You said so yourself, I’m not one to joke. I fully expect those two stacks done by tomorrow.”

Yu heard a groan of resignation from the phone.

“Akechi?” He asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“Yes. Hurry up and eat your breakfast. We don’t want to keep Principle Ushimaru waiting.”

Sae ordered.

“Trust me, you really don’t.” Makoto replied, and rubbed her forehead as if remembering something painful. Maybe this Ushimaru gave her a scolding. It’s not like he’d chuck any chalk at her.

Yu looked at his meal and started eating while Makoto and Sae talked among themselves. Yu, ever curious, decided to try listening in.

“Watch…. trouble…. kick out…. aim below the waist.” Sae spoke.

“Don’t worry…. fear…. wrath…. carry a taser.” Makoto replied.

Yu decided that, if he didn’t want to fear the mere sight of the Niijimas, he should probably stop listening. He finished with his meal just as they finished their talk.

“You ready? Let’s go.” Sae ordered, leading the way. Yu managed to get Makoto to drop back as they walked into the parking lot.

“So… what did you and your sister talk about?” Yu asked, knowing he would probably regret
it, but unwilling to let his curiosity go unsatisfied.

“Oh, she just asked me to look after you at school. Also told me to warn you: Cause any trouble for either of us and you’ll be kicked out, and that if you should try anything, I was to aim for your…. More private parts.” Makoto answered with a smile starting to form.

Yu gulped. Makoto continued, as if reveling in his fear.

“I told her that if you did try anything, you should be more afraid of Sis than me. After all, she carries a taser with her at all times.”

Yu gulped again. Louder this time.

“But don’t worry. Just stay out of trouble, and you’ll be fine.” Makoto assured with her smile still in place as the group approached the car. Makoto rode shotgun and Yu sat in the back. After a good few minutes of driving, Yu decided to strike up a conversation and hope it didn’t backfire.

“So, what’s Shujin like?”

“Ah, it’s a wonderful school, one of the best in the nation. If you manage to graduate there, you can make it anywhere. We offer a wide array of clubs, from kendo to drama to music to writing to baking. We also have a team for every sport, track, basketball, baseball, we have it all.” Makoto explained, smiling with pride.

“Makoto is the Student Council President there. I’ve asked her to keep an eye on you so you don’t cause any trouble, or get in any trouble.”

“Yes. I hope you’ll make many friends there. Oh, we’re here now.” Makoto said.

Yu wasn’t expecting a paradise, but from the way Makoto described it, he wasn’t expecting the school to feel like a prison as soon as he entered it.

*Guess you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.*

The three made their way to the principal’s office. Ushimaru was a stocky man, big boned, but not fat. He had black hair combed and slicked all the way back, and wore a dress shirt with a tie and suspenders. His eyes peered at Yu from behind his glasses, but nothing could top Sae. Next to him was a woman in a plain long-sleeved yellow and white striped shirt and a navy blue skirt. As for her features, she had simple black hair and looked way too tired to be here.

“Hello Yu Narukami. I am Ushimaru, your principle. Let us get down to business. I know you’re most likely aware of your situation, but just so we’re clear; you cause any trouble for this school, and you will be expelled. Now, that said, I decided to accept you because I believe in second chances. We all falter in some way or another at one point in our lives, and I do not want you to throw away your life and future because of one stupid decision.” the man informed the grey-eyed teenager, short and to the point.

*Like you know the whole story*

“With that in mind, I want you to make the most of this second chance. This is Sadayo Kawakami. She’ll be your homeroom teacher.” Ushimaru said. The tired woman simply nodded, putting two items on the desk.

“This is your student ID and the rulebook. Please look over it, because, as stated before, cause any problems, and I won’t be able to protect you.” She said as Yu picked them up.
“If there’s nothing else you would like to discuss, the three of you are free to leave.”
Ushimaru finished with a nod. Oddly enough, despite his harsh words and tone, Yu got the impression Ushimaru was just strict, not mean-spirited, and Kawakami seemed to regard him with indifference, and neither seemed to harbor him any ill-will. He hoped this would be the case with all of his professors, considering that they’ll have to know about his record.

“Do we have time for a tour?” Yu asked as they walked down the halls.

“Normally, I’d say ‘no’, but since Akechi is handling my paperwork, I should be free for the rest of the day. Take as much time as you need.” Sae said, walking off.

“Alright then. Follow me please Yu-kun.” Makoto asked. Before they could get on with their tour properly, they saw a girl stumble and fall.

This girl had bright orange hair, and was rather small for a girl in highschool. She had glasses on her face that seemed a little too round, and had bag holding a laptop that held a computer decorated with various egyptian symbols and alien paraphernalia, such as UFOs, Area 51 stickers, and so forth. Yu and Makoto helped her up.

“Be more careful Futaba, you almost hit us.” Makoto said.

“I’m sorry prez. Wait, who’s this guy?” The girl, Futaba, asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

“This is our new transfer student, Yu Narukami.”

Futaba’s eyes widened at the name. Yu couldn’t tell if it was from surprise or fear. Futaba quickly picked herself, then her laptop bag and held it close to her chest.

“S-s-sorry about that. I-I gotta make like a tree and GTFO, KSEEYABYE!” Futaba sputtered quickly, sprinting with the energy of an Olympic athlete.

“What’s her issue?” Yu had to ask.

“She… doesn’t function well around strangers. She’s a second year, like you.”

“She in my homeroom?”

“No. Though, I am curious. What was she doing at school today?” Makoto pondered out loud.

“Well, we won’t get an answer now, let’s get on with the tour, shall we?”

“Yes, this way leads to the faculty office…”

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Futaba scurried out of the school as fast as her little legs would let her. That was way too close. She had been ordered to tap into the school’s network to find out about the school’s new student, but the files were all pen and paper, so she had to go to school in real life. Had she been caught by Makoto who knows what would have happened. Her family suffered enough because of that woman, despite her best intentions. Futaba reached inside her bag, luckily, the computer concealed the portfolio that held Yu Narukami’s file. She pulled out her phone and took pictures of it, then called the man who ordered her to do this.

“Yes?”

“Mission successful.” Futaba said with a heavy heart.
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Futaba winced. She forgot the man only liked talking business in person, courtesy of her previous screw-ups.

“O-Oh. Sorry. Wrong number.” Futaba sighed, defeated. She knew what to do: If what her boss told her was true, then she was to take action. She didn’t know this Yu, and she knew that if she did this, his life would be hell on Earth, but she pissed off her boss once, and she’s still paying the price for that, with interest. She took a deep breath before opening her laptop and going to work. With any luck, she’ll never see the new guy’s face again.

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“And that concludes the tour. Any questions?” Makoto asked.

“No. You were pretty thorough. Where’d Sae-san go?”

“No need to be so formal with my sister. She may be strict, but she doesn’t mind when it comes to honorifics.”

“Oh really? I’ll keep that in mind.”

The two approached Sae, who simply nodded at the two as they got back into the car. Yu decided to try and memorize any landmarks as starting tomorrow, he’d take the train. Sure, Makoto would be with him, but he still would like some semblance of independence during his prison sentence. They were halfway back to the apartment when Yu spoke up.

“So, what happens now?”

“Now, you and Makoto will have the whole day to yourselves.” Sae answered. Yu noticed that, despite her best efforts, there was bitterness in her voice.

“Any rules?”

“Be back by nine, stay in your room unless you’re invited to the living room, if you want any friends to come over, you have to ask for my permission first. Also, I want you to write in this.”

Sae reached inside her pocket and pulled out a book.

“This is your probation diary. You are to write in it at least once a week, and if I ask to read it, you’re to give it, no complaints.” She said, handing it to Yu. When he took it, he swore he could feel chains being attached to his arms and legs. She really was his warden.

“That’s mostly it. Anything you’d like to add Makoto?”

“Yes. I saw that you were the top of your class in Yasogami High, and I expect similar results here. If your grades start slipping, I’ll decide what you can do in your free time. If you need help, please don’t hesitate to ask me to tutor you.”

“Violate any of these rules, or get expelled, and I’ll throw you straight out. Understood?”

By now the car had reached its destination, the apartment parking garage. The passengers and driver got out, and Sae turned to Yu.

“About the be back by nine rule…”
“Yes?”

“What if I get a job that requires me to stay past nine?”

“Get a job?” She asked, confusion on her face.

“You said you’re very busy. I figured you wouldn’t be able to give me an allowance, considering what you have to spend. If I get a job to help ease the burden, would you let me stay past nine?”

“Hmmm… as much as I appreciate your initiative, I have to say no. For now at least. I want you to get used to your new life before going job-hunting. And I wish you luck, I doubt there will be many willing to hire someone with a record.”

“Know anyone who might be willing to hire me?”

“No. But do keep it in the back of your mind.” Sae answered, the bitterness and ice gone. And her face began to shift.

*Is that… a smile? Nah, it couldn’t be.*

“Now, if you two don’t mind, I have to get back-”

They were interrupted by the sound of Sae’s phone ringing, the ringtone being the Superman theme of all things. She picked it up with a groan.

“Yes Akechi? YOU DID WHAT?! So the paperwork isn’t done?! I gave you one job: Take care of my paperwork so I could go straight back to work as soon as I was done with Narukami. What do you mean sushi means more to you?! Remember who signs your paychecks young man! Fine. But if the job’s not done by tomorrow, I’ll give you another instruction in kickboxing. Is that clear? Good.”

Sae hung up and Yu was surprised that she didn’t crack the screen by squeezing too hard. She turned to the two high schoolers and rubbed her temples. She took a deep breath in, and her usual calm returned.

“Well, change of plan. Since Akechi loves conveyor belt more than his job, I am now free. Please tell me you have something planned. I hate sitting around and doing nothing.” Sae informed, sounding almost hurt at the thought of free time.

Makoto, however, lit up like a Christmas tree.

“The entire ‘Like a Dragon’ saga! You haven’t seen the final two installments because of work, so now’s the perfect time to watch it!” Makoto suggested with barely contained glee.

“Like a Dragon? I’ve heard of those, but never watched them before.” Yu said, scratching his chin. His response garnered a gasp from both of the girls.

“You… you haven’t seen *any* ‘Like a Dragon’ movies?! Then it’s decided, you’re going to watch the whole saga with us. If you don’t, we will kick you out!” Makoto ordered.

“You’re not gonna kick me out for not watching movies.” Yu retorted, shaking his head.

“You’re going to watch the whole saga with us Narukami. And that’s final. If you don’t want to, start packing.” Sae said matter-of-factly, turning around and walking with Makoto, leaving Yu
dumbstruck. Once he got over how his wardens had just abused their power, he went into the complex. When he entered the living room, he saw neither of the girls in there.

“Makoto? Sae?” He asked.

“We’re getting changed. Put in the first movie in will you? It’s called ‘Like a Dragon: A Single Step.’ It’s in a golden box under the TV.”

_Wish I had a TV._

Yu began looking under the wide plasma screen TV, soon finding it. Inside were six movies, all starting with ‘Like a Dragon.’. Shortly after, he heard the door open to reveal Makoto in a simple white blouse and skirt, and barefoot.

“Help me prepare some snacks Yu-kun. After that, prepare to witness the best movie saga of all time!”

“Someone’s excited.”

“I’ve seen all six movies 54 times.” Makoto said as she got popcorn and heated them in the microwave

“I’m more scared that you’ve kept count more than the amount itself.” Yu said as he got some candy and poured it into a bowl.

“Oh, just wait until the movies start.” Sae said, no longer in a business suit, but now in jeans and a sweater. Yu had to admit, he had a hard time imagining the prosecutor in anything other than a business suit in the short time he’s known her, and yet, here she was.

“I can’t wait to see your reaction to the ending Sis!” Makoto said as she got out the popcorn. Now, there was no mistaking it; Sae was in fact smiling. It looked good on her.

“I’ll put in the movie. Narukami, kill the lights.” Sae ordered.

Yu did as he was told and Makoto went back to her room and came back with… a panda plushie?

“Is that… a panda plushie?” Yu asked.

“Yes, and his name is Buchi-kun. Buchi-kun, this is Yu Narukami. Say hi Buchi-kun.”

Makoto moved the plushie’s arm to wave at Yu, who waved back.

“Alright you two, get comfortable. I’m starting the movie.” Sae said as she hit play and Yu dimmed the lights.

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The three watched the final scene of the movie saga, the main character’s funeral. In the first three movies, he had gone from a cowardly kid on the streets to the most powerful Yakuza boss in Japan, in a story full of twists, turns, drama and action. In the final three, the story focused on the now old main character training a protege to take his place, and the final fight was between that protege and his former teacher/father in order to save the clan. When the movie ended after the main character’s funeral, Makoto and Yu were crying their eyes out. Sae turned the lights on and ejected the movie.
“T-that…” Yu croaked.

“I… I kno-hooooo-ooolow!” Makoto sobed.

The two turned to each other and hugged, both refusing to stop attempting to talk to each other over what they just saw, despite the incomprehensible sobs and sniffs that followed. Sae couldn't help but let herself smile at how well they got along, and at how fast. Maybe Narukami wasn't so bad after all. She glanced at the clock, and her smile vanished completely.

“It’s getting rather late, so we should head to bed. You especially have a big day ahead of you Narukami, with tomorrow being your first day at Shujin.” She informed, getting up.

“Alright Sis.” Makoto said, breaking the hug. Any sadness from before having vanished at the mention of school. After saying their goodnights, Sae turned to Yu.

“Don’t forget about the probation diary Narukami.” Sae said, back to her serious self. Yu simply nodded, going to his room, getting changed and ready for bed. He looked at his diary, and decided he’d best get into the habit of writing in it.

Dear Diary: A lot has happened to me recently. I’ve been found guilty of a crime I didn’t commit, and now I’ve been sent to live with a woman called Sae and her younger sister Makoto. Since that happened, I’ve meet a teenage detective who works for the greatest crime fighting unit in Japan, almost been kicked out because of a panda costume, somehow had two LSD trips from an app that doesn’t know how to stay deleted, been sent to a jail in my dreams, and have been blackmailed into watching a saga of Yakuza films. I’m going to be staying here for a whole year. I’ve been here for two days.
The morning went about the same as yesterday’s; Yu had to wake up for school, and got dressed in his Shujin uniform: a red-buttoned black blazer with Shujin’s emblem on the pocket, a white turtleneck shirt with chevron detailing on the collar, and red plaid trousers. At least this time he didn’t have to deal with those strange people in that prison while he slept. He walked out of his room and seeing Makoto setting the table for breakfast, already dressed in the female version of his outfit, the only real difference was that she had a skirt instead of pants, and a vest instead of blazer. Sae was nowhere to be seen.

“I take it Sae-san has left for work already?” Yu asked as Makoto handed him his plate.

“Sadly yes. Often times, I have to cook her lunch, breakfast, and dinner in advance.”

“So she doesn’t just use Akechi for slave labor.”

Yu felt a sharp pain in his leg. Makoto spoke in a harsh tone as he grabbed it in response.

“Unlike Akechi, I actually volunteered for this. Sis has a lot on her plate, and she welcomes every attempt to help her, so long as it doesn’t jeopardize either of our futures.”

Yu expected some venom or spite in her voice, but she talked to him like he was a child who simply didn’t know any better.

“Now, hurry up and finish eating. We have a school to attend.”

Yu was able to navigate the dreaded subway system easy enough, thanks largely in part to Makoto. The two were making good progress until it started to rain, which forced the two to make a mad dash for an awning nearby, as they tragically forgot to bring umbrellas, using their bags as makeshift cover from the water drops. Yu pulled out his phone to check the time, and saw a familiar, and unwelcome sight. An app shaped like an eye, with a star for an iris.

“Why won’t this thing go away?” He muttered.

While he was looking at his phone, a feminine figure walked up and stood next to him. She wore a version of the female Shujin uniform, the main differences being that she wore a hooded sweatshirt with a four-leaf clover on the hood instead of a turtleneck and had red tights under her skirt. Judging by how soaked the hood was, she too forgot to bring an umbrella and was seeking shelter from the rain as well. Once she was under the awning, she pulled back her hood and Yu’s jaw dropped.

“She’s beautiful.” Yu thought out loud.

The woman had Japanese features with flawless skin that boasted of the utmost care, with her hair was a natural platinum blonde tied up in pigtails that flowed past her shoulders like water, and her eyes were a light blue, shimmering as if they were a part of the ocean, and attached to her ears were two small pearl earrings. She turned to Yu and smiled.
“Awwww, thank you!” She said, her voice full of life.

“Wait, did I say that out loud?”

“Yes. Rather loudly too. Hello Takamaki-san.” Makoto said, turning to face the girl.

“Hey Prez. Who’s this? Did you finally get a boyfriend?” Ann teased, checking out Yu.

“N-no, of course not! T-this is my sister’s ward; Yu Narukami. Y-Yu, this is Ann Takamaki.” Makoto said with a blush on her face.

“Charmed, I’m sure.” Ann said with the most fake British accent a Japanese student could muster. The moment was cut short when they heard a car horn and turned to see a car roll up. The window rolled down to reveal a man with a pointed nose, round chin and bald head. He looked like he weighed a ton, but Yu could see that if his arms and chest were any indicator, every pound was muscle. This was a man who treated his body like a temple, and gave off a very malicious aura.

“Takamaki, get in. We have to talk.” The man ordered in a gruff tone comparable to a drill sergeant.

“Yes sensei.” Ann said, all the life drained from her voice as she entered. The car sped off as soon as she closed the door, and Yu couldn’t help but notice the scowl on Makoto’s face.

“Let’s go. You can’t afford to be late.” She said, frustration clear in her voice. Before the two could even move, Yu felt someone push past him, bumping into his shoulder. A boy tried to run after the car, but stopped shortly after.

“Damnit! Screw that asshole!” the boy yelled to no one in particular.

“Ryuji! Language!” Makoto yelled.

The boy, Ryuji turned around, his face in an apologetic look and awkward smile. He had spiky hair dyed yellow that gave him the look of an unruly punk. He wore the Shujin blazer and pants, but the blazer was unbuttoned to show a yellow shirt that said “ZOMG!” with comical stars that complemented his yellow hair.

“Heeeeeey Prez. Didn’t see ya there. Who’s this guy? Did ya finally get a boyfriend?”

“No, Ryuji. This is Yu Narukami, our new transfer student.”

“Awwww, he is? I was hoping it’d be a girl. I’m Ryuji Sakamoto. How do you and Prez know each other?” Ryuji asked, his grin wider and no longer nervous.

Before Yu could answer, Makoto did it for him.

“He’s currently under probation and will be living with me and my sister for the next year. Don’t get any funny ideas, or start spreading rumors.” She added the last part with extra authority.

“Relax, the rumor mill will take care of itself.” He replied, bitterness in his words.

“Didn’t you say we’d be late to school?” Yu cut in.

Both of them went wide-eyed.

“Shit, you’re right! Follow me, I know a shortcut!” Ryuji said, turning on his heel and leading the two down a series of alleyways. Yu and Makoto had to break into a light jog in order to keep up
with him, and he was casually strolling.

*This guy on the track team or something?*

True to his word, Ryuji led them to the school with minutes to spare.

“Well here it is, the shitty Shujin school.” Ryuji said, anger in his voice.

“Thanks Ryuji. We’ll take it from here.” Makoto said.

“Yea yea. But first, new guy; stay the hell away from Kobayakawa. That asshole thinks he’s the king of the castle or some shit.”

“Conditions have not been met.” A mechanical voice ringed out.

Yu pulled out his phone and saw that he forgot to close the app. Only this time, instead of the eye, he was met with three boxes, the first two saying “Kobayakawa” and "Shujin", but the third was empty. Yu noticed Makoto looking over his shoulder, so he quickly turned his phone on silent and shoved it in his pocket.

“Was that your phone?” Ryuji asked.

“Sadly, yes. I’ve been having some trouble with it.” Yu said quickly. It wasn’t a complete lie. Ryuji simply said “See ya” and went on his merry way. Yu turned to Makoto.

“Who’s Kobayakawa?”

“Coach Kobayakawa.” Makoto said the name as if it burned her mouth, and her brow furrowed.

“That’s the name of a man that can be called many things. Merciful isn’t one of them. He coaches the boxing team, and has a history of abusing students that don’t live up to his expectations.” Yu analysed her tone and body language. This wasn’t just disgust of the man because of his practices, this was personal.

“When Akechi and I started coming here, this place was hell on Earth. Two teachers, Kamoshida and Kobayakawa used the school as their own playground. Kamoshida coached the volleyball team, and would physically abuse its male team members, and sexually harass female students. Kobayakawa would strong arm faculty and blackmail students that tried to fight back, just to protect Shujin’s reputation.”

“Wait, Akechi goes here?”

“Yes, and believe it or not, you’re not the first one who thought we were siblings because of our eyes. Back to the story. When Akechi heard about the rumors, he went to Ushimaru-san, but he refused to do anything unless there was concrete proof of abuse. So, he took matters into his own hands. Alongside myself, Futaba, Kawakami, and a boy named Yuuki Mishima, Akechi-kun was able to get enough proof of Kamoshida’s deeds and get Ushimaru to have him fired. Sis took up the case when she caught wind of what Kamoshida did, and with Akechi-kun’s help, they put him behind bars for good. That’s how they met, and they’ve been working together ever since.”

“What about Kobayakawa?”

There was a silence that lasted a few seconds, and Makoto’s attitude shifted. Whereas before she looked ready to snap someone’s neck, she now looked ready to cry.
“Akechi-kun tried. God knows he tried. But Kobayakawa learned from Kamoshida’s mistakes. First, the coach tried to recruit Futaba. When she refused, her mom was reported to be in the hospital, and there we learned that she… was raped and had her back broken. Kobayakawa warned he’d finish the job if Futaba didn’t help him, and she’s done just that ever since. Next was Kawakami. He was able to find some… unsavory details about her and threatened her if she didn’t cooperate. Finally, there was Mishima. Mishima had no close friends besides Akechi and me, and his parents were out of town for a few weeks. So…” Makoto swallowed hard, and her lips started to quiver.

“One day, Mishima stopped showing up to school. When we investigated, we found… we found him in a coma, where he still remains to this day.”

Yu took a moment to let this knowledge sink in, his eyes widening as he processed it.

“God damn. If dad found out about this…”

“There’s more. You should know exactly what kind of monster you’re dealing with.” Makoto said, as if forcing herself to continue.

“For our second year, Akechi-kun and I tried again. Kobayakawa had stepped into the power vacuum left behind by Kamoshida. We formed a new team, Ryuji, Ann, and… a girl named Eiko.” Makoto choked up on saying the last name, a tear streaming down her cheek.

“A-and then…” Makoto stammered. She looked ready to break down, and Yu decided that his curiosity would have to wait another day.

“Thanks Makoto. I’m sorry for bringing back any painful memories.” Yu said, putting his arm on her shoulder.

“You’re welcome Yu-kun. All we can do is hope that this year will be different. You remember the way to the faculty office, yes?”

“Yea.”

“Good. I’m going… to compose myself before I head in.” She said with a sniffle.

“Take all the time you need. I’ll be alright.” Yu said, going in. Then he heard the whispers and realized he wouldn’t be alright.

“Is that the transfer student?”

“No way. That’s the criminal?”

Yu stopped dead in his tracks like a deer in headlights.

No. No, there’s no way. Only the teachers and Makoto should know about my record.

“Stay out his way, I heard he has a knife on him.”

“I heard he was a part of the Yakuza.”

“I heard that he attacked the cops that arrested him too!”

“Is he really the son of Dojima Narukami? He must be disgusted with him.”

Yu had to stop after that one and looked around to give that student a piece of his mind. Once
he found the man, he clenched his fists. No one insulted his father and walked away. Before he took the first step, he heard another voice in his head.

“Cause any trouble, and you’ll be expelled immediately.”

“Stay out of trouble. Stay out of trouble.” Yu muttered to himself as he turned around and walked up the stairs. He had one job.

More whispers about what they heard about him: They ranged from him doing drugs to him carrying a knife to him raping a woman, and it made Yu want to go into a corner and cry. There’s no way he’ll be able to make friends, outside of maybe Makoto and Akechi, and that’s a strong maybe. Keeping up the mask of a cool guy undaunted by what he heard, he knocked on the faculty office. Only Kawakami was there, and she looked incredibly tired, her makeup barely concealing the bags under her eyes. After she noticed him, she let out a yawn and turned to him.

“Oh, it’s you. You actually decided to show up today. Though, given you live with Makoto, that shouldn’t be a surprise. Well, come with me, we’ll introduce you to your homeroom.” She said without any emotion whatsoever.

Yu followed her as the bell rang, stopping right outside the classroom.

“Oh, by the way, I’m sure you know but… your record has been leaked.” Kawakami said, this time with genuine concern.

“H-how did that happen?”

“I don’t know. Someone hacked into the school webpage and shotgunned it everywhere. You can bet that there won’t be a single club that’ll accept you, but if you need a place to study in peace and quiet, let me know and I’ll take you to the faculty office.” She offered.

“Really? T-thanks.” Yu replied, surprised by her offer as the two opened the door and stepped in the classroom.

“Alright class, this is Yu Narukami. Please give him a warm welcome and treat him like you would any other student.”

Yu knew there’s no way in hell any of them would listen to that. Already he could hear the whispers.

“I can’t believe the I’m in the same class as this criminal.”

“I’m going to see if I can switch rooms with someone.”

“Don’t look at him, he’ll whack you in the face.”

“How long until he gets expelled?”

“Hopefully by the end of today.”

With every word, Yu wanted more and more to just walk out, crawl into a corner, and die.

“Let’s see. You’re going to sit, over there, by the window.” Kawakami pointed to an empty seat, and Yu walked over and saw a familiar bob of blonde hair. Ann. And unlike the others, she didn’t show any interest in the rumors. As he sat down, she stretched, dropping a piece of paper by his feet. He picked it up.
'If you want to have lunch with me and my friend, meet us in the courtyard.’ It read.

“You sure you want to be seen with me?” Yu whispered.

“I don’t see why not. If you’re worried about the rumors, don’t. Shiho and I have had our share.” Ann whispered back with a gentle smile. As if to prove her point, both heard whispers as the rumor mill began yet again.

“What are they talking about? Do they know each other?”

“Did she hit on him before he transferred?”

“Guess what they say is true; foreign girls really are easy.”

Yu saw a glare from Ann make it’s way to the gossipers, which prompted them to hush, or at least slander her more quietly.

“So?” Ann asked, hopeful.

“I’ll think about it. It’d be nice to talk to someone who doesn’t personally know my probation officer.” Yu said as the bell rang.

The rest of the classes went as expected, the teachers treated him like he was the plague, and more and more rumors circulated about him. As the last class finished, lunch bell sounded. Yu got up to try and meet up with Ann when he bumped into a familiar face with blood red eyes.

“Oh there you are Narukami-san. I was looking for you.”

“Why’s that Akechi? And why are you still wearing that pea coat instead of a Shujin uniform?”

“Since you never know when the SIU will come calling, the school has made me exempt from wearing a uniform. But, on to more pressing matters. As you have no doubt heard by now, your record has been leaked. I want to see how you’re holding up. Come on, we’ll talk away from prying eyes.” Akechi said, leading him up the roof. Yu once again heard the rumors as he and Akechi navigated the halls of highschool.

“What’s Akechi-kun doing with the criminal?”

“Hopefully getting him expelled.”

“Nah. Probably another victim of Akechi’s crusade.”

“Haven’t enough people been hurt by that already?”

“Yea, but at least this time, if something happens, no one will miss him.”

The two reached the rooftop, ignoring the ‘No entry’ sign on it.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that.” Akechi said as he closed the door.

“Don’t be. You didn’t leak my record.”

“And I can already guess as to who did. His name is Kobayakawa, and-”

“Makoto already told me about him. Why do you think he leaked my record?”
“That’s a very good question. Kobayakawa’s first and foremost interest is Shujin’s reputation. Successfully rehabilitating a delinquent would help Shujin’s reputation.”

“Given what Makoto’s told me, I’m surprised he didn’t catch me by the gates.”

“Kobayakawa doesn’t do his dirty work himself anymore. He has students for that.”

“So you think one of them leaked my record on his behalf?”

“I’d bet my life on it.”

“Would a girl called Futaba be able to do it? I saw her with a computer bag the other day.”

“Futaba doesn’t leave Yong Yen unless it’s for school or an emergency. And she’d never bring her laptop outside. But… yes, Futaba would be able to hack into the school site with ease. And if she was here yesterday, it was likely to find your record and plaster it for all to see. Please, don’t try to confront her. She’s as much a victim as you.”

“I know. Makoto told me about Kamoshida, and what happened to your team.”

“Really? I’m surprised she’d be comfortable talking about Eiko with you, given how little you know each other.”

“She didn’t. She choked up when she got there, and we decided to drop it.”

“I see. I’m not surprised it’s still a sensitive subject for her.”

The two stood in silence for a few moments before Yu spoke again.

“If there’s nothing else, can I go? A girl I met, Ann, said she’d like to have lunch with me.”

“Ann you say? I’d advise against talking to her.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well… I’m not comfortable discussing our previous exploits without Makoto-san’s knowledge or consent, but lunch break won’t last long. How much do you know?”

“Makoto left off at the second team.”

“Alright. Second year had come around, and Makoto-san and I had promised ourselves that this would be the year we finally nailed Kobayakawa. We found three students to help us; Ryuji Sakamoto, Ann Takamaki, and Eiko Takao. It started out well enough, Ryuji had joined the boxing team, since the volleyball team’s fall from grace thanks to Kamoshida, Kobayakawa hoped to elevate the boxing team to the same status as the volleyball coach, and would abuse them when they didn’t reach his standards. Ann and Eiko befriended students who weren’t doing so well academically wise, because of rumors that Kobayakawa was threatening them with abuse and blackmail if they didn’t improve.” Akechi said, anger rising with each word.

“You’re getting very worked up over this.”

“Let me finish, and you’ll find out why. The information gathering was going well enough, but… amateur mistakes, poor communication, and the fact that our previous team was shackled to Kobayakawa’s will… led to our team falling apart. Evidence went missing from the student council room, confession recordings deleted from our phones, and the students we were talking to came to school bruised, beaten, and bloodied. Officially, they were mugged, unofficially,
Kobayakawa beat them to a pulp and asked his friends to support his alibi and had Futaba tamper with cameras to support his claim that he had nothing to do with it. Then, he came for our team. First was Ryuji. When Kobayakawa realized Ryuji was with us, he was kicked out of the Track Team, and had his arm broken on grounds of ‘self defence’. Then, his father was attacked and put in the emergency room. The bills were so much, the Sakamotos had to sell their family home in order to pay it, and live in a cheap motel even today. Next was Ann, who was always an outcast due to her looks. There were only two people who befriended her; Ryuji and a girl named Shiho Suzui. By this point, everyone knew full well what happened if you tried to go against Kobayakawa, so when he threatened Shiho, Ann caved in almost immediately. Finally, there was Eiko.”

Akechi looked at the ground, and looked like he was going to be sick.

“One day Eiko was called into Kobayakawa’s office. Makoto-san happened to be walking by, and Eiko ran out, tears in her eyes. When Makoto caught up to her and asked what was wrong, Eiko slapped her, said that she wished she never met her, and that she hoped that her, me, and Kobayakawa all burned in hell. The next day, I was called to her house, to interview her parents. There was a suicide.”

“My God.”

“Yes. There were only a few bruises on her shoulders, but given the intensity, I’d say they formed because someone was holding her still with all their strength. I’ll let you guess what he did that would warrant suicide with so little damage to her body.”

“That’s… that’s awful.” Yu said, his eyes wide with horror.

“Yes. Eiko killed herself, and she did so hating Makoto-san and me. After that, Makoto-san told me to lay off Kobayakawa, and we spent the rest of the school year as pariahs.”

“And being with me won’t do your reputation any wonders.”

“I don’t care about my reputation, I care about seeing justice done. Mark my words Yu Narukami, Kobayakawa will know the price for what he’s done, and I’ll be the one that makes him pay.”

There was a short silence as the Yu just realized exactly what kind of prison Shujin was. Soon, they heard a bell, signaling that lunch break was over. The two went back to their respective classes, with Yu having lost his appetite. Classes ended and Yu heard a chippy voice from behind him. He turned around and saw Ann cutting right through the crowd.

“Hey Yu, did you forget about meeting me and Shiho?” She asked, sounding hurt.

“Sorry about that. Akechi found me and brought me up to the roof.” Yu said, looking down.

*Of course the one person who wants to be my friend is probably doing so under orders from the same guy that made it impossible to make friends to begin with.*

“Really? What’d he want to talk about?” She said, trying to hide her fear, and failing miserably.

“Mostly wanted to make sure that I wasn’t letting the rumors get to me.”

“Oh, that’s nice of him. Say, want to make up for lunch? Shiho’s waiting for me, and she was rather disappointed she didn’t get to meet you.”
Somehow, I doubt that.

“Oh really?”

“Really! Suuuuuuper disappointed!”

Wow, her acting sucks.

“Well then she’ll have to be disappointed again.” A female voice called from behind Yu. Before either, could respond, Makoto stepped between the two. If this was an anime, Yu would’ve thought they were fighting over him.

“As it just so happens, I have student council duties, and I need help. Yu is going to accompany me.”

Before either Yu or Ann had a chance to protest, Makoto grabbed his arm and dragged him upstairs and into the Student Council room. She closed the door quickly and with far too much force.

“Gee Makoto, could you have been a little more gentle? I’m not your prisoner”. Yu asked, rubbing his wrist.

“Sorry, it’s just… I don’t want Kobayakawa to get his hooks in you.”

“It’s alright, just please be more careful next time, ok?”

Yu looked around the room. It was a small room, standard for a student council. There was about enough space for ten, maybe 15 people, and there were several drawers and file cabinets for different documents, from tests to requests to budget plans. In the center of the room was a massive table made of smaller desks with five chairs around it.

“Makoto-san? You in here?” Akechi asked from outside with a knock.

“Yes Akechi. Please come in.” Makoto said.

“Oh, Narukami-san’s here as well.”

“That’s what we’re here to discuss. Yu, Akechi told me that you were informed of… the fate of our second team.”

“Yes, I must apologize for doing so without your consent Makoto-san. Did you call us here because you’re thinking about forming a third team?” Akechi asked.

There was a moment of pause, and Yu thought Makoto was considering it. That thought went away as Makoto slammed her hand on the table, startling Akechi and making Yu recoil. If looks could kill, Makoto would slay an army right now.

“EXCUSE ME?!?!” She roared.

“I-I simply thought-” Akechi croaked.

“You thought what? That if we had a new member, one who’s already in the crosshairs of Kobayakawa, it would somehow change the outcome? I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Well, here, hear me ou-”
“No way Akechi.”

“But, if we have someone we know is being targeted, maybe we could-”

“Use him as bait?” Her tone was ice cold.

“Makoto, this is our last year at Shujin. Once we leave, there won’t be anyone left who will try to take him down.”

“And for good reason. Need I remind you what happened to everyone else that helped us?”

“Makoto, the war isn’t over yet. We still have a chance. Now that we know what we did wrong, this time-”

“NO!! The ‘war’ is over Akechi! We lost. You need to accept that.”

“I can’t. Not when I can still do something.” Akechi said, motioning to Yu.

“Umm… do I get a say in this?” Yu asked.

“You didn’t even fill him in?!”

Akechi opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He tried again, with the same result, and could only hang his head in shame.

“Unbelievable. I called you two here to expressly tell you both; despite the rumors, you two are to do nothing that could provoke Kobayakawa. We are going to get through this year as honest high school students. Especially you.” Makoto explained, looking at Yu.

“Your situation is even more volatile than ours. If you get expelled, your going onto the streets. I’ll be watching you closely to make sure you don’t do anything that could land you in hot water with Sis. If you encounter any trouble from Kobayakawa, I fully expect you to roll with the punches.” Makoto said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“You can’t be serious Makoto-san!” Akechi said, his brows furrowing.

“I’m very serious. You understand, right Yu-kun?”

“I do.”

_I’ll be a nice, obedient little prisoner._

“Excellent.”

“So, you’re just giving up Makoto-san? Going to let Mishima and Eiko go unavenged?”

Makoto walked over to Akechi and gave him a massive slap to the face. Yu had to wonder if Akechi was brave, stupid, or crazy. Given that he regularly works with Sae, Yu decided on a mix of the last two.

“Don’t you dare bring them up. I’m doing this so that no one else suffers their fate. I know when to admit defeat with grace. You need to do the same.”

Makoto turned to Yu.

“I’m going to check out some books for study material. You two, stay here.” She ordered as
she left. Akechi got up, rubbing his struck cheek.

“That looked like it hurt.” Yu said as he got out his phone.

“That was nothing. You should see her when she actually wants to hurt someone.” Akechi said, rolling his arm.

A few moments of silence filled the room, and Yu decided to get on his phone and browse some memes. Instead he saw a familiar, and unwelcome sight.

“This stupid thing.” Yu muttered as he opened the eye app again. The boxes were all empty this time. Before he could delete it again, he heard Akechi speak up.

“Phone trouble?”

“I might have to get a new one at this rate. But, in more relevant news, you were planning to put my life on the line just to get a shot at revenge?” Yu asked coldly.

“It’s not vengeance, it’s justice.”

“Same thing.”

“No it isn’t. The difference is mercy.”

“Something I won’t get in this prison.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This damn school. It’s a jail, and I’m its sole prisoner.”

“That’s an interesting perspective. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t see this place as a prison.”

“Ryuji said it was like a castle.”

“Heh, of course he did. But no, I wouldn’t say Shujin is like a castle, or a prison. I’d say it’s more like… a nation, and Kobayakawa is its ruler.”

“And you are the heroic rebel?”

“Of course.” Akechi said with a smile and small chuckle.

If Yu didn’t have his phone on silent, he would have heard a “Beginning navigation.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand into the Metaverse we go!
Yu seemed to immediately get a headache, and Akechi felt the same, judging by how they both grabbed their heads at the same time. Yu and Akechi groaned as the pain left a sharp ringing in their ears that fades a little too slowly. Yu looked at his senpai, and saw he had the same look of pain as Yu.

“Ow. What was that?” Yu asked.

“You felt like your skull was about to burst too?” Akechi replied.

Before he could reply, they heard a voice outside.

“You should be honored to be a part of the Shujin Nation!”

Yu and Akechi looked at each other, both equally puzzled.

Wait... I touched the app. Shit, this is another LSD trip. I’m so getting my phone replaced when this is over.

“Did you hear that Narukami-san?”

“You did too? I thought this app gave me another drug.”

“Another?”

“Believe it or not, strange stuff like has happened before, and every time it was because of this damn app. I don’t know how, but every time I activate it, I get these weird visions. Though, nothing on this scale before.”

“Well, are there any consistencies with these visions?”

“None. First one, I saw myself in a pillar of electricity, second time I had a dream where I was in prison with two women and a long-nosed gremlin as my wardens. And now, I’m hearing voices.”

“But the room looks completely normal. And the noise came from outside. I’m going to investigate.”

“Didn’t Makoto say that we had to stay here?”

“Ah, details, details.” Akechi said with a sly smile.

*Does this guy enjoy being on the receiving end of the Niijimas’ wrath?*

Akechi walked outside the door while Yu looked back at his phone. The app was closed, and when he tried to open any other apps, they wouldn’t work. He decided to text Makoto, hoping that she would be back soon. But the message didn’t go through, and Yu noticed that he didn’t have any reception. At all.

“Great. This probation is the gift that keeps on giving.” Yu groaned.

“Narukami-san? You should probably come out and see this.” Akechi said, worry in his tone.
Yu rolled his eyes and left, closing the door behind him, and it vanished as soon as it did. He turned around, and rubbed his eyes to make sure he really was seeing this. His attitude went from annoyance to a mixture of fear and awe at the sight.

“Do… do you see this too Narukami-san?” Akechi asked, thinking the same things as Yu.

The two looked around. They weren’t standing in Shujin Academy. They were standing in the middle of a road inside a small city. Well, to say it was a city would be a bit of a stretch.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m seeing what looks like a tourist resort.” Yu said.

“That’s exactly what I see as well. Two massive hotels, a restaurant, houses-

“-convenience stores, shops for souvenirs, a police station-” Yu said the last part with a bit of fear in his voice.

“And… is that a beach?” Akechi finished.

Yu turned around. It was in fact a beach. The blue ocean waves turned orange in the glow of the sunset, and the sand was free of any umbrellas, chairs, or other things.

“Hey, I can see something in the distance. It looks like… an island.” Yu added, squinting to make sure he saw it right.

“Look, up on the cliff. An airport.” Akechi stated, pointing to a cliff that was just past the hotels.

“Look at the billboards.” Yu replied, pointing to one on their left.

“Remember, Shujin’s needs come before your own… ?” Akechi quoted.

“What is going on?” Yu asked, shaking his head.

“I don’t know. Here, I would like to test something.”

Without warning, Akechi went up to Yu and punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

“OW! What the hell Akechi?!”

“I felt the resistance your shoulder gave. And since nothing’s changed, it’s safe to say that we’re not dreaming. Here, Narukami-san, hold up some fingers, and I’ll try to guess how many.”

Yu then proceeded to raise one finger, the one that was in between his ring and index, to full length. Akechi narrowed his gaze at the crude gesture.

“Ha ha ha. Very funny Narukami-san. But since I was able to see clearly, and you have complete control over yourself, it’s safe to say that neither of us are under the effects of drugs or alcohol.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that, as improbable as it is, we have to accept that what we’re seeing is very real. And judging by the placement of the buildings, I’d say we’re in the middle of the town square. Which is odd, since my phone has no reception.” Akechi said, waving it around.

“So, our best bet is to find some people and ask them about this. After all, can’t have a tourist
That does indeed sound like our best bet. Let’s go.”

The two walked around for a few minutes, and saw banners and billboards everywhere, all saying things such as “Shujin’s reputation needs your sacrifices!”, “Shujin’s reputation comes before all else!” and “Do nothing to tarnish Shujin’s reputation, and you will be happy!” The only sounds that could be heard were the blowing of the wind and their footsteps.

“Jeez, when you said Shujin was a nation, I didn’t expect this.” Yu said as they continued walking.

“This is more like a ghost town than a resort. The sun has only started to set, so shouldn’t people be taking romantic stro- wait. You hear that?”

Yu listened, and sure enough, he heard a voice. One that sounded a lot like the one he heard when he first got here. The voice grew louder and louder, and it became easier to make out the words.

“Remember students, heed not the fools that cry for resistance, rebellion, and revolution! Maintaining Shujin’s reputation is the only way you can find joy!” It shouted.

“Look, that’s where it’s coming from!” Yu said.

Turning the corner, they saw a van with speakers mounted on the top. As it rolled by, they saw on the side a picture of Kobayakawa and next to him, the kanji spelled “Joy and prosperity to those who uphold Shujin’s reputation.” The van sped away, paying the two students no mind.

“That… that was a propaganda van, wasn’t it?” Yu asked

“Yes, and with Kobayakawa’s face on it. I think it’s best we find a way back. We have no idea what we’re dealing with here, and if something bad happens, we’re not going to be prepared to deal with it.”

“Agreed. The question is, how?”

“Didn’t you say this happened when you used an app?”

Yu’s eyes widened.

Wow. I’m such an IDIOT!

Yu took out his phone. Like before, he had no service, and none of his apps were working. None, except one. The one shaped like an eye. Only this time, it did something other than mess with him: It turned into a black screen, with a yellow and red arrows in the center and a purple circle in the upper left corner. When Yu turned, he saw that the circle move with him.

“Looks like this app is acting like a map now. I’m guessing the two arrows here are you and me. But, the city isn’t showing up. It’s just us and this purple circle.” Yu explained, showing Akechi the phone.

“Then that is our destination. Let’s-”

The next thing they heard sent Yu’s heart and mind into panic mode and made his blood run cold. Police sirens, and they were getting closer.
No. No no no no!

“We need to go, now!” Yu yelled

“What, why? It’s just the police.”

“EXACTLY!”

“Narukami-san, they’re not going to arrest us.”

“We’re in a place with Kobayakawa’s face plastered everywhere like he’s a hero.”

“That’s… a really good point. Let us make haste.” Akechi said as the two turned to run.

“Stay where you are!” A voice called out, and Yu suddenly suffered flashbacks to that night and what came after. Being forced into a car, Dojima yelling at everyone, including him, the slamming of a hammer, the disgust of people he once knew, people he helped, people he sacrificed for, Nanako crying, him tying a noose. He couldn’t live through that. Not again.

“We have to run, now!” Yu yelled, turning around, but saw armored cars approaching them from all directions. He desperately looked for a way out as police helicopters flew overhead, men getting ready to repel down.

“Yu, wait! Running will only make it worse.” Akechi said, grabbing Yu’s arm.

“On the ground! NOW!” An officer ordered as Special Assault Teams filed out of the armored cars.

“Give up! You’re surrounded!”

“Akechi, I can’t be arrested again. I can’t!”

“Calm down Narukami-san. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That didn’t save me last time.”

Yu was about to break out of Akechi’s hold when he noticed red laser dots pointing at Akechi and himself. Snipers. Now, he had no choice. He and Akechi put their arms behind their heads, and got down on their knees. The police rushed in, more on Akechi than Yu.

“We finally got you, you bastard!” He said as they snapped the cuffs on Akechi while Yu was still on the ground.

“We’ve done nothing wrong!”

“You are responsible for endangering Shujin Nation, terrorizing its residents, and attempting to remove our beloved President Kobayakawa from office!”

“President?” Yu asked.

“Beloved?!” Akechi spat.

“Quiet!” the officer yelled, slamming Akechi’s head on the pavement.

Yu tried to get a look at the officers. Most of them were in riot gear, and behind the helmets, he wasn’t sure if it was because of the adrenaline or something else, but he couldn’t see any faces,
just a blob of black ink in the shape of a head with red orbs for eyes. They picked up Akechi, attached a set of cuffs to his legs and attached chains that connected them to the cuffs on his wrists, and forced him into an armored car.

“President Kobayakawa will celebrate this day for years!” One cried out, to which the others gave cheers and applause.

“What about this one? The one with the silver hair and eyes?”

“He could be a potential accomplice.”

“He doesn’t show up on the suspect list. Perhaps Akechi kidnapped him and was in the process of brainwashing him? He could just be a kid who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Yu closed his eyes and let himself hope they would let him go. If only the cops were this understanding on that night. But his hope was quickly dashed.

“Better safe than sorry. Throw him in with the Akechi. We will allow our most benevolent Kobayakawa to decide his fate.”

Just like with Akechi, they grabbed Yu and cuffed his legs and chained those to the ones on his wrists, and forced him into the same armored car as Akechi. Yu heard several voices in his head.

"Cause any problems, and you’ll be expelled immediately."

"If you are expelled, I won’t hesitate to kick you out."

“Why’d you have to get involved?”

Yu could feel the tears coming as the car began to move, and he didn’t even try to stop them. It was over, he was going to be expelled, then kicked out, and finally, taken back to Juvie, only this time, he’d stay there. His life was now over, one way or another, and he knew it.

Three days. I couldn’t make it through three days.

“Narukami-san? It’s going to be ok.” Akechi said, noticing his fellow prisoner crying.

“No. No it’s not.” Yu said, looking back at Akechi, who seemed to have an ironclad drive shining in his eyes, despite the grave situation.

“It will. I won’t let Kobayakawa hurt you.”

“Is that what you said to Mishima? To Eiko?” Yu growled.

“They have nothing to do with this.”

“Oh really? They’re both people who thought being with you was a good idea, and now look where they are! My life is ruined Akechi. Once everything is over and done, I’ll be sent back to Juvenile Hall, and there is nothing either of us can do about it!”

The tears kept coming, and Yu just let them roll down his cheeks as rage and hopelessness churned within him.

“What did I do to deserve this? I kept my dad from becoming an alcoholic when he found out
mom was gone, I helped save three people from destroying their lives, and I befriended Yosuke when everyone else wouldn’t even look at him. And for what?! All of them abandoned me! Dad stopped me from ending it all so that I could live for this?!”

He glared at Akechi but instead of seeing pity, he instead found sympathy and understanding in his crimson eyes.

“I’m truly sorry to hear that Narukami-san. But I promise you, if there’s a way to get you out of this, I will take it, even if it costs me my life.” Akechi said, determination in his voice.

“You go ahead and do that.” Yu muttered as the car stopped.

The two boys were taken out of the car and dragged into the police station. Outside, they saw people wearing the Shujin uniform cheering and throwing fruit at Akechi. After they entered, they were taken to an elevator and went down. Yu swallowed hard, and braced himself for being thrown in a cell the second time. When the elevator doors finally opened up, his and Akechi’s eyes widened. This wasn’t a normal lockup for a police station. In fact, it was like they entered another building entirely. This was a full blown prison, with the cells going down in a spiral motion, the only way that seemed to go down was a long continuous ramp going down the same spiral motion as the cells. Yu looked in the cells and saw that some of them were occupied… by people wearing the Shujin uniform, all being beaten and tortured by men in a military uniform. Curiously, they, just like the police, didn’t have faces, just a blob of black ink acting as the head, and two red orbs acting as the eyes.

“Akechi, do you know any of these people?” Yu asked.

“Quiet!” a guard yelled, shoving Yu’s head forward.

Akechi looked around, and his eyes widened in horror. He simply gave a nod, and Yu made and educated guess as to who these people were. Most likely, they were students who tried to give testimony or evidence against Kobayakawa. As they began their descent down the ramp, Yu could hear the cries of anguish from the prisoners, and his heart sank, knowing that he would be joining them.

“I didn’t know! Akechi brainwashed me with talk of justice, but all he gave me was pain! I’m begging you, please stop!”

“I promise to tell you everything I know about that bastard! Just stop, please!”

“Helping him wasn’t worth it! I’ll be a good citizen, I promise! Please!”

Yu felt a pang of guilt, as he knew Akechi could hear them too. He wanted to apologize for being so rude earlier, but he knew what would happen if he tried to speak again.

Can’t even apologize without being punished for it.

As they went lower and lower, the cells became more advanced, going from simple iron bars, to glass, to metal with only a small view through it, to bulkheads. In each cell, they saw a student being interrogated, but it would be more accurate to say they were being tortured, each one forsaking and cursing Akechi. When they finally reached the bottom, both Yu and Akechi were simultaneously horrified and heartbroken at what they saw. At the bottom of the ramp was the floor, but it wasn’t made of metal, it was made of rocks, jewels, and metals, all of which were being mined in a quarry opening.

“My God. This… this is inhuman.” Akechi whispered.
The miners were none other than Ann Takamaki, Ryuji Sakamoto, Sadayo Kawakami, and Futaba Sakura. All four of them wore collars around their necks, and one of the guards cracked their whips on Ann, getting a scream from her as blood poured from the wound.

“Ann!” Akechi yelled, earning a punch to the jaw from a guard. Ann turned to the duo, her eyes downcast.

“Stop Akechi. Just stop. You did this to me. You made me fight a war I wasn’t involved in and wanted no part of. You put me here. You made me Kobayakawa’s slave. So please, just stop.” She begged. The defeat, hopelessness, fear and pain in her voice couldn't be stronger.

Just like me.

Akechi looked to the left and let out a gasp. Yu followed his gaze and saw that there was a bounty board that said “Most Wanted”. On the board were pictures of Akechi, Makoto, Ryuji, Ann, Sadayo, Futaba, and a boy and girl Yu didn’t recognize. Only Makoto and Akechi were left untouched, while the boy and girl had a skull stamped on their pictures, and the rest had a big red “X” on them.

“I take it the ones with the skull stamp are Mishima and Eiko?” Yu asked.

“QUIET!”

Another punch, this time to the stomach. Brought down to one knee, Yu was grateful that he didn’t eat anything for lunch, or it would be puked up on the floor by now. He looked at Akechi, who simply nodded to answer.

“On your feet inmate!”

Yu was grabbed and forced to his feet. He turned to his right and saw a wall-like slab made of concrete, a slab that looked out of place, and was filled with bullet holes, as if someone had been executed by firing squad there. Every sight just made him more and more hopeless and afraid. He’d never get to see his father, his sister, ever again. He’s going to spend the rest of his life as a slave working in that quarry, and that’s just him. Akechi would no doubt rot in a cell, if not be outright killed.

“Alright, the cell’s ready for you two. Get comfy while you can. President Kobayakawa’s on his way as we speak.” A guard informed them as they were led down a tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel was a small drawbridge, big enough for one person at a time. The guards pushed Akechi first, and Yu followed. Due to how no one else was there, the sound of their chains clinking was almost deafening. They arrived at their destination; a cell being suspended in the air by four chains. The cell was made out of stainless steel, and its door was a small bulkhead that opened up, revealing a padded room that looked like it was barely big enough for one person. Scrawled on the padding, in blood, were the words:

“Welcome to hell. It's the one you made yourself.”

The two got in, way too close to each other than was comfortable for either. Yu turned to Akechi, who reached inside his coat pockets.

“Still think you can get us out of here?” Yu asked.

“Yes, though now, I know I can’t do it with words. Like I said before, no matter how difficult it is to accept. This. Is. Real. And if Kobayakawa truly does reign here, then there’s no way I’ll be
able to talk him into letting us no simply with the argument that ‘we’ve done nothing wrong.’ If we are to get out of this free, or even alive, I believe we will have to force our way out.” Akechi explained, getting out a hairpin from his coat.

“And how do we do that?” Yu wondered as Akechi went to work freeing Yu.

“Judging by the fact that they didn’t even bother to search us or even get us out of our respective uniforms, I’d say they’re stupid, arrogant, or both. We can use either to our advantage.”

“But they have bullet-proof vests, machine guns, and most likely combat training. And there’s no way you could fit more than maybe three clips in your coat. If we’re getting out of here, we’ll have to do it without being seen.” Yu pointed out.

“Correct. Which will be a problem since the only way out that I saw was that ramp.”

“We could disguise ourselves as guards.” Yu suggested.

“That sounds like our best bet.” Akechi replied as he got the last of the cuffs off of Yu.

“Here, take this.” Akechi said, pulling out his gun.

“A-are you sure? I’ve handled a gun because dad taught me, but I hoped to never use one.” Yu squeaked, all color draining at the sight of the weapon.

“I’ve got a plan. That drawbridge is only wide enough for one person at a time. I’ll go first, still in chains, then fall down. When a guard comes, you’ll have to kill him.”

Yu’s eyes widened and a cold sweat dropped down his forehead. Kill someone? Sure, he hasn’t been able to see their face, but maybe the black stuff was supposed to be a face mask. Yes, he wanted to get out of here, but he wasn’t sure he was willing to kill someone for it to happen. If he did kill someone, he’d be exactly what all students in Shujin said he was; a criminal.

“Akechi… I don’t… I don’t think I’m willing or able to kill another human being.”

Yu expected Akechi to get angry, maybe call him weak, but the detective simply nodded.

“I understand. Taking a life is not something to be taken lightly. In that case, we’ll switch. You go first, fall down, then I’ll kill the guard.” Akechi said, putting his gun back in his coat pocket.

Before Yu could put his cuffs back on, the cell door opened, revealing a guard that grabbed Akechi before he could finish getting his cuffs off. Before Yu could try to fight him, he saw laser sights be pointed at his face and chest. Akechi was taken away, and Yu was only allowed to start walking once Akechi had crossed the bridge. The guards hadn’t even attempted to put cuffs back on Yu. Akechi was right, they were overconfident.

Once both of them were across, they once again started walking through the tunnel, and with each step, Yu felt like he was on death row, despite the absence of chains. Maybe he would be spared given that he was new, but Akechi was most likely going to suffer a far worse fate, and there was nothing he could do about it. Once they were back in the quarry area, they saw two guards talking to a man. The man was dressed in a white military outfit with a gold outline.

“Sir, I present to you: The rebel Goro Akechi, and his new accomplice: Yu Narukami.”

The man turned around, revealing that his uniform was decorated with more medals than Yu thought existed, with a purple sash around his chest. His uniform strained to contain the powerful
body the man had, and if he took his shirt off, Yu was sure he’d look like an Olympic athlete. He had a bald head, round chin, and a pointed nose. But most disturbing of all were his eyes. They were a bright yellow and glowed like they were in a horror film.

“Hello Goro Akechi. I would have waited an eternity for this.” He greeted, but his voice sounded... distorted, like he was possessed by a demon.

“K-Kobayakawa? Is that you?”
“Yes Akechi. I am President Kobayakawa, ruler of Shujin Nation! The same nation you have terrorized for two whole years.” The man yelled, posing with his fist raised, as if he was giving a speech.

“Nation?” Yu asked.

“Of course! Shujin is renowned all over the world as a nation where the best and brightest go in order to be groomed for success. And now, one of it’s greatest troublemakers is finally where he belongs: Rotting away, out of sight, and out of mind.” Kobayakawa answered.

“You can punish me, but all I ask is that you let Narukami-san go. He’s done nothing wrong.” Akechi said, hanging his head in defeat and shame.

“Normally, I’d say that being with you is crime enough Akechi, but in this case, you are correct. Narukami is just a poor fool who you were taking advantage of. And this wouldn’t be the first time you’ve lead a citizen astray, and they paid the price for your mistakes, is it?”

Yu felt his blood start to boil. The tone in Kobayakawa’s voice showed nothing but haughtiness and pride. Kobayakawa turned to Yu, a snicker on his face.

“Consider yourself lucky young man. None of Akechi’s victims had the benefit of being saved before Akechi brainwashed them.”

“What are you going to do?” Yu asked, somehow keeping the anger out his voice.

“Simple. You may leave, unharmed. As for the rebel Goro Akechi, he broke the laws of my supreme nation, and the punishment is death.”

“W-what? What could he have done to warrant that?” Yu asked.

“Simple: He tried to oust me, the benevolent -”

Yu heard a crack of a whip at the word, and saw Ann go onto her knees out of the corner of his eye.

“-ruler of Shujin nation. Worse yet, he conscripted citizens into his service, brainwashing them with foolish talk of ‘justice’. Hmph. The only justice that matters is the kind that I decree. Here, my word is law. I decide who lives and who dies, because no one else is worthy of that power. But it’s hardly their fault that I am naturally superior.”

Yu clenched his fist as Kobayakawa prattled on.

“Is that why you blackmail students to do your bidding? Assault and rape their families when they don’t cooperate?” Yu interrupted, no longer able to hide his anger.

“Narukami-san, stop. Please. You have the chance to get out without being hurt. Don’t waste it. Please, just go, and don’t worry about me. It’ll be ok. I’ll be ok.” Akechi pleaded, and judging by the sound of his voice, Yu couldn’t tell if Akechi was trying to convince himself, or Yu. But
Narukami didn’t listen.

“Would a superior person strong-arm a 16 year-old into leaking my record? Would a superior person drive a teenager to suicide just because they were associating with a student the ‘superior person’ didn’t like?” Yu yelled, his anger welling up inside him.

“Acceptable compromises. I don’t expect a rodent like you to understand.” Kobayakawa growled.

“Of course they’re acceptable to you.”

“Narukami-san, please…” Akechi pleaded as the scowl on Kobayakawa’s scowl grew worse and worse.

“You’re not superior person, you’re just a bully in a costume, doing whatever the hell you want because you enjoy the power trip, all while lying to yourself and saying that it’s for the reputation of some overrated academy!”

That had pushed Kobayakawa over the edge. The muscled dictator gave a swift punch to Narukami’s gut, knocking all the air out of him, and the crunch of cracking ribs was heard loud and clear. Yu was hunched over on his knees, coughing and gasping for air.

“It seems I was wrong. Akechi truly did get his hooks in you.” Kobayakawa said, standing over Yu.

“However-” Kobayakwa said, grabbing Yu by the hair and lifting him off the ground.

“I am a merciful man.”

Yu could hear another crack of the whip and another scream from Ann at the word ‘merciful’.

“I am willing to strike a bargain with you.”

“What the hell can I give you, that you can’t simply rip from people’s lives?”

“Information. You see, I may have Akechi, but there is one other rebel, one who is just as arrogant and foolish as this so-called ‘detective’. Her name is Makoto Niijima. Sound familiar?”

“You stay away from her!” Akechi yelled, prompting another punch from a guard.

“Be silent Akechi. Your life is forfeit.” Kobayakawa said, picking up Yu and making sure the young man could stand.

“If you want to get out of here alive, you must, first and foremost, be an upstanding citizen of Shujin Nation. You must obey all the rules, do nothing that could embarrass me, and follow my orders to the letter. Second, you must report any and all incriminating information about Makoto Niijima. In exchange, you get to reap the rewards of being in the best nation known to man. What do you say?” Kobayakawa asked, extending his hand as Yu’s anger returned a thousand fold.

This man was never satisfied. He was willing to all kinds of depraved ends simply to satiate his own gluttonous appetite for power. Staying out of trouble be damned, expulsion be damned, probation be damned, the rigged system be damned, Yu was going to do something about it. Yu looked Kobayakawa straight in the eyes, steely grey meeting unnatural yellow. Kobayakawa saw something in those grey orbs; the fire of rebellion, a fire he had put out many times. But this one was different. In others, the spark was fleeting, destined to go out the moment it encountered any
resistance, like a candle in church. But this wasn’t a candle. No, this spark would lead to a fire that couldn’t be doused no matter what tried to put it out, and each attempt would only make the flames of defiance return even stronger.

“Do you really think that I would deliver my probation officer’s sister to your claws, in exchange for being allowed to simply exist?! You leaked my record and expect me to obey you?! I say this; you can take Shujin’s reputation and shove it up your ass!!” Yu answered, throwing a punch to Kobayakawa’s face with all of his strength. Strength that didn’t even manage to turn Kobayakwa’s head. The dictator turned to look Yu in the eyes, his face contorting into a snarl.

“You would rather die than submit to your betters? Then so be it!”

Kobayakawa threw another punch, this time it hit Yu straight in the jaw, knocking out a tooth and sending him straight to the ground. As he made impact, Yu knew that would leave a mark, and shortly after, tasted blood. Then, he felt a boot on his face starting to press down.

“This is where worthless scum like you belong. Under the heels of your superiors.” Kobayakawa said, stamping his foot hard on Yu.

“Stop it you bastard!” Akechi yelled, trying to force his way out of the guards’ grip.

“Hmph. You’ll just have to wait your turn Narukami. Guards, hold him and make sure he doesn’t turn away. I want him to witness the fate of all who oppose President Kobayakawa. Prepare the firing squad!”

Four soldiers marched in, all with assault rifles. Two more guards forced Yu up and held him in place, making sure he’d watch.

“Put Akechi up against the wall!”

The soldiers dragged Akechi to the concrete wall, removing the cuffs that limited his movement, and placing his arms in chains that forced him to spread his upper body.

“The vermin is secured and ready to be executed on your orders sir.”

No. No! I can’t let this happen! I have to do something!

Yu started to struggle. Kobayakawa was no better than the man who had him arrested, the man who was willing to assault and most likely rape a woman simply because he thought he was born superior to everyone else. Kobayakawa had ruined so many lives, all for the sake of a school’s reputation, just like how that man ruined Yu’s life because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Ready!” Kobayakawa ordered, the squad loading their weapons

They were going to kill Akechi. Yu wanted to stop it, he wanted to stop Kobayakawa, he wanted to do something . Yu continued to struggle, but he had to give up, the guards were simply too strong for him.

Then, he heard a voice. It was otherworldly, powerful, and firm.

“Is that truely the extent of your will? A few meager pushes and shoves? They will kill him if you do not act. Is that the kind of man your father raised? A bystander who will let injustice, deceit, and corruption reign?” The spectral voice asked, and Yu could hear himself in the words, as if he was talking through a filter. Judging by how no one else reacted to it, Yu had to
guess the voice was coming from in his head. No, it was coming from his soul. And his response came from the same place.

No… that’s not me. Dad taught me that being a good person in this world comes with a price, and that it’s a price worth paying!

“Is it? What if your actions here become a mistake, like on that night?”

That wasn’t a mistake.

“Very well. If that is what you truly believe, then let us seal our contract.”

There was a THUMP that echoed through the room, like the heartbeat of a creature brought to life. Yu suddenly felt a skull splitting pain. Had it not been for the guards holding his arms down, he would have grabbed his skull to ease the throbbing.

(Awakening + Willpower https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjzQXrUXuHk&t=14s)

“I am thou, thou art I.”

Yu screamed, and he screamed louder than he thought possible. He shook against the guards’ grip, the two now having to use both of their hands to hold him down, a new strength surging within.

“Aim!” Kobayakawa ordered, both he and his men indifferent to the wails of agony.

The squad pointed their guns at Akechi, who was struggling in vain to break free.

“The time has come. Thou art willing to do any and all acts to obtain the truth and deliver justice upon the wicked. Now, awaken the power within thou and right the wrongs of this world!”

Yu thought his head was going to explode from all the pain. It felt like something was in his skull, and it was clawing desperately to get out, like a diver trying to reach the surface.

“Open thy eyes and call forth what is within!!”

There was a sudden burst of energy, knocking all the officers back and even catching Kobayakawa off guard. When the dust settled, Yu felt something on his face, heavy and uncomfortable. He instinctively reached up to touch it, and found it was a mask. It was a masquerade mask, with its nose curved like a hawk’s, and Yu’s fingers traced a Roman numeral “II” on the forehead. Somehow, he knew what he had to do, what would come after if he did it. And that knowledge made him smile. The firing squad got back up, pointing their guns at Yu and inching closer as he grabbed the edges of his mask.

“Per-” He whispered as he started to pull with all his strength, ignoring the flesh that peeled off with the mask.

“-So-” He pulled again, pain like never before being felt throughout his face and blood splattering everywhere. But he didn’t care, he had to get this off.

“-Na!!” He yelled, finishing the job, ignoring the pain and blood gushing from his face. The mask fell to the ground as the word he spoke hang in the air like a fog.

He raised his head at the others. His eyes were glowing an unholy yellow, his face was
covered with his blood, but the most disturbing feature was his smile. A bizarre, twisted grin was plastered on his face, and soon, a chuckle was heard, but it did not come from Narukami’s lips. A blue flame enveloped Yu, devouring the Shujin uniform, and left another outfit in its place. A black tangzhuang shirt with a golden dragon printed on the right side, black dress pants with silver trimmings, black dress shoes with gold scales that would clink whenever he took a step, and white gloves with golden claws attached. Once the flames were done giving Yu this new outfit, they peeled off of him like a second skin and merged to give birth to a new creature.

Hovering behind Yu was a man wearing a uniform, but not one any had ever seen before; a red and black trench coat with a silver vest with a bright white ascot tie and black pants. It wore a white helmet that shone bright yellow eyes behind it and attached behind the helmet where two belts that reached all the way to his feet, which were in sandals that had razor sharp blades for soles. It wore clawed gloves that held a massive naginata with a blade so sharp, it could cleave through any metal like it was warm butter. Yu raised his hand and flung it towards the firing squad, and the creature swung its weapon with one hand in the blink of an eye, instantly beheading them all.

“I am the original god of Japan. IZANAGI!!” It roared like a crack of thunder.

Yu couldn’t suppress his smile even if he wanted to. For the first time since that night, he had the power to control his life. For the first time since that night, he could act without fear of the consequences. For the first time since that night, he was free. He had almost forgotten how good it felt, and he vowed to never forget again.

Akechi could do nothing but stand in awe, while Kobayakawa turned to the two guards.

“Don’t just stand there! Kill him! NOW!!” He ordered.

Two guards charged forth and soon exploded, melting into black sludge that soon reformed itself into a fairy and a Jack-O-Lantern with a cape, hat, gloves, and lantern. Yu, still smiling, clapped his hands together on instinct, and when he spread them apart, a blue flame was burning between them. He reached his hand through the flame and closed it into a fist. The flame soon evaporated, and in Yu’s hand, a two-handed katana with a single phrase engraved in gold on the razor sharp blade; Truth is powerful, and it prevails.

“If you wish to overcome this crisis, you must draw upon your inner strength and use it to destroy those who oppose you!” Izanagi bellowed as Yu looked at his enemies with a wild look in his eyes, while the other soldiers escorted Kobayakawa to safety.

Yu did as Izanagi said, and he heard a voice whisper a word of power in his head.

“Zio!!” Yu cried out.

Izanagi spun his weapon around, causing a lightning bolt to shoot out and strike the Jack-O-Lantern, and the fairy stepped in, hitting Izanagi right in the chest with a swift kick. Yu felt a throb in his head, as if he just got a bad headache, but it was gone as soon as it came. Yu regained his resolve, with Izanagi now looking more angry than hurt.

“There are many ways to win your battles. Experiment to satisfy even the faintest curiosity.”

“Cleave!” Narukami ordered.

Izanagi grabbed his weapon and skewered the fairy on it. Within moments, she let out a final
breath and faded to ash. The Jack-O-Lantern rushed and swung with its lantern, but Yu was too fast. Dodging out of the way, Yu swung the sword in his hand, cutting the Jack-O-Lantern in half. After it faded to ash like the fairy, Yu gave a flick of his blade to remove the black sludge that was the monsters’ blood. Izanagi turned to Akechi and with a quick slash, freed him from his chains. And just like that, a blue flame engulfed Yu yet again, and when it vanished, Izanagi vanished with it.

“If you need to call upon your true self again, simply say my name, and I will heed your orders.” Izanagi said, before vanishing into thin air.

“Wh-what on God’s Earth was that?” Akechi asked, his legs slightly wobbling.

“I… I don’t know. All I felt was this mask-”

Yu reached up to touch his mask again, only to find that it had vanished. Not only that, but his clothes had reverted to his uniform. Before either could try to make sense of it, they heard alarms blaring.

“ALERT! ALERT! THE REBEL GORO AKECHI AND HIS ACCOMPlice YU NARUKAMI ARE FREE! ALL UNITS: REPORT TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PRIVATE PRISON! SHOOT ON SIGHT AND SHOOT TO KILL!” the PA system blared.

“We need to go.” Yu said.

“But how? The only way out is that ramp!” Akechi yelled back.

Yu looked around, trying to see something that could help them. A hiding spot, a secondary route, anything. In the distance and through the alarms, he could hear footsteps. A lot of footsteps.

Think Narukami, think. No prison would ever have just one way in or out. That’s just poor design and begging for a disaster to happen. Think. You didn’t see any other ramps on the way down, just doors to other cells. There was only one cell down here, and there was nothing out of the ordinary, just metal walls and…

Yu turned to the slab of concrete that Akechi was previously chained to. Why would they use this rather than a metal wall? Running to the edge of the concrete, Yu found a crack between the slab and the metal wall behind it. Through that crack, he felt a draft. The footsteps were getting louder.

“Akechi, help me tip this thing over!” Yu ordered, pulling at the crack.

With Akechi’s help, the two were able to tip the slab over like a stage prop. It fell with a THUD, revealing just what Yu hoped: An exit in the form of a heavy metal door.


“Run for our lives now, admire prison design later.” Yu replied, opening the door.

The two stepped through. As Yu turned around to close the door, he saw a guard reach the bottom of the ramp, one with an RPG. Everything seemed to go in slow motion as the soldier loaded his weapon while Yu stood like a deer stuck in headlights. Then Yu felt a shove, and Akechi stepped in front of him, pistol drawn. A gunshot rang out as the guard fell backwards just as he pulled the trigger, his RPG tilted by his sudden movement, pointing at the ramp, now full of several guards. Yu saw the explosion tear through steel and heard screams as the cops on the ramp were vaporized by the explosion, and saw that they didn’t bleed blood, but black sludge, just like
those monsters from before. Akechi closed the door and locked it.

“Nice shot.” Yu said, impressed.

“Run for our lives now, admire my shooting skills later.”

Yu simply nodded, and turned around. In front of him was what looked like another prison, but this time, it looked like an actual prison, rather than a spiral/drill. There were hundreds, if not thousands of cells, all of them empty and made of glass, creating a silence that was more disturbing than calming.

“ALERT! ALERT! AKECHI AND NARUKAMI ARE CURRENTLY IN THE PUBLIC PRISON!! ALL UNITS, REPORT THERE IMMEDIATELY!! SHOOT ON SIGHT, AND SHOOT TO KILL!” The PA system roared, and just like before, the alarms flashed and blared, and Yu and Akechi took that as their cue to run.

Due to the fact that this place had the layout of a real life prison made it easier to navigate away and hide from incoming guards, evasion that was made easier by the silence of the prison. Before, the cries of anguish was all they could hear, but now, the quiet was more eerie than comforting. The feeling was made even worse by the fact that the only form of navigation the two had was Yu’s phone as they tried desperately to reach the purple circle. But they were running in circles and getting tired. The two turned at a hallway back into the main prison section. By now, the noise of the alarm had died down, and only the flashing lights served to remind them that they were still being hunted by Kobayakawa’s private police.

“This isn’t working. We have to find another way.” Yu said leaning against a rail, catching his breath.

“Agreed, but what else can we do?” Akechi asked, leaning on the rail as well. If they turned around, they would see that the cell behind them was occupied. They heard footsteps and instinctively went back the way they came, hiding behind a wall as a squad approached.

“Any sign of the rebel and his accomplice?”

“None sir.”

“Then spread out!”

“That way! They went that way!” An unknown voice declared.

“Which way?”

“That way! Across the bridge!” The voice’s owner answered, pointing at the direction away from Akechi and Yu. The two held their breath as footsteps thundered pass them and slowly faded into nothing.

“It’s clear. You two can come out now.” The voice said.

The two came out of their hiding spot, looking at the voice’s source: The occupant of the glass cell, and perhaps the only occupant of the whole ‘Public Prison’.

Akechi and Yu looked at the person. It was a woman, slightly shorter than Yu, a slim but toned body, with shoulder-length straight raven black hair, and azure eyes slightly darker than
Ann’s. She wore a skintight catsuit, with white gloves that went past the wrist, white boots, a yellow scarf, and had what looked like a utility belt around her waist, with a scimitar attached to her back and a whistle around her neck. Yu’s eyes focused on one particular detail on the belt, a blue disk that acted as the buckle. A disk with a golden ‘V’ imprinted on it.

“Thank you… miss…?” Yu asked, wondering what her name was.

“Pleased to meet you, fellow Trickster. I am Morgana.”

Chapter End Notes

And so ends Yu's first awakening. Let me know how you thought it went. :D
Oh, and if you're curious as to what Morgana looks like in human form, it's something like this:
https://www.deviantart.com/artsip/art/Persona-5-Morgana-550557020
“Trickster? What are you talking about?” Yu asked, nervous. That prison, that long nosed man, those girls, they had to be a dream. Right?

“Well duh! I’m talking about you silly! Someone who uses their Persona to oppose ruin!” Morgana answered cheerfully.

Before either Yu or Akechi could ask anything, Morgana cut them off.

“But we don’t have time for explanations. Another batch of guards will be coming around any time now. Help me get out of here!” She pleaded.

“You have a sword and a utility belt.” Yu pointed out.

“Ok Mr. Smartypants. Why don’t you try to use your sword to break me out?” Morgana replied, irritated.

Yu did as she said, using his sword to stab the glass, only for his blade to bounce off, doing nothing. Morgana crossed her arms. He then tried to slash at the glass, only for his sword to leave scratches. Morgana raised her eyebrow as if to say ‘Told you so.’

“Uh-huh, that’s what I thought. Now let me out!”

“Why should we?” Yu asked.

“You owe me! Those guards would have caught you if it wasn’t for me!”

“Why should we trust you?” Akechi asked.

“I’m locked up! How could I be the enemy?”

“I don’t mean that, I mean, how do we know you won’t double-cross us to save your hide?”

“One, my top priority is to guide and protect the Wild Card. Him.” Morgana said, pointing at Narukami.

“Two, if I wanted to sell you out, I’d do so with the guards from earlier. Three, I want to get out of here too, since that scumbag, Komowaka, or whatever, put me here. Now come on! I can sense the guards getting closer!”

“Should we do it?” Akechi asked.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because she has an interest in you.”

“Not only that, but… I can get you out of here.” Morgana added, saying the last part in a sing-song voice.

“Looks like it’s a risk we’ll have to take. If we get you out of the cell, you’ll help us get out of here, deal?”

“Deal! Just kick the control box next to my cell door.” Morgana said.
Yu did as the woman said, and sure enough, the glass lifted itself. Morgana walked out, doing stretches once she was out of her cage.

“Ahnhh, freedom, how I have missed thee!” She said, as she stretched her back.

“We held up our end, now it’s your turn. I’m Yu Narukami by the way.” Yu said.

“I’m Goro Akechi.”

“Thanks for freeing me. Now come on. There’s only one way in and out of either prisons; the elevator. And getting to it won’t be an easy feat. But we’ll cross that bridge when we reach it, so for now, let’s go. Guards.” Morgana said, breaking into a light jog, Yu and Akechi following shortly behind.

Just like before, they were able to avoid the guards, following Morgana’s lead. Eventually, they were able to successfully reach the elevator, but there was a problem, it was guarded, and unfortunately the guard looked strong. Unlike the previous ones, which had a standard police uniform, this guy was dressed in a full military setup, from the bullet-proof vest to an assault rifle. The only thing that didn’t belong was the riot helmet.

“Alright, if we’re gonna get out of this, you’ll have to learn, Wild Card.” Morgana whispered, turning to the boys and looking at Narukami.

“Learn what?”

“As you may have guessed, these guards aren’t human beings. They’re called Shadows; suppressed and twisted human desires given form. The best way to fight these things is with something called a Persona.”

“Persona? That’s what you yelled before you summoned Izanagi, Narukami-san.”

“He’s already awakened?! Sweet, that makes this so much easier. Alright, get ready to call forth this ‘Izanagi’, because we’re gonna have to fight to get out of here.”

At the thought of calling Izanagi, a blue flame engulfed Yu, vanishing just as quick as it appeared. Akechi let out a gasp.

“Narukami-san, look at your clothes!”

Yu turned to a nearby cell and saw his reflection. He wore the same outfit as before, when he first called Izanagi: a black, long sleeved tangzhuang shirt with a golden dragon printed on the right side, black dress pants with silver trimmings, dress shoes with gold scales that clinked whenever he took a step, and white gloves with golden claws attached. But there was something there that wasn’t before. On his face was a silver and white masquerade mask with its nose curved like a hawk and the Roman numeral “II” was branded in gold in the center of his forehead.

“Not going to lie, I look good in this.” Yu said, admiring his set of clothes.

“You sure do. But you can admire yourself later. Right now, I need to teach you some of the basics to fighting.” Morgana whispered, motioning him to come closer.

“Ok so… how do I put this. Izanagi, your persona, can only be summoned by revealing your true self. To do that, you have to take the mask off.”

“Like this?” Yu reached for his masquerade mask, but Morgana stopped him.
“Not now you idiot!” She yelled a little too loudly.

“What was that? Who’s there?!” the guard yelled, leaving his post and approaching the group.

“Crap! So much for ambushing. Alright Wild Card, we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Morgana reached onto her back and pulled out the scimitar, ran from their hiding spot and slashed at the heavily armored guard before he could react. In response to the sudden attack, the guard bent his back backwards in a way that shouldn’t have been possible, and soon, his body dissolved into a black puddle that reformed itself into no less than three Jack-O-Lanterns and two floating orbs with mouths, purple tongues slobbering as they moved into attack formation.

“Alright, listen up. In our battle against Ruin, we’ll encounter all kinds of enemies. Each will have strengths and weaknesses. Let me show you.”

Morgana stood to her full height, the blue light of her irises expanding until her entire eyes were blue. The same fire that consumed Yu when he first called Izanagi erupted behind her. When she spoke, her voice boomed and seemed to fill the whole prison.

“Come, Lady Trieu!”

The fire gave shape to a woman wearing a red kimono that had orange leaves scattered at the bottom in a pattern that looked like a raging fire, while imprinted on the back was a single yellow star. On her head, she wore a Japanese straw hat that hid her upper face, showing only her black hair tied in a loose ponytail and her black lipstick-colored lips, which seemed fixed in a sly grin. At her feet lay a small mound of corpses that supported her spiked wooden sandals, and on her left shoulder was a square wooden shield that had ‘I’d like to ride the storm, kill sharks in the open sea, drive out the aggressors, reconquer the country, undo the ties of serfdom, and never bend my back to be the concubine of any man.’ written on it in blood. Her left hand was on her hip, while in the her right was a nodachi resting on her right shoulder.

The Jack-O-Lanterns’ advance was brought to a halt in the face of this new adversary, while Akechi went wide-eyed at their new friend having the same power as Yu. Morgana crossed her arms and smirked as Yu stood next to her. Ripping off his mask like before, only this time, his upper face caught fire rather than bleeding. Strangely enough, the fire was more comforting and empowering than painful.

“IZANAGI!” Yu cried out, and like he said he would, the god appeared behind Yu, ready to battle. By now, the Jack-O-Lanterns and floating mouths had regained their senses and resolve.

“Alright, watch and learn. Every enemy has a weakness. Lady Trieu! Garru!”

The woman behind Morgana raised her curved weapon to the sky. Yu expected her to attack with the blade itself, but instead, green swirls formed underneath one of the Jack-O-Lanterns, erupting and knocking it down. The others were stunned, before Lady Trieu raised her katana again, with the same result on another Jack-O-Lantern. The third moved and fired a fireball at Morgana, who yelled at the pain. One of the floating orbs approached Yu and rammed into him hard, knocking him back into the wall. Yu recovered quickly, wiping the blood from his cut lips.

“Zio!” Yu ordered.

Once again, Izanagi spun his naginata, causing a bolt of lightning to strike the orb, making the orb fall to the ground, dazed and confused. Before the second one could try anything, Yu repeated the action, with the same result. By now, Morgana had recovered from the fireball and a final
green vortex knocking the last Jack-O-Lantern down. All five enemies laid down on the floor, dazed and vulnerable.

“Alright! This is what happens if you manage to hit their weaknesses. Once they’re knocked down, we can go for an ‘All-Out Attack’. Just get in there, hit hard and hit fast, and hold nothing back!”

With that, Morgana leaped into the air, pulling out a slingshot and firing metal balls as she fell before pulling out her scimitar, while Yu charged like a bull. The two slashed at the Shadows with wild abandon, kicking up a massive storm in the process. No enemy was spared from their onslaught, Yu utilizing his kendo club skill and Morgana using her experience, and soon enough, the dust cleared, revealing all five Shadows bleeding before turning into ash. Yu turned to Morgana, who gave a smirk in approval.

“Nice! You’re a natural at this Wild Card!”

“I already gave you my name.”

“Yea, yea. But I won’t use it while we’re in here.”

“Why?” Akechi asked.

Before Morgana could answer, they heard footsteps and voices.

“I heard a yelling and sounds of a battle. This way!”

“No time to explain. We need to hurry!” Morgana said and the three made their way into the elevator. There were only two buttons: an up arrow and a down arrow. All three of them slammed their fingers into the up arrow several times. The doors closed as hundreds of guards arrived, readying their guns and firing, but to no avail. Yu pulled out his phone and sighed since he saw that the purple circle had gotten farther. As the elevator went up, a blue flame engulfed Yu, the sensation of his clothes changing becoming more familiar.

“Huh, seems you don’t have full control over your powers yet.” Morgana said, sounding a little disappointed.

“What do you mean ‘yet’?” Yu asked

“It seems your powers only activate when you’re in immediate danger. Don’t worry. With enough time, you’ll have full control.” She assured.

There was a ding of an elevator and the three stepped out, carefully looking around to make sure they were alone. They were standing in the middle of a regular police station, the same police station Yu and Akechi were hauled to.

“Alright, coast is clear. Let’s go.” Morgana said, the three walking through the station, walking as if they were in a minefield. The lobby was completely empty, any civilians evacuated and officers down in the prisons. They soon saw the exit sign and walked through, and were greeted with the outside world, an empty parking lot right in front of them. They tasted freedom as they breathed a collective sigh of relief as fresh air smacked them in the face. Until they heard the PA system turn on.

“ALERT! ALERT! AKECHI AND NARUKAMI HAVE ESCAPED THE PUBLIC PRISON WITH THE HELP OF AN ADDITIONAL ACCOMPLICE! ALL OFFICERS, REPORT TO THE POLICE STATION AT ONCE! SHOOT ON SIGHT AND SHOOT TO KILL!”
Shortly after that announcement was made, sirens could be heard in the distance. And the other guards would no doubt cram as many as they could into the elevator to flank them.

“Damnit. And we were so close too.” Akechi said with a grimace.

“We’re not finished yet evil-eye!” Morgana said

“Evil-eye? That’s the best you could come up with?”

“What? Your eyes are red, and only bad guys have red eyes!”

“Are you serious?”

“Hey! Run for our lives now, complain about poor taste in nicknames later!” Yu yelled.

“Alright, but what I said was true; we’re not finished yet.”

Morgana reached for the whistle around her neck and blew into it. No one could hear anything at first, but then, a big black bus with blue headlights could be seen driving at about 80 MPH down the road before turning the corner and entering the station square, never slowing down as it approached the group.

“Um, isn’t it going to slow down?” Akechi asked.

The bus got closer and closer, until right in front of them, it screeched to a halt, its whole body bending in a comedic fashion like it was in a cartoon. There were three doors on the side, the middle and front doors opened up as soon as the bus stopped.

“Here it is, our getaway vehicle, the Mona-mobile!” Morgana declared proudly, gesturing for the boys to get in as she went through the front door and taking the driver’s seat.

Akechi and Yu went in through the middle. The bus itself wasn’t that big, maybe nine people tops would be able to fit in here, but it was state of the art, with leather seats, cup holders, air conditioners and heaters, and even small TV screens on the back of the seats to play movies on. And on the dashboard itself, where the radio, AC and other control functions was a massive computer screen with several buttons. Akechi let out a whistle at the sight, and Yu noticed a trigger attached to the stick shaft.

“Glad to hear you’re impressed, I designed her myself. Now, I’d say we overstayed our welcome. Wild Card! You were looking at your phone earlier?”

“Right. Take us to this.” Yu said, leaning forward, showing her the purple circle on his phone. The cop cars pulled up and Morgana slammed her foot on the gas.

“Hang on!” She ordered, the Mona-mobile ploughing through the cop cars as if it was a tank. As it speed off, three more cop cars arrived and began pursuit.

“Oh great. Come on then. Let me show you what my car can do.” Morgana whispered to herself, grinning as she did. One of the cars got close enough to ram the bus, lining up to make the kill. And it probably would have too, had Morgana not flicked the turn signal lever, firing off thrusters at the side of the bus, slamming into the car full force, sending it off the roads and on its sides. The passengers heard the roar of blades and looked up to see a police helicopter approaching. And directly ahead was a roadblock composed of armored cars. This prompted Morgana to speed up, aiming right for the roadblock.
“What are you doing?! We’re going to hit it!” Akechi yelled.

Morgana maneuvered the Mona-mobile so that it was aiming right for a space between two trucks.

“We’re not going to make it!” Yu yelled.

Morgana sped up, her grin only getting wider from the discouragement.

“WE’RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT!” Akechi repeated, the words having no effect on Morgana.

Seeing that nothing they could do would deter her, they both took what cover they could behind the seats, waiting for the inevitable crash. And waited. And waited. And then they waited some more. Finally, they poked their heads out just in time for the Mona-mobile to rush past the roadblock without even scratching its paint job. The cop cars however, weren’t so lucky, both crashing into their own roadblock as they attempted to mimic Morgana’s driving.

“Made it.” she said with a smirk.

Making a U-Turn at the end of a street, the helicopter got ahead of them, and dropped a spike strip. Morgana swerved around it and began to speed down the beach. Dodging another spike strip from the helicopter, she pushed a button near the dashboard, causing the screen to light up with an image of an EMP.

“What are you doing?” Akechi asked

“Getting rid of that chopper.” Morgana answered, pushing the down arrow, cycling through screen after screen. A female mechanical voice piped up with each image.

“Side flamethrowers, missiles, jammer, spike strips, turbo boost, harpoon, ejector seats, railgun.”

“There we are.” Morgana said as she pushed a green button, making the front windshield light up, a target reticle moving until it found the helicopter. Akechi and Yu could hear activity on the roof as the center opened up, and from the opening, a railgun popped up. Morgana reached down to the stick shaft and pulled the trigger. A light blue energy beam shot out from the car and slammed straight into the helicopter’s tail, the metal tearing like it was styrofoam.

“Alright Morgana!” Yu yelled as the chopper fell down, exploding on impact.

“Well done! We’re sorry we doubted you.”

“Awww, thanks. Looks like there’s no immediate threats, so let’s get going.”

Ignoring the total destruction they unleashed, Morgana drove the trio to the purple circle. Yu and Akechi got out, looking around. The area it was in was in the middle of a road that led to a tropical jungle and Shujin Nation. From where they were now, it looked like something out of a brochure, a peaceful resort bathing in the golden light of the setting sun. The only thing that ruined the scene was the sign that said ‘Welcome to Shujin Nation! Obey President Kobayakawa and you’ll enjoy your stay!’ Akechi and Yu looked at his phone, they were just outside the circle. Upon entering it, the map turned into a single question.

“Do you wish to return to the real world? Yes. No.”
Before Yu could slam his finger down on the ‘yes’ button, Akechi stopped him.

“Wait. I have questions.”

“Who cares?”

“I do. Let me ask Morgana-san a few things before we go back.”

“Fine, but make it fast.”

Akechi turned to Morgana, who was still in the driver’s seat of the Mona-mobile.

“Thank you for all of your help Morgana-san.”

“Anytime. I’m glad I got to meet you two. Both of you head back to the waking world, I need to go. Now.”

“Wait, I have too many questions!”

“You’ll have to ask them when you come back. I have other business here. Go, now.”

Before Akechi could protest, more police sirens could be heard, and the Mona-mobile sped off. Yu grabbed the teenage detective and slammed his finger into the ‘yes’ button. They felt a small headache as the world seemed to shift around them, the lines that made up shapes distorting, twisting, and blurring, until finally, it stopped, and the world looked much more familiar.

“You have returned to the real world. Welcome back.” A mechanical voice chipped from Yu’s phone. They looked around. They were in the alleyway that Ryuji used for a shortcut to the school. They looked at the direction they came from, and instead of seeing the resort of Shujin Nation, they saw the building of Shujin Academy. They had indeed returned to the real world from wherever that other place was.

“We did it. WE DID IT!!” Yu yelled, his smile stretching as wide as it could as he held his hand out for Akechi to high-five. Which he did, a smile also on his face.

“Indeed. Though, I wish I could get some of my questions answered.”

“I’m just glad we escaped certain death.”

“YU NARUKAMI!!!” a voice erupted that made both boys go wide-eyed and their blood freeze in terror. They both turned and saw two very angry Niijimas making their way to the boys. 

*I spoke too soon.*
Yu and Akechi looked at the two women then to each other, an ‘Oh shit, we are so screwed’ look written all over their faces. As the girls marched closer, Yu suddenly remembered that Makoto knew aikido and Sae knew kickboxing. He realized he would rather be punched by that Kobayakawa a thousand times over in the balls than face the wrath of these two women. He turned around and considered running for dear life, but he knew that doing so would only make the situation worse. He looked to Akechi for protection, only to find that the teen detective had taken cover behind the silver-haired student like the two women were walking bombs.

“Where. Were. You?” Sae asked through gritted teeth, each word sounding like a curse.

“W-well…. You see… um… ah…” Yu stuttered, unable to use his brain at the sight of both Niijimas giving him their worst possible stares. There was no way they’d believe any of the truth, and even if they did…

They’re going to kick me out for sure.

“What happened to your face?” Makoto asked.

Yu put his hand up to his face and found that where Kobayakawa punched him had started to bruise, and he felt a cut on his lip from when the orb rammed him. Sae noticed once her sister pointed it out, and her eye started to twitch.

Forget kick me out, she’ll throttle me at this rate.

“What. Happened?” Sae demanded again. If all that she interrogated were given this treatment, then Yu suddenly found himself pitying that plagiarizing artist she locked up.

“I… I…”

“You what?”

“I saw someone being mugged.” Yu blurted out.

“... Continue.”

Yu took a deep breath to steady himself. His life depended on his next words, and if he wasn’t careful, they’d see right through him. It was now or never.

“When Akechi and I were in the Council room, I saw someone getting mugged and… acted on instinct. I rushed out before Akechi could stop me. By the time I got out, the mugger was running down an alleyway, and… I followed.” Yu made up, doing everything he could to appear truthful. When neither Sae nor Makoto said anything, he took it as his cue to continue.

“I had him cornered, but… he brought friends. I… fought them and I got hit. But before they could do anything besides hit my face, Akechi reached me.”

Both Niijimas turned their attention to the man cowering behind Yu, and he only got more terrified as a result.

“And?” Sae asked, her blazing red orbs focused on her charge once again.

“He talked to them, but they wouldn’t back off. Until he pulled out his gun and gave them a
warning shot. After that, they got lost. I wasn’t able to get the wallet.” Yu said, scratching the back of his head and looking down.

Sae and Makoto stared at Akechi, who was now whimpering in fear. Yu wondered if it was possible to have PTSD from having two women stare at you.

“Akechi, let me see your gun. Now.” Sae ordered, holding up her hand.

Akechi reached into his coat and handed her his pistol sheepishly. She inspected it thoroughly. Yu saw her glare soften slightly.

“It does show signs of being fired. But…” She said, unloading the clip.

“Why does the clip have all its bullets?” She questioned, glare returning.

Akechi and Yu looked surprised and turned to each other.

“It’s a fresh clip Sae-san.” Akechi explained. Sae didn’t let up the glare as she gave his gun back.

“You expect us to believe that a simple mugging and what you told us would last for two hours?” Makoto asked.

Once again, the boys looked at each other, and some color left their faces.

“Did you say two hours?” Yu asked.

“Yes Narukami! Why else would Makoto call me to help her track you two down?!”

“Well… it’s just that…” Yu began, trailing off.

“I told Yu to stay where he was after making sure he was ok. I decided to follow them, maybe learn their identities. But after following them for awhile, I decided to stop. If I took this matter to the police, I wouldn’t have had enough evidence to get them, plus doing so would bring down more misfortune on Narukami-san. AND, it would not do for an officer of the law to fire on civilians.” Akechi explained.

“That doesn’t explain why neither of you answered either of our texts.” Sae replied.

“Texts?” Akechi asked, both he and Yu pulling out their phones. Indeed, both had numerous texts from Makoto and Sae. Yu winced as he read Makoto’s.

‘Yu-kun, where are you? I came back to the Council room and neither you or Akechi-kun were there. I’ve looked around the school, but can’t find you.’

‘Is Akechi-kun with you? Please answer.’

‘Yu-kun, if this is a prank, it isn’t funny. Please tell me where you are.’

‘I tried texting Akechi-kun but he won’t respond either. Please don’t do anything stupid Yu-kun.’

‘Yu-kun, I am seriously starting to get worried. Please answer me.’

‘Yu-kun, if you don’t answer, I’ll have to call Sis. Please don’t make me.’
‘Yu Narukami, answer your phone or else!!’

‘FINE’

‘I called Sis and explained the situation. I hope whatever you were doing was worth it.’

Yu felt his blood start to freeze when he saw the single text Sae sent him.

‘You are in very big trouble young man. I’m on my way to Shujin, and you and Akechi had better be there when I arrive, or so God help me, you’ll wish you stayed in Juvie.’

The boys turned up from their phones to see that the girls’ glares hadn’t let up in the slightest. Sae was tapping a finger, expecting an answer. Yu looked at his phone, and saw that, oddly enough, it was still at 98% power. It would definitely be lower if it was on for two hours.

“I turned it off, and only back on recently. I’m just now reading the texts.” He said with as straight a face as he could muster. Sae snatched his phone and looked at the percentage. She shot a sideways look at Yu, then handed his phone back with a nod.

“And what’s your excuse Akechi?”

“I had it on silent. I’m so sorry Sae-san.” He said, hanging his head down.

Sae looked between the two teenage boys. Her intuition told her that they were lying, but the evidence backed what they were saying. She was about to open a new line of questioning, but stopped herself. She promised Yu she’d give him a chance, fair and square. So, for now, she’d assume they were telling the truth. Yu saw her face soften, and was about to offer his apologizes for worrying her and her sister, but Sae’s eyes widened before he could say anything, and the infamous glare returned.

“So, the truth is that, you saw a complete stranger getting mugged and decided to interfere, despite being told numerous times by myself and others to not get into any trouble. You didn’t give any thought to potential consequences or to let Makoto know anything. And worse, you dragged my subordinate into it. Is that correct? Or would you like to add something else?”

Yu flinched. He traded one trap for another.

“Y-yes, that’s correct.” Yu said numbly.

There was a loud, hard SMACK that would most likely be heard across all of Tokyo if it wasn’t drowned out by the traffic and other noises. Yu felt his face sting as a red mark in the form of a woman’s hand showed almost immediately. Yu rubbed it as he looked at his guardian sheepishly, and braced himself for what came next.

“I’m not happy young man. Not. Happy. Do you have any idea how worried Makoto was, or how badly that could have gone for you?”

“I… no, Sae-sama.”

“So, you didn’t even think, you just saw something going wrong and decided to play the hero, consequences be damned, just like the very same situation that landed you in this mess?”

Yu said nothing, simply rubbing his arm.

“I thought not.”
Sae looked at him for what felt like years, until she let out a sigh and her glare vanished.

“Look Narukami, I said I’d give you a chance, and I fully intend to honor my side of the agreement, but you have to work with me. If this is to work, you have to think things through. I won’t kick you out, but you can’t continue this kind of behavior. Just… just keep your head down, be an honest student, and don’t act on impulses. Understood?”

“I understand.” He muttered.

“I didn’t hear you.” Sae said, narrowing her eyes.

“I understand Sae-san.” Yu said, louder.

Sae simply nodded, not having any sadistic smile or any other sign of glee.

“In that case, get in the car. We’re going home.”

“Wait. Can I talk with Akechi for a few minutes?” Yu asked.

“… Alright. You have five minutes.” Sae said as she and Makoto walked and then entered the Cadillac. Yu turned to Akechi, who had recomposed himself.

“That… could have gone worse, if I’m being honest.”

“Yea. You know the saying ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.’? Well, they should change it to ‘Hell hath no fury like an angry Niijima’.”

“That was not angry my friend. That was mildly irritated.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If she was angry, she would snap your neck.”

Yu just stood there and let all the color leave his face.

“Now, onto more important things. We have to talk about what we saw. We have to go back.”

“Two brushes with death are enough for my life, thanks.”

“So you’re not the least bit curious? This Morgana-san seems to know everything there is to know about that place, and that strange power you have; Persona.”

“Did you not hear a word of what Sae-san said? I can’t get in trouble again.”

“Then we’ll have to be careful. Please, at least let me get some answers. After that, I’ll drop this matter. Promise.”

“… Fine. Tomorrow, after school.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow has the volleyball rally, so school should let out early. Let’s exchange contact information.”

Yu and Akechi did so, and Akechi looked at Yu with a warm smile.

“And there we go. I look forward to working with you, Narukami-san.”

Yu heard a voice in his head, but managed to keep the surprise from his face.
I am thou, thou art I…

Thou has acquired a new vow

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth

With the birth of the Justice Arcana,

thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power

“Narukami! Time’s up!”

“I will see you tomorrow. Let’s meet up here, yes?”

“Sure thing Akechi.” Yu said, getting into the car and waving goodbye to his new friend as the car pulled away from the school. The sights of Tokyo seemed to blur together as they continued their silent trip to the apartment. The silence seemed to strangle the very air in Yu’s lungs, and he felt a little bit like he did on that night. The teenager shook his head. Nothing could be as bad as what happened that night. Yu decided to talk, to try and alleviate the tension.

“Sae-san? Makoto-san?”

“Yes?” Both asked, not moving to face him in any way.

“I… I want to say that I’m sorry. For worrying you two, and for doing something so stupid.”

The tension seemed to almost evaporate as Makoto replied.

“So long as you don’t pull something like that again, apology accepted. I was really worried, and so was Sis.”

“Really?” Yu asked, turning to his guardian.

“Of course. You are my ward, and I still have a debt to repay. You getting hurt is not an idea I like entertaining.” Sae answered.

Yu softly smiled before Sae changed the subject.

“This incident aside, how was your first day at school?”

“Honestly? Not that great.”

“How so?”

“His record was leaked. The whole student body knows.” Makoto answered for him with a sigh.

Sae snarled as they reached a light and Yu swore she muttered ‘damnit’ under her breath.

“I’m sorry to hear that Narukami, and for making a bad day worse with that lecture. Despite this poor start, I hope you won’t be discouraged.”

“Don’t worry Sae-san, I intend to make the most of this.”

“Good, I’m happy to hear it.”

The rest of the ride was spent in silence. Once they arrived, he received a text from Akechi.
head to his room while Sae started a bath and Makoto went to work on preparing dinner. Once he was sure he wouldn’t be disturbed, he opened his phone and read the text.

Akechi: ‘Narukami-san, can you see this?’

Yu: ‘No.’

Akechi: ‘Ha ha ha, very funny. We will need to discuss that place. Shujin Nation.’

Yu: ‘I saw it, and I still don’t believe it.’

Akechi: ‘Whatever it was, it was real, no matter how impossible it may seem. The bruise on your face, and my gun showing signs of being fired prove that.’

Yu: ‘Speaking of firing guns, how did you manage to reload without Sae noticing?’

Akechi: ‘I didn’t. I don’t know why the gun still has all its bullets. Just one of many questions to ask Morgana-san. What are Personas? What was that place? How, if at all, does it affect this world? What were Sakamoto-san, Takamaki-san, and Kawakami-sensei doing there?’

Yu: ‘And how did they get there in the first place?’

Akechi: ‘And so much more. For once, I’m actually excited about going to school.’

Yu: ‘Remember what I said. We go after school, and we go to get answers only. No unnecessary risks.’

Akechi: ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

Yu: ‘You’re not the one with their life hanging by a thread.’

Akechi: ‘I apologize. That was insensitive of me. What questions are you going to ask her?’

Yu: ‘What she means by ‘Wild Card’ and ‘Trickster’.’

Akechi: ‘Also good questions. She showed a special interest in you.’

Yu: ‘Yea. Probably because of the fact that I have the same power as her.’

Yu heard a knock on his door and hurriedly shoved his phone into his pocket.

“You-kun, it’s time to eat!” Makoto called.

“Coming!” Yu answered.

Yu: ‘Got to go. Dinner.’

‘Understood. See you tomorrow Narukami-san.’

Yu entered the living room, the smell of a delicious dinner waiting for him. Sae had already started eating, and Yu found his place already set. Makoto was somehow studying and eating at the same time as Yu began to eat his share.

*School’s just started, and she’s already started studying?*

As Yu ate his food, dinner was quiet. A bit too quiet.
“Sae-san?”

“Yes Narukami?”

“Are you still angry?”

Yu noticed some irritation in Sae’s eyes flare up.

“A little. You have only been here three days, and you’ve already started getting in trouble. But don’t dwell on it, and if you have to ask a question, make sure it’s not a ridiculous one like that.” Sae answered.

“I’m sorry. It’s just, my dad made me have a strong sense of duty. And I really want to make him proud. I thought that… well… I could do the right thing and win.” Yu said, repeating what he told his father, hoping that Sae would be more sympathetic.

“It’s no wonder you and Akechi get along so well. He thinks that he can be a hero like in those comic books of his, that he’s somehow special and destined to save the world.” Sae said, ire starting to rise as she looked Yu straight in the face.

“I’ll give you the same advice I gave Akechi. This isn’t a video game, or a movie. This is real life. You aren’t special. You can’t save the world, you can only save yourself.”

“Is that why you became a prosecutor? To save yourself?”

Makoto let out a gasp, but it was more out of fear than shock. Sae slammed her hand on the table, and Yu realized that he made a terrible mistake. Sae looked at him, and Yu understood why Akechi believed she was only mildly irritated before.

“Excuse me?!” She seethed.

“W-well, it’s just that, prosecutors are supposed to make sure that criminals are locked away, so I thought that you’d share the same view of justice as I do. That you became a prosecutor to do the right thing.” Yu said, shrinking back into his chair.

“Justice is subjective, and at times, circumstantial. And doing the right thing doesn’t put food on the table, give you clothes, or get you and your younger sister out of homeless shelters! People are always grateful to have a hero, but that gratitude means nothing in the long run, and it certainly won’t help when you are left to fend for yourself!!” Sae yelled.

“I-I, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Yu hastily whimpered.

“No, you don’t. I promised you I wouldn’t judge you based on your record. You would be wise to not judge me because your father gave you my backstory.”

Yu could do nothing but silently poke his food as Sae let out a deep breath and her face turned from a vicious snarl to sympathetic stare.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to explode at you like that.”

Yu simply nodded, and Makoto took it upon herself to relieve the rising tension.

“S-sis, don’t you have a kickboxing instruction this Sunday?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”
“Well, it’s just that, Yu-kun might run into those thugs again, and I think it would be best if he got some training. Especially if that training came from you.

“I don’t think now’s the best time.”

“Now? No. Sunday, when you’ve both cooled off? It would be perfect. Yu-kun gets some training, you get to let off some steam, and you both can get to know each other better. What could go wrong?”

“What do you think Narukami? I’ve been told I’m very intense when I give kickboxing lessons, but Makoto raises valid points.”

Yu put a hand to his chin. It was true, he could get to know Sae better, and he could benefit from kickboxing if Izanagi failed him. But on the other hand, he and Sae weren’t on the best of terms, and this would be the perfect opportunity for her to take her frustrations out on him. However, if he didn’t get on better terms with his prison warden, then it could cause more problems later down the line.

*Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

“Alright. When and where?”

Sae shot him a look of surprise.

“Really? Are… are you sure?”

“I am.”

“Well, in that case, 8 AM sharp on Sunday. Just ask Makoto to show you the way to SIU HQ, and ask for where the training dojo is.”

Yu gave a single nod, and the three finished their respective meals without any more conversation. Once that was done with, Makoto and Yu finished the dishes and went to bed. Once he got changed into his PJs, he started to charge his phone and looked at the strange app.

*I got in a lot of trouble because of you. Once tomorrow’s over, I’m getting my phone replaced, and I’ll never see you again.*

He laid down and closed his eyes with that thought in mind, a smile on his face.

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A smile that vanished when he heard the sound of chains. Wide awake and bolting out of bed, he saw that he was in a jail cell with blue padding on the walls. He turned to the door and saw two women with platinum blonde hair and golden eyes staring back at him.

*Oh no.*


“Welcome. I am delighted to see you are well Trickster.” Igor said, his grin just as wide and unnatural as before.

“Alright. This isn’t a coincidence. Akechi was right, this has to be real.” Yu realized, more calm this time.
“That’s what we’ve been telling you since the start.” Justine stated in a bored tone.

“You are correct Trickster, these events are very real. But in spite of how hard you tried to deny the truth, you’ve made great strides towards your rehabilitation.”

“I- wait, what? How?”

“Not only have you awakened to your power and began to tap into your potential, but you’ve also already established your first Confidant.”

“Confidant?”

Igor snapped his fingers and a strange tarot card materialized in front of Yu. It showed a sword and balance scales. The right side was blood red, while the left side was snow white, with the sword and scales black as tar. Yu flipped the card over and found…

“Akechi?”

“Correct. He is your Confidant of the Justice Arcana.” Igor explained.

“A Confidant is someone who will aid you on your journey to complete your rehabilitation.” Justine added.

“You’d be smart to make as many Confidants as possible, inmate! You’ll need it.” Caroline finished.

“And just how do I do that? How am I supposed to know who can be my Confidant?!”

“We are not deaf inmate.” Justine stated.

“Not yet, anyway.” Caroline added.

“I’m sorry, it’s just frustrating, not having all the answers.”

“The answers will come to you in due time Trickster. Your guide will explain everything you want to know about that place. If there’s something she can’t answer, then it’s not meant to be something you’re supposed to know.” Igor informed.

“My guide? You mean Morgana? I saw that ‘V’ on her belt just like the one there.” Yu said, pointing at the carpet.

“You are correct Trickster. She was created with the sole purpose of guiding you and other Tricksters through your rehabilitation.”

“I see. Then I’ll have to talk to her. I just need to get back into that place. Wait… are you the bastard that keeps on putting that damn app on my phone?!”

Caroline slammed her baton on the cell bars, the electricity startling Yu, but not hurting him. She gave him a stern look as he backed away.

“Do NOT talk to our master like that inmate! Final warning!”

“No, I am in fact, not, the one who bestowed the Metaverse Navigator on your mobile device. Whoever it was that did, you must find out yourself. Should you encounter other Tricksters, I’m sure they bestow it upon them as well.”
The bell began to ring.

“Time marches on in the waking world. Farewell Trickster, and don’t forget about your contract and the obligation that comes with it.”

Yu woke up, but this time it was calm, no sweat, no sudden movements, it was like he had woken up for an average morning. He heard his alarm going off and got up and ready for the day. Makoto came to get him once breakfast was ready, both dressed for school. They ate in short order, and as they were washing the dishes, Yu got a message on his phone.

‘Narukami-san, do you remember our arrangement?’

‘Who are you texting Yu-kun?’ Makoto asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice.

‘Akechi. We exchanged contact info.’

‘What’s he texting you about this early?’ Makoto questioned, suspicion starting to grow.

‘Oh, since the volleyball rally is today, he wanted to take me around the city and show me the sights, restaurants, you know, the usual.’

‘When does he want to do this?’

‘Immediatly after school.’

Makoto let out a curse under her breath as she and Yu went out of the room and on their way to the train station.

‘Really? How long do you think it’ll take?’ Makoto asked while they waited for their train.

‘Maybe a few hours. Maybe more if I get lost.’

‘You sure you want to be exploring at a time like this? Especially since Sis just told you not to let anything like yesterday happen?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. I’m not the kind of person who lets my curiosity go unfulfilled.’

‘Well, think you could at least wait about an hour? I’ll have Student Council work to do, but I’d love to join you.’ Makoto offered as the two boarded the train.

‘Sorry, but no, Akechi said he’d rather get this done with so that he can get to helping Sae-san soon. Don’t worry, we’ll be sure to let you know when we’re leaving.’

‘I sure hope so. If you pulled another stunt like that so soon, Sis would probably kick you out this time. And maybe fire Akechi-kun if he went along with you.’

‘Really?’

‘Sis is very strict, in case you haven’t noticed.’

‘Yea. But still, firing Akechi…. If what they told me is true, they’re like Batman and Robin to the SIU.’

‘It’s true that, without Akechi, Sis wouldn’t have been able to win half of her cases. But she
even after about two years of working with him, still has reservations about using a teenager for crime fighting.”

“I see. A woman like that, I’m a little surprised she decided to take me in.”

“It was to repay the debt that my family owes yours.”

“I know, dad told me. It sounded like you two had it worse than me and Nanako did. I mean, when dad found out mom was dead… things got really bad. Dad would spend every spare yen on booze, so I had to take three part-time jobs to make up for it, then he would use cholone in order to cover the stench of booze. He’d purposefully avoid Nanako and remain absent from her life because she reminded him of mom. When his boss came to the house and said ‘Dojima, if you don’t pull yourself together, I’ll have to ask you to turn in your badge.’, I knew I had to do something. It wasn’t easy, but eventually, I was able to get him to ditch the bottle and visit mom’s grave. Now, he’s a father again, and a good father at that.”

“I’m glad to hear it. As for us, it was a struggle. Still is, actually. We were able to do it by sacrificing our social lives in exchange for grades that would get us scholarships. Selling most of our family heirlooms in exchange for a meager apartment where we had to take turns sleeping on the couch. It was an uphill war, and still is.”

“Especially now that I’m here, causing you trouble.”

“Yu-kun, you’re not causing us trouble.”

“That spat yesterday says otherwise.”

“And you took the offer that could patch things up, and when you first got here, you asked if Sis knew anyone who was hiring for a job so you could help ease her burden. That sounds like someone who is dedicated to helping, not causing trouble.”

“Yea. It’s just… dad being a cop really ingrained my moral compass. A lot of what I do, I do to make him proud.”

“I can relate. And, between you and me, I would have likely done the same thing yesterday in your position. So please don’t feel bad about that.”

Yu let out a smile. It seemed that he and Makoto were starting to understand each other. Once again, he heard a voice ring out in his head.

I am thou, thou art I…

Thou hast acquired a new vow

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth

With the birth of the Priestess Arcana,

thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power

The train’s next stop was theirs, and the two shuffled off. The rest of the trip went without incident until they reached Shujin gates, where a man was greeting students that went by with the most fake enthusiasm ever. He had a bald head, a pointed nose, and his brown business suit and red bowtie barely concealed his highly muscular body. He turned to Makoto and Yu, and his false smile vanished completely.
“Ah, hello Nijima.” The man said. There was no mistaking who this was.

“I take it you’re Kobayakawa?” Yu asked.

“That’s Kobayakawa-sensei to you, young man. And yes, I am. Whatever foul rumors Nijima here has spread, I can attest to this; they are false.”

*Somehow, I doubt it*

“Let’s go Yu-kun.” Makoto said, grabbing Yu’s arm. When they tried to rush past Kobayakawa, the man put a firm hand on Yu’s shoulder, stopping him, and in turn, Makoto.

“One moment Nijima. I would like to speak to our new student.”

Makoto looked at Yu with a mix of terror and pity. She looked around and slowly nodded her head after seeing how many students were still around. Yu felt a shiver down his spine. If Kobayakawa remembered what happened in Shujin Nation, he was screwed.

“Just remember; he has to get to class soon.” Makoto warned.

Once she was out of earshot, Kobayakawa turned to Yu, his grip getting stronger.

“I’ve been waiting for you young man. I hope you realize your situation.”

Yu felt his blood run cold and his heart seemed to bang in his chest. What if Kobayakawa knew what happened? What if he was going to try again? What would he do to Akechi?

“Shujin is an excellent school with an amazing reputation.”

*This is definitely the same guy that socked me in that prison. Doesn’t look like he remembers it though.*

“And I will do anything to uphold that reputation: So heed me when I say this, criminal.”

Yu felt his anger rising at the last word.

“Do. Not. Do anything that could endanger the prestige of this fine school. If you do, there will be consequences.”

For a moment, Yu was back in the prison, his resolve strengthening with each word. His eyes glared into Kobayakawa’s, and though they were brown instead of yellow, they still held the same malice behind them.

“I’m sure Ryuji, Futaba, and Kawakami can tell me all about those consequences, right?”

Kobayakawa let out a chuckle, the kind one would give to someone who they knew were wrong. The coach turned away from Yu, scratching his chin with a smile.

“I’m not sure why those individuals came to mind, but I’ll leave your imagination to think up what will happen to you.” He said, knowing that he could taunt Yu with borderline confessing and that the teen could do nothing about it.

“I don’t have to imagine. Thanks to you, I’m having a hard time finding people who will give me eye contact. The only ones who do are Makoto and Akechi.”

“I heard you were associating with those rabble. I know Nijima can’t be helped, but stay away
from that fool Akechi. And on the topic of friends, I’ve heard that Takamaki is trying to get your attention. I know foreigners have low standards, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

Yu thought back to the prison. How hopeless and defeated Ann looked and sounded, her cries of pain as the whip assaulted her without mercy. He knew she was probably being ordered to be his friend, and that she didn’t have a choice. Kobayakawa turned back to Yu, who had still been glaring at him.

“Don’t give me that look. It’s your fault you’re a criminal.”

Yu fought the urge to punch Kobayakawa. He knew from experience what would happen, and on top of that, they were in the real world. If Yu hit the coach here, he would no doubt get expelled, and that would be after he got another bruise. Not to mention, he would just prove all the rumor mongers right; that he was just a violent delinquent that needed to be put in his place. He continued to glare at Kobayakawa as the coach finally let go of his shoulder.

“Fine. Just don’t try to fight me like Akechi and Niijima have. You don’t want to be one of those brats that hates me for petty reasons.”

Yu started to walk, and once he was out of arm’s length, he turned back to Kobayakawa.

“Maybe if you weren’t as disgusting and unwanted as a diarrhea explosion on a proposal date, you wouldn’t have to worry about the whole damn school hating you.”

Kobayakawa turned around, and almost ran after Yu as the student hurried into the building. He dared to look back and saw that Kobayakawa had stopped right outside the entrance, as if it was a magic barrier. He walked up the stairs, the rumors about him and his bruised face turning into white noise. He entered his homeroom and smiled about his little act of rebellion, the smile never leaving his face for the rest of class.

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The volleyball rally had begun, and Yu found a nice little secluded corner after he and the rest of his class had changed into their PE clothes. It was boys vs girls, and as the two teams began to line up, Akechi approached, taking a seat beside him.

“You never answered my text Narukami-san. If you want to back out I-”

“I’m in. Makoto said she’ll be busy for about an hour, so we have about that long to go to get answers. My main concern is finding Morgana. She said she had to take care of other business, and I’m worried about what could’ve happened. She could be dead or captured again for all we know.”

“Morgana-san doesn’t seem to be the kind of person to make the same mistake twice. Besides, I noticed that map on your phone had two arrows. Once Morgana-san joined us, a third one appeared; a blue one.”

“Really? I didn’t notice that.”

Before Akechi could reply, a whistle blowed and the PE teacher turned to Yu.

“Narukami, you’re up!”

Yu turned and got up, shooting Akechi an apologetic look. The match was 4-7, girls’ favor. And as soon as the next match began, Yu wondered how the boys had managed to score at all. He managed to put up a good fight, better than the other boys, but the girls gave as good as they got.
One girl in particular was unstoppable. She had raven hair, like most girls, but she wore it a ponytail with a pink hairband, with deep eyes the color of chocolate. Her figure was well-defined, most likely someone who had been playing sports for a long time, as her PE uniform hugged her tightly. She was a one-woman sports team, blocking every spike Yu sent, rebounding every time the ball came to her, and every spike she gave, she gave with the force of a runaway train. Yu was able to stop each one, but it felt like he was trying to stop a bullet, and the burns were already starting to show. Yu looked at her and saw a fire in her eyes that only burned hotter with every attempt at scoring he stopped. Back and forth Yu and this pink hairband girl went, and soon it stopped looking like a game and more like a grudge match between the two. Yu thanked his kendo club training for being able to last this long, but knew he couldn’t keep it up for much longer.

“Go Shiho! You can do it!” A voice yelled.

Yu looked and saw that it was Ann who yelled, the blonde jumping up and down like she was a cheerleader.

So this is her friend? Damn, wonder if she’s giving me a hard time because I’ve been brushing her and Ann off?

The distraction did its job; Yu didn’t notice the girls had set up a spike for this Shiho. When he turned his attention back to the game, it was too late. The ball came at speeds Yu didn’t know a it could reach and hit him square in the face, and everything went white and a ringing formed in his ears, like he had been hit with a flashbang. The impact was enough to make him skid across the floor and he swore his nose was broken.

Just my luck too.

The cheering crowd died down and turned into a massive ‘Ooooooo’ followed by many saying variations of the word ‘ouch’. As Yu tried to get up he heard a girls voice.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry! Are you ok?” She asked, helping him up.

“Pretty sure my nose is broken.”

“I’m so sorry. Hey guys! I’m going to take him to the nurse’s office. Keep the game going!” The girl ordered.

“Shiho-san, that’s the criminal! Let me go with you!” One boy cried out.

“No Shiho-san, let me! I can carry the delinquent for you!” Another yelled.

“He’ll hurt you once you’re alone Shiho-san! I can protect you!” A final offered.

“GUYS!! I’ll be fine! I’m perfectly capable of helping someone to the nurse’s office by myself. Just focus on the game, ok?” Shiho said, a little of the fire in her voice.

“But-”

“Enough! Suzui-san, please see to it that he’s taken care of. The rest of you, back to the game! Now!” Ushimaru ordered.

The two made their way through the hallway, Yu finally able to stand and walk. Once his sight returned and focused, he saw Shiho in crystal clear detail for the first time. Her hair was silky smooth, her skin looked as soft as the clouds, and her eyes were a hazel brown that seemed to burn with passion during the game. She was beautiful, and Yu found himself entranced by her. She was
rubbing her arm in guilt and the fire that burned so brightly before was completely snuffed out now. She turned around, and she looked like she was ready to cry right then and there.

“I’m so, so, so sorry. How are you feeling?” She asked, as she walked alongside Yu, who had taken some napkins to staunch the bleeding.

“Could be better.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, when I play, I get so worked up. I often forget how powerful my arms can be when I cut loose.”

“You were amazing out there.” Yu complemented

Shiho looked at Yu with widened eyes and a slack jaw.

“Y-you’re not mad? I-I broke your nose.”

“Yea, but that aside that, you were grilling us. I’ve never seen a girl, or anyone for that matter, play like you do. It was spectacular.”

Shiho blushed at the compliment, looking at the ground.

“Great, now I feel even worse for hurting you.”

“About that, you seemed to have it out for me. Was it because I was brushing you and Ann off?”

“What? No, it’s not that at all. In fact, when Ann told me that she might introduce me to someone, I was worried. So when you didn’t show up, I was relieved.”

“Why? Wanted Ann all to yourself?” Yu joked.

“What? No, of course not. It’s just…” Shiho trailed off, rubbing her arm again.

“Yes?”

“Do you know who Kobayakawa is? Who am I kidding, you’re friends with Akechi-senpai and Makoto-senpai, of course you know him.”

“Yea, met him by the gates. Gave me the creeps.”

“He has a deal with Ann. She stays his obedient little slut, and in exchange, he doesn’t lay a finger on me.” Shiho explained, the fire starting to relight.

“Slut? What do you mean?” Yu asked, eyes widening in shock at the implications.

“Whenever there’s a boy that Kobayakawa needs to get under his thumb, he often sends Ann to get to know them. And almost every time, it ends with them dating.”

“So rumors go around that she’s willing to sleep with anyone.” Yu finished.

“ Exactly. Even though she hasn’t needed to go that far. Yet.” Shiho added the last word with some venom in her voice.

“And associating herself with me, the criminal, would sink her lower.”
“Yes. It’s nothing personal, I promise. I just… want Ann to be safe and happy.”

“I understand completely. But that wasn’t the reason why you went after me during the game, then what was?”

“Oh, right, sorry.” Shiho said, her fire going out again.

“It’s just that, I’ve been playing volleyball for so long and gotten so good that nothing’s a challenge anymore. I barely put in half my effort at the best games. So, when you came out and actually forced me to pay attention, I… got excited.” She admitted, rubbing her arm.

“So, I decided to test your mettle, so to speak, and when you gave as good as you got, I, um, kind of started to see you as my rival. Then, I actually put in my full effort and… broke your nose. Sorry about that.” She apologized, again.

“Quit saying sorry.”

“Sorr- um… ok.”

Yu let himself chuckle. She was adorable.

“So, you saw me as my rival huh? I’m flattered. Maybe if it wasn’t for those stupid rumors, I’d join the volleyball team just for a chance to repay the favor. Minus the broken nose.”

Shiho let out a giggle as they stood outside the nurse’s office.

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t think the rumors about you were true. And I certainly don’t think so now.”

“It does Suzui-san. More than you know.” Yu said with a warm smile.

“Please, call me Shiho.” She replied, giving an equally warm smile.

“Alright Shiho. Thanks for guiding me to the nurse’s office.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I got to meet you. Even if the situation could’ve been better.”

After a visit to the nurse’s office, and a text informing Sae of what happened so she wouldn’t freak out when he got home, Yu went to the gates and waited in the alley. He looked at his phone and saw that, sure enough, the app was still there. The ‘Metaverse Navigator’ Igor called it. But when he opened it up, he found that instead of three blank boxes, there was a bookmark.

‘Kobayakawa, Shujin, Nation’. He was snapped out of his staring by Akechi’s voice.

“Ah, there you are Narukami-san. I texted Makoto-san that we’re heading out and won’t be back for a few hours. Have you figured out how to get back to that place?”

“I think so. I opened the strange app and found a bookmark. I think if I activate this…”

Yu pushed the button, and the world around them began to vibrate and swirl, the colors and shapes becoming distorted as both Akechi and Yu felt their heads throb. The students closed their eyes, and when they opened them up again, they saw that it worked.

The alleyway had been replaced with a road that led to a sign that said ‘Welcome to Shujin Nation! Obey President Kobayakawa and you’ll enjoy your stay!’”. Beyond the sign were two
hotels, an airport on a cliff, a beach, and other buildings that looked like they belonged in a resort. They made it back successfully.

“Now, we just have to find Morgana-san, and get our answers.”

“Right.”

Yu pulled out his phone, the clawed hand opening the app which transformed into a black screen and-

Wait what?

Yu examined himself and found he was back in that strange outfit from before. A black long sleeved tangzhuang shirt with a silver outline and a golden chinese dragon imprinted on the right side of his shirt. On his hands were white gloves with golden claws attached. He also had loose-fitting black dress pants, and black dress shoes with golden scales covering them. Finally, on his face was a silver with a white outline masquerade mask with the Roman numeral “II” branded in gold at the center of his forehead.

“That’s… that’s the same outfit as before. I didn’t see a flame engulf you this time.”

“Yea. Guess that means I’m in complete control of my powers this time.” Yu said, smirking as he admired himself again. He also felt weight on his back, and when he reached for it, he felt the handle of the katana that materialized after he first summoned Izanagi.

“Find Morgana-san now, admire your choice in attire later.” Akechi said, crossing his arms.

Yu looked at his phone. Just like before, there were a red and yellow arrow, but now, there was a blue one, heading for the red and yellow one. At really high speeds too. Yu looked up as he heard the roar of an engine, like a hungry lion coming for its next meal. Shortly after, the Mona-mobile emerged from the trees and screeched to a halt like before with a cartoonish hunch. The front door opened up.

“Hey there guys. Didn’t expect you two to come back so soon. What happened to your face Wild Card?” Morgana asked as she stepped out.
Basic of Basics

Chapter Notes

This chapter will basically be Morgana explaining the Metaverse, Personas, and so forth, so feel free to skip if you like.

“Hello Morgana-san. I’m glad to see you are well. As for Narukami-san, there was an… incident at school. Don’t worry, he’s perfectly fine.”

“I’m glad to hear that. And it’s good to see you too evil-eye. You guys must have a treasure trove of questions. Ask away, I’m all ears.” She said, stretching.

“What is this place? How exactly is it that we can enter here?” Akechi asked first.

“For your first question, there are a few answers. This place that we’re in, in general, is called the Metaverse, an alternate dimension formed by human cognition. It allows people who enter it to, in essence, see and alter the hearts and minds of other humans. This place we’re in, specifically, is called a Palace, a spot in the Metaverse that has been altered by extremely powerful and distorted desires.”

“Could you explain that last part further?”

“Well, since the Metaverse is a product of human cognition, it is capable of being altered by human cognition and desires. Those who have distorted desires that are strong enough to affect the Metaverse get a Palace. Palaces are how a person views a certain place in the real world. Every time, the Palace is something that it’s equivalent in the waking world could never be. Case and point: This Kobayakawa sees this ‘Shujin’ place as his own private nation. He believes he’s the ruler of Shujin, and that he’s allowed to do whatever he feels is necessary to protect it.”

“So, these Palaces are a product of human desires and how they see the world. They form because someone has twisted desires and a skewed world view. Kobayakawa wants to protect Shujin’s reputation at any costs, and as a result, views Shujin as a nation.” Akechi repeated thoughtfully, as if he was reviewing clues in a case.

“Bingo! And since Palaces form from one person, each one is unique in how it distorts the Metaverse.”

“Alright, anything you want to ask Narukami-san?”

“Yea, I remember getting sluged by Kobayakawa, but he didn’t seem to remember that when I met him at the gates this morning. Why is that?”

“Well, like I said, the Metaverse allows us to see and enter the hearts and minds of others. What we’re moving through is his heart and subconscious mind. Chances are that he won’t remember what happens here. Probably.”

“What do you mean ‘probably’? If Kobayakawa finds out I’m messing with his mind, I’m expelled for sure.”
“Well, you know how I said that the Metaverse was affected by human cognition? Well, it’s something of a two-way street, so what you do in the Palace can affect the waking world in a few ways. This Kobayakawa guy won’t know what you’re doing, but if you have a lot of interaction with him while you’re in here, and keep saying your name, the real Kobayakawa will get on edge and on guard whenever you’re around. He might not know why, but he will. That’s why I didn’t say your real names last time. He might not outright know what you’re doing, but you will earn his attention and his ire, which could lead to further complications later.”

“I see. Thank you for keeping our identities secret Morgana-san.”

The woman beamed at the praise.

“You said that this Palace can affect the real world in a few ways. How?” Yu asked.

Morgana smirked and rubbed her hands together, like a mustache-twirling villain who just saw the hero fall into his trap.

“I’m soooooooo glad you asked that question Wild Card! As you know, Palaces form because of distorted desires. Those desires originated from somewhere, and that somewhere is in the Palace!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, at the heart of each Palace is something called a Treasure. The Treasure is the source of the distorted desires that caused the Palace to form. If the Treasure is removed from the Palace, we’ll remove those desires from the Palace ruler’s heart!”

“Umm... What?”

“Since the Treasure is what caused the desires to manifest into a Palace, it only makes sense that removing it would remove the desires.”

“What happens to the person in the real world if we steal this ‘Treasure’ and make the Palace collapse?” Akechi asked.

“Well, since taking the Treasure means taking the desire that formed the Palace, we’d be removing their desire in the real world too. This would cause the person to realize the full extent of what they’ve done since they don’t want what they originally wanted. As a result, they’d feel guilt over their actions. In other words, we’d force them to have a change of heart, so to speak. After that, they’d most likely repent for their crimes and work to atone.”

Both Yu and Akechi looked at each other before turning to Morgana.

“So, what you’re saying is that, if we steal the Treasure in Kobayakawa’s Palace, we’ll make him confess his crimes and seek atonement?”

“Yup!”

“You’re sure? You are 100 percent sure?”

“Yes!” Morgana affirmed, starting to grow irritated.

Akechi looked at Yu then back at Morgana for a moment before smiling from ear to ear.

“YES!! YES YES YES!!! AT LAST, MY PRAYERS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED!!” Akechi
yelled, jumping for joy with every word.

“WE’RE GOING TO TAKE YOU DOWN KOBAYAKAWA! DO YOU HEAR ME?! YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED!!”

“Calm down Akechi. He actually will hear you if you keep yelling like that.” Yu said, exasperated by his outburst.

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t contain my excitement. It almost seems too good to be true.”

“Well…” Morgana started.

“Damnit!!”

“Because of the nature of the Treasure, it’s going to be in the most heavily guarded place in the Palace. If we want to reach it, we’ll have to infiltrate the Palace, and that means we’ll have to fight.”

“Those police guards? You called them Shadows yes?” Akechi asked.

“Correct. Formed from repressed human emotions and vices, Shadows are the sworn enemies of us Tricksters. There are a few ways to fight them, but the easiest and most effective one is, without a doubt, using our Personas.”

“Like Izanagi.” Yu pointed out.

“And Lady Trieu! Exactly! And before you ask, Personas are, in a nutshell, your inner self. They are your personality, traits, qualities, both good and bad, all mixed together and given form, and that form is based always on a figure in history or mythology whose personality and history is the most similar to you. Because of that fact, they are separate entities from ourselves, like if your heart or brain had its own personality. Every person save for Wild Cards can only have one Persona.”

“A Wild Card?” Yu inquired.

“Yup! Wild Cards are the rare Persona users who have enough mental flexibility, fortitude and adaptability to hold more than one Persona. As a result, they are the best of the best Tricksters.”

“Sounds like you’re quite impressive Narukami-san.”

“Legends and reality are very different things. Besides, those apply to previous Wild Cards, if we’re believing everything Morgana says, and I haven’t done anything.” Yu replied.

“Yet. You haven’t done anything yet. If we want to steal the Treasure, we’ll have to infiltrate the Palace. If we’re going to pull off a successful infiltration, we’ll need information. Hence why I had to leave early last time. Which brings me to the second half of Palaces: Cognition.”

Before either could ask what she meant, she snapped her fingers and the middle door to the Mona-mobile opened to reveal Makoto and… Akechi. Both of them were dressed in camouflage for the jungle, and their clothing was rather… sparse. For Makoto, she wore booty shorts with suspenders connected to a tube top, while all Akechi wore was pants with an army pattern. Both had belts on top of belts of ammo, a heavy machine gun, a bandana and face paint in the form of two stripes on their cheeks.

“Um… who are these people, and why do they look like Makoto-san and I?”
“Well, you see, Palaces may be formed by distorted desires, but they are affected by cognition, how the Palace ruler sees the outside world. Since Kobayakawa sees Shujin as his nation, and since evil-eye and his sister oppose him—”

“Makoto-san and I are not siblings.”

“-He naturally sees them as any dictator would; rebels. And are you really? You both have red eyes.”

“No, they aren’t.” Yu said.

“Thank you Narukami-san. Back to the topic at hand, why are these two showing so much skin in a jungle?” Akechi pointed out, looking at his counterpart.

“Hey, I’m not complaining.” Yu said as he stared at Makoto’s half naked body, earning a jab to the gut from Akechi.

“But that doesn’t explain how there’s two of me.”

“I’m getting there. Since this Kobayakawa sees evil-eye and lady evil-eye as rebels, they appear in his Palace as how the real Kobayakawa thinks rebels look like.”

“What about the ones in the prison? I saw Ann, Ryuji, Futaba and Kawakami-sensei working in a quarry. They were dressed like prisoners and Ann got whipped. Several times.”

“Then that’s how he sees those people: Prisoners that he is free to abuse. These things, the rebel evil-eye and lady evil-eye and those prisoners, those are called cognitions. They’re how the Palace ruler views people, but they aren’t real. Think of them as very life-like dolls.”

“So, if we came to him one day and submitted to him, what would happen to these rebels?” Yu asked

“I highly advise against such a thing civilian. Servitude under Kobayakawa is a fate worse than death. You should instead join us rebels and help us sow chaos and destruction across the Nation!” Cognitive Makoto suggested.

“Yes. Our primary goal is to plant the seeds of unrest across Shujin Nation, because we were not good enough to make the cut for the villainous Kobayakawa’s standards! Bah! But it matters not! We will deliver glorious justice for all to see!” Cognitive Akechi declared, striking a dramatic pose.

“He nailed your theatrics.” Yu pointed out.

“Shut up.” Akechi ordered, getting a grin from Yu in response.

“I’m guessing these cognitive versions of you and Makoto would turn into those prisoners we saw before.” Yu said.

“I agree. So, what happens in the real world would have a chance to affect the Palace?”

“That’s correct. Like, if there was door in here that couldn’t be opened in here, it would be because he thinks there’s a door in the real world that only he could open. BUT! If he saw evil-eye or the Wild Card open that door, then the door in his Palace would open up because of the change in Cognition.”
“I see. That makes sense.”

“If this world is affected by cognition, does that mean Kobayakawa sees himself as a dictator?” Yu asked.

“That’s a different story actually. Since we’re traversing a mix of his soul and subconscious, he doesn’t have any active control over it. If he did, he would be able to make sure we never escaped to begin with. What you saw before was his own personal Shadow.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, remember how I said Shadows were repressed human emotions and vices? Well, everyone has one specific Shadow. That’s their true self, the part of them that they don’t want to admit exists, and thus, they hide it away.”

“I can believe it. He talked to us the same way the real Kobayakawa does to me whenever we’re alone. But if everyone has a Shadow, does that mean Narukami-san and I do as well?”

“Yes… and no. For the Wild Card’s case, no. Once you become completely aware and accepting of your true self, that strength forges your heart and soul into your Persona.”

“Except I didn’t face myself.” Yu pointed out.

“I was getting there. There are many ways to obtain a Persona. Facing your true self and accepting all the ugly in you is without a doubt the most dangerous, but surefire way to get one. Another way is situational; if the proper conditions are met, and if the person is put in a stressful situation, like if their life is on the line, then a Persona can be forced to take form, bypassing the need to accept your inner self completely until the day you die. The first awakenings are traumatic and the person will most likely pass out once the danger is over, but the Persona materializes permanently from then on and will come if the situation is replicated. The middle ground is how Wild Card here summoned his Persona: Willpower. If your desire and need is great enough, then you can form a contract with your inner self. In exchange for obtaining the power of Persona, you must agree to never lose sight of yourself or compromise your beliefs. And finally, for guides such as myself, we are given our Personas and thus, don’t have to use any methods humans do.”

“Is that all of the methods?”

“All that I know of. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were other ways to call a Persona, but there is one constant; you have to have the potential to have a Persona. Not everyone has the strength needed to obtain one by any methods.”

“I see.”

“Any other questions?”

“Yes. How do you know all this?” Akechi asked.

“She’s our guide. She was created by a man named Igor to help me complete my ‘rehabilitation’. I’ve met him in my dreams.” Yu answered.

“Ummm... What?”

“Let me explain. You know how I thought that the app was giving me LSD trips, and how I thought one of those trips was me in a prison? Well, turns out that is real. Or am I mistaken?” Yu asked, turning to the woman.
“Nope! I’m surprised you figured it out, since I didn’t mention Master Igor, his assistants, or the Velvet Room.”

“You have a ‘V’ imprinted on your belt.”

“Oh yeah… hehe.” Morgana laughed, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Wait, wait just a moment. Who exactly is this Igor? What does he want?”

“He’s a long-nosed gremlin that only wants to help!” Morgana answered gleefully.

“Or so he claims. He says he’s here to help, but so far all he’s offered is talk.” Yu countered.

“Really? So he hasn’t done anything?” Akechi asked.

“No, nothing.”

“I see. Please let me know if that changes.”

“Yea, yea. Sure.” Yu rubbing the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

“Are you alright Narukami-san?”

“It’s just… this is a lot to process Akechi. We just found out that there’s a separate dimension that can let us force Kobayakawa and other people to have personality changes, and that place is plagued by humanity’s inner demons, and the only way to fight those demons is with our souls. You’ll have to forgive me for not taking all this in stride. Especially since this has happened so quickly. I need a few moments.”

*Not to mention there’s the contract that said ruin draws near, and that only Tricksters can fight it. And according to Morgana, I’m supposed to be the best of the best. No pressure, right?*

“I understand Narukami-san. This is a lot to process for me too.”

“Once you guys are done, I have a question I want to ask you.” Morgana said, her expression turning serious.

“What question is that?” Yu asked.

“Are you in?”

“A moment of silence passed as Akechi and Yu looked at each other in confusion. Morgana decided to clarify what she meant.

“I’ve told you everything I know, and now you need to decide what you’re going to do with it. You have two choices; use what I’ve told you to make a difference, or walk away and forget everything. So, I’ll ask again; Are. You. In?”

“So you’re asking us if we are going to steal Kobayakawa’s desires?”

“It’d be more accurate to say we’d steal his heart, but yea.”

“If doing so will bring him down, then yes. What about you Narukami-san?”

Yu was still thinking. True, he had no reason to back out, or protect Kobayakawa. But if he went through with this, he would have to shoulder the burden of fighting a war for who knows how
long. What if he died? What if Sae found out? What if they took on more members and one of them betrayed him? There were so many ways this could go wrong. He heard his dad’s voice.

“If you get in any trouble, your life will be over.”

Then he thought back to when he first called Izanagi. He remembered what he told his inner self. That his actions that night were not a mistake. That he would do it all over again. He was just a defenseless teenager then. Just a boy who didn’t know what he was getting into, and had no way to fight the rigged system that was set on ruining his life. But that was then. He’s not a defenseless teenager now. Kobayakawa ruined so many lives, and would no doubt ruin more if he was left alone, and now, Yu had the power to do something about it, and if he did it right, he would get away with it. With that thought in mind, he decided to take action, consequences be damned. He would pass judgment on this monster, since no one else could be bothered.

“When do we start?” He asked, small sparks flashing in the eyes behind the mask.

“Alright! Expected nothing less from the Wild Card.”

“If we’re going to do this, we’ll need better nicknames.” Yu stated flatly.

“Well, they’re more like codenames, since I won’t use them if I go to the waking world.”

“Regardless, I’m not going to be called ‘Wild Card’ the whole way through.”

“Alright, then you’ll be called ‘Joker’!”

“I’d rather not follow someone who’s named after a comic book villain.” Akechi said.

“Really? That’s what bugs you? It sounds plain stupid to me.” Yu replied.

“But it fits so well! In a deck, the Joker is often the wild card, a game changer!” Morgana countered.

“No.”

“Awww, fine. Then what do you want to be called then?”

“Hmm. How about… Seeker?”


“I like it.” Akechi stated, nodding in approval.

“Two out of three, majority rules.” Yu confirmed.

“Fine!”

“What about you Morgana-san? Have you thought of a codename?” Akechi asked.

“Of course! The name I chose for myself is… drum roll please… Carmen!”

“Carmen? As in the dancer?” Akechi asked.

“Yup, a femme fatale!”

“I approve.” Akechi said.
“Works for me.” Yu added with a nod.

“Sweet! As for the other one, I think that we should stick to evil-eye. After all, you won’t be able to accompany us the whole way. You don’t have a Persona.” Morgana suggested, looking at Akechi, who shot a look of disapproval.

“What makes you think I don’t have the potential for one?”

“Because the way you guys got here, an app I think you call it, has a range of about 10 feet, so you could drag in anyone.”

“So, if we activated it in a crowd, we’d bring dozens of people in the Metaverse?”

“Yea, so I wouldn’t risk it. Plus you never know who has the potential to awaken to a Persona. And not all Persona users are Tricksters.”

“How do you mean?” Yu asked.

“Well, there are some people who awaken to a Persona, and decide to use it for their own personal gain. Those kind of Persona users are called ‘Champions of Ruin’. They are extremely rare, and extremely dangerous, because they know how sick, twisted and all around nasty they are, and accept it without trying to change. As a result, they hold nothing back, Persona power or otherwise. In fact, if we encountered a Champion of Ruin right now, I have no doubt that they’d kill us all within a minute.”

Both of the boys looked at each other with a mix of fear and concern.

“Right, let’s get back to the objective at hand. How exactly will we go about infiltrating this Palace?” Akechi asked after shaking his head.

“I’m glad you asked evil-eye. And it was for that express reason that I brought the cognitive versions of yourself and your not-sister!”

“Why? Do they know how to infiltrate this Palace?”

“They should. But we got lucky with this first one. The other Palace’s won’t have a guide for us to follow, so we’ll have to figure it out as we go for future infiltrations. But right now, we’ll take any advantage we can.”

The three looked at the cognitive rebels, and Akechi was the first to speak up.

“Excuse me, do you know where the Treasure is?”

“I don’t know what this ‘treasure’ you speak of is. Unless you are referring to where President Kobayakawa keeps his ill-gotten fortunes, then yes, I do.”

“No, we’re not- were you listening at all to our conversation?’

“Unless it is related to the downfall of the villainous President Kobayakawa, or the collapse of the corrupt Shujin Nation, then I am not interested.”

“I have other things on my mind besides defeating you, Kobayakawa.” Akechi muttered to himself. Before he could try again, Yu put his hand on Akechi’s shoulder.

“Let me give it a try.” He mouthed, and Akechi stepped aside.
“Where’s the most heavily guarded spot in Shujin Nation?” Yu asked and Akechi facepalmed for not thinking of that earlier.

“Ah. That would have to be, without a doubt, President Kobayakawa’s private residence. It’s a small mansion off the coast, on an island. Getting there will not be easy.”

“Nothing worth doing ever is.”

“Haha! Spoken like a true rebel! If you want to get to the island that houses the disgusting glutton, you will need to board his private jet and get past his island’s defenses. To do this, you will need two access codes: One to make sure you aren’t shot down leaving the resort, and one to make sure you land without being fired on.”

“Wait, what? Why are two codes needed?”

“A righteous conspirator named Mishima and I once tried to force our way onto the island of villainy by holding the pilots at gunpoint. We managed to arrive, but sadly, Mishima was not prepared for what awaited us, and paid the price for it. Since then, any guest that wishes to see that slug Kobayakawa is given the codes, not the plane pilots.”

The real Akechi hung his head low at the mention of Mishima.

“And where can we find these codes?”

The cognitive Akechi pointed two fingers to the hotels.

“At the top floor of each hotel lies a lap-dog marshal. They are supposed to give whatever the current codes are to any guest that visits Kobayakawa. If you manage to obtain them, you will be able to fly to Kobayakawa’s island. But it will not be easy once you get there.”

“How do you mean?”

“His infernal mansion is full of security, but it isn’t the corrupt police. His private military soldiers prowl the halls. The only way you’re getting through that untouched is if you have the disgusting President himself guiding you through.”

“And that sure isn’t an option.” Yu muttered.

“Exactly. Underneath the island is a bunker housing the vile General Morooka.”

“That’s a new name.”

“Kinshiro Morooka is Kobayakawa’s best friend, one that helped collaborate his alibis and is the sole reason why so many testimonies against the coach failed to hold up in court.” The real Akechi explained.

“Yes. General Morooka has fought against our righteous cause for a long time. As a result, he was entrusted with a copy of the key to Kobayakawa’s foul inner sanctum in his mansion. In there lie his deepest, darkest secrets.”

“Sounds like that’s where the Treasure would be. Anything else that we should know?” Yu asked.

Cognitive Akechi pulled out two maps, one of both hotels, and one of the private island. After Yu shot a glance at them, he heard a PING come from his phone. Pulling the device out, he saw
that there was no longer a black screen, but instead the map he saw in cognitive Akechi’s hand. After giving a nod, he returned the maps and looked at Morgana.

“If there’s nothing else, then let’s get to it.” Yu ordered.

“Alright. Oh, and by the way, you’re going to be our leader.” Morgana said as she started up the Mona-mobile.

“Wait what? Why me?” Yu asked as he climbed in.

“That should be obvious Seeker. You have the unique talents of a Wild Card.” Morgana answered.

“That means I have an ability. It doesn’t mean that I should be deciding who should be in the front lines and such.”

“I agree with Morgana-san. Wild Cards are supposed to be talented in many areas, if what she says is true. Leadership is probably one of those areas.” Akechi said as he got in and closed the door.

“Yea, except we have no idea if those apply to me. So how about no?”

“Two out of three, majority rules!” Morgana stated as they began their drive to Shujin Nation, leaving the cognitive rebels behind.
Yu had tried, desperately, to worm his way out of leadership role, but every argument was swiftly countered by a solid counterargument. Before he could think of another excuse, he saw them approaching the first hotel. He breathed a sigh of resignation.

“Oh, fine. I’ll be the damn leader. Get us in that alleyway. We can’t risk them recognizing Akechi- ahem- evil-eye.” Yu said, with a smile at the last part.

“Doesn’t the Mona-mobile have a tether of some sort? Can’t we use that to climb up the hotel?” Akechi asked.

“It was a harpoon. It’s designed to attach to pierce flat surfaces and pull things to us or tear off things like walls. It won’t work.”

“Then we’ll have to work our way up. Let’s go.” Yu said, opening his door and getting out. As they were currently in an alleyway, there weren’t any windows for them to climb into, but there was a vent. Pulling the grating off, Yu climbed in, Morgana and Akechi following close behind.

For a while, it seemed like they were going nowhere, and it was starting to cramp up their legs. Yu, however didn’t notice. Instead of soreness, he was feeling alive, excited, and most of all, free. Just like the first time he summoned Izanagi, he felt a rush as he crawled through the vent, a rush that only intensified as he thought about what he was doing, and he smiled as he could imagine how it would look when he was finished. As he turned the corner, he saw light, and it was coming from the bottom.

“Looks like this the end of the line for crawling in the vents. The only way left is down.” Yu said, trying to readjust himself so that he’d land feet-first.

“Finally! I was worried it went on forever.” Morgana complained.

“If the directions are any indication, I’d guess we’ll pop out below the main floor.” Akechi informed them as Yu got his feet out in front of him.

With a single movement, Yu went over the ledge and fell, his weight breaking through the grating, but the fall itself wasn’t enough to hurt him. Getting out of the way, Morgana and Akechi landed, the woman stretching afterwards. It appeared they were in a storage area of the basement, with several crates and racks scattered about. They then heard footsteps.

“Disturbance in the basement, going to investigate.” Came the distorted voice of a Shadow.

“Quick, hide!” Yu ordered, quickly taking cover behind a storage rack, Akechi and Morgana following his command and hiding right behind him.

“Psst. Seeker, there’s something you should know.” Morgana whispered to him.

“What?”

The footsteps got louder as the guard made his way to the voices.

“You see that riot mask he has? If you tear it off, it’ll disrupt the Palace ruler’s control over the Shadows. It’ll disorientate the shadow and force it to reveal its true form. The few moments it needs to reorient itself should be a big enough opening for us to get a few good hits in. Give it a
try.” Morgana informed, Yu nodding shortly after.

The Shadow was dangerously close now. Remembering all those action movies he’s watched over the years, Yu jumped right in front of the Shadow, and gave a second jump, landing on top of the Shadow’s shoulders. His clawed hand reached for the mask and pulled with all his strength. The mask came off easily, and Yu pushed with both of his legs. The Shadow twisted and convulsed, and just like before, transformed into a black puddle that soon reformed itself this time into two women with red dresses floating in the air.

As Morgana said, they appeared to be in a state of confusion, giving Yu the chance to strike. Summoning Izanagi, a bolt of lightning stuck one of the women, and Morgana called Lady Trieu, who summoned a green vortex that finished the job. The other one quickly recovered, and extended her palms, as if she was giving a gift. And that gift was a few chunks of ice that hurled themselves at Yu. All of them hit him, and while he felt hurt, he could also feel Izanagi protecting him from the bulk of the damage. Morgana charged, slashing upwards with her scimitar, and before the Shadow could recover, fired a ball from her slingshot that hit square in the chest, going straight through. It was then that Akechi decided to enter the battle, pulling out his pistol and firing rapidly into the woman’s body, using all the bullets in the clip, and the woman’s body slumped down as a result. Yu summoned Izanagi to finish her.

“W-wait! Please!” The woman cried, hovering over to the group.

“Hold on Seeker. Let’s hear her out.” Morgana suggested.

“What do you want?” Yu asked, holding out his sword.

“If I’m going to die, I want to know, what was I to you?” She asked in return.

“Ummm… no one really.” Yu answered, both confused and not prepared to think of a better answer.

“I suppose that makes sense. I don’t leave a good impression.”

“Ummm…. Ok???”

“Do you think there might be someone out there who doesn’t think of me as a no one?”

Yu rolled his eyes. He didn’t have time for this.

“I don’t care.”

“Yea, I don’t suppose I would in your position t- WAIT! I remember!” She yelled suddenly, floating with renewed life.

“I am thou, thou art I. From the Sea of Souls I cometh. I am Silky, and I will aid thou on thy quest.” The woman, now known as Silky, declared, before turning into a mask exactly like Yu’s and flying right to his face, merging with the one he had on. Both he and Akechi looked at Morgana expectantly.

“Congrats on getting your first new Persona Seeker.” Morgana congratulated with a smile.

“Will all Shadows be potential Personas?”

“Sadly, no. Some will be untameable beasts that need to be killed.”
“I’ll keep that in mind as we keep going. By the way evil-eye…”

“Yes Seeker?”

“Those were some great shots before.”

“Thank you. My firing instructor told me I’d make a great assassin in another life.” Akechi joked.

“Still have any bullets?”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot about that.” Akechi admitted, pulling out his weapon and then the ammo clip. Sure enough, all of the bullets were still there.

“Wait, you brought in a real weapon? I thought it was a model.”

“Why would it fire if it was a model?”

“Because this world is affected by cognition. If it looks real in this world, then it is.”

“I see. So if I take out the clip, then it would still fire?”

“I think so. It would explain why you didn’t use any last time. But how come Morgana’s slingshot does just as much damage?” Yu wondered, walking up the stairs out of the basement.

“Because it’s been augmented by the magics of the Velvet Room. Now, let’s focus on the task at hand please!” Morgana borderline demanded.

They came up at a hall and walked to the end of it, Yu using his phone’s map as their guide. When they reached the end, they found themselves at the back of the lobby of the hotel. They saw a few Shadow’s roaming around in patrol routes, and there were two flights of stairs that connected to a balcony directly above them, as if they were in a mansion. On the other side of the room was another hallway, one that led to the gym and pool, according to the map. Most hotels had elevators, and they would use that to reach the top. Skillfully avoiding the Shadows, the trio walked down the hall, looking for the elevator, only to find that there was no such thing. The only way up was another set of stairs, and they began on the balcony.

Who designed this?

Managing to sneak their way past the Shadows by memorizing their movement routes, the three climbed up the balcony. As they approached the end of the hall to the stairs, they saw a Shadow standing guard, one that didn’t seem to notice them yet.

“There’s no way we’ll be able to ambush this one.”

“That’s ok. If you can manage to hit them, it’ll force them to reveal their true form. They won’t be disoriented, but we’ll still have a chance to strike.”

Yu nodded his head, and pulled out his katana, rushing forward.

“What the hell?! Intru-”

Yu slashed his sword across the Shadow’s chest before it could alert the others. This time, it’s black puddle reformed into two male demons. Yu decided to give his new Persona a try. Reaching for his mask, he decided to summon her the same way he summoned Izanagi.
“Silky!” Yu called, and the woman appeared behind him as he tore off his mask. Another word of power made its way into his mind.

“Bufu!” Yu yelled, and Silky obeyed, shooting ice blocks at one of the demons, knocking it down. But just like Morgana said, the other demon was ready, and with a snap of his fingers, fireballs appeared and exploded all around Yu, and this time, the force was great enough to knock him down.

“Damnit! That Persona must be weak to fire!” Morgana yelled, summoning Lady Trieu.

“Show them your power!” Morgana ordered, and the attack she launched at the male demon held more power than usual, knocking the him down. Yu forced himself up, Akechi pointing his gun from afar while Morgana jumped over them, surrounding the two demons.

“Say goodbye.” Akechi said, ready for the kill.

“Wait a moment evil-eye. It’s in our best interest to have as diverse an arsenal as possible. Try to negotiate with them.” Morgana advised.

“Alright Carmen. Lend me your power, demon.” Yu said to the Shadow.

“Who the hell do ya think ya are, bargin’ in like this?” He demanded.

“I’m the guy who kicked your ass.”

“How? How did ya win? What do ya have that I don’t?!”

“A social life.”

“……….Heh. Ya got spunk kid. Kinda like m-WAIT! I remember!”

The demon flew upwards, the second one vanishing into thin air.

“I am thou, thou art I. From the Sea of Souls I cometh. I am Incubus, and I will aid thou on thy quest.” He said, the process from Silky repeating itself and soon, a new mask merged with Yu’s. He motioned for the team to form up, and turned around, expecting the other Shadows to show up because of the commotion, but to his surprise, no one did.

“Shadow’s only show up if they see an intruder. Unless the Palace is on high alert, like when you guys first came here.” Morgana said, as if reading his mind.

“Alright. In that case let’s head up. This hotel has what, five floors?”

“Four Seeker. And we’re on the first.” Akechi informed.

“Alright. After we beat the marshal, we can head over to the other hotel and repeat the process. Follow me.” Yu ordered as he went through the doors.

“And he thought he wasn’t cut out to be leader.” Morgana said to Akechi as they followed. They climbed up the stairs, but soon ran into a problem. There were only three floors these stairs went up to.

“Hold on, let me check my… oh you’ve got to be kidding.”

“What’s wrong Seeker? Was evil-eye wrong?” Morgana asked.
“No. There’s another separate set of stairs that go only from the third to the fourth floors, and that set is on the other side of the building. And there’s a lock icon on this door on the map, so I’m assuming it won’t open. At least on this side.”

To confirm his theory, Yu gave a quick push and pull to the door, but it didn’t move an inch.

“Then that means we’ll have to explore the second floor.” Akechi reasoned, and Yu nodded in response. The trio went to the second floor and went through the hallway. For some reason, there was a door unlocked and open at the very end, and Yu decided to take a peek. There was a single Shadow in the room, walking back and forth between an open window and the door. The room inside looked like a standard hotel room, which meant that there was plenty of room to maneuver around the Shadow if he wanted to avoid fighting. And he really wanted to avoid fighting, given how little space there was. Timing his movements carefully, Yu and the other two were able to completely avoid the Shadow, or at least until they neared the window.

“STOP REBELS!!” The Shadow yelled, pulling out a baton and swinging it at the closest member, Akechi, and landing a direct hit, the impact slamming the detective into his teammates. As they recovered, the Shadow dissolved, and this time, rather than take on any kind of creatures with human features, like a body, the tar spread out so it surrounded the three and reformed into blobs that only had a pink mask standing out.

“These are what I was talking about, the ones that aren’t Personas.” Morgana explained, getting up.

The three masks were relentless in their assault, pressing their advantage as one attacked Akechi with fireballs, and the detective didn’t have a Persona to protect him from the flames. The second one attacked Yu, but this time, he was able to not just repel it, but absorb it, thanks to his newly acquired Incubus. This opening allowed him to get up and call on Izanagi, the god cleaving the blob with his blade, destroying it. The third managed to hit Morgana, while Akechi’s attacker turned to Yu. The teenager avoided the fireballs that were hurled at him, and the other blob turned to aid its kin. Yu pulled out his katana and ordered Izanagi to hit Morgana’s attacker while he went after Akechi’s. Izanagi summoned a lightning strike to charge his naginata and hit the blob of tar straight in the center of it’s form, causing it to evaporate completely. Yu charged the last Shadow, which was desperately trying to hit him with it’s fire. But it was too little, too late, Yu dodged the last fireball and spun around, the momentum allowing his sword to cut clean through the mask, the rest of the body disintegrating shortly afterwards. He turned to his comrades.

“You ok evil-eye?” Morgana asked.

Yu looked over to the ace detective, who was struggling to stand, even with the support of the furniture. Black scorch marks dotted his pea coat, and bruises formed on his face, and blood leaked from his nose. His lips were swollen, and from the way he held his gut, Yu guessed that he might have a broken rib.

“No, Carmen. You were right. Without a Persona, I am useless.” Akechi admitted.

“Don’t say that. You’ve come in handy so far. Don’t worry, Lady Trieu knows a healing spell. Let me patch us up, that battle was rough.”

Lady Tieu appeared behind Morgana, and raised her sword. After that, the three felt a warm feeling boiling up inside them, like they just drank hot chocolate immediately after coming in from a blizzard. Yu felt the lingering aches from previous battles start to subside, while Akechi looked like he never got into a fight. Even his clothes showed no damage.
“Carmen, you ok?” Yu asked, noticing his female friend started breathing heavily.

“I’m… fine, thank you Seeker. Surly you noticed it too by now right? How each time you use a Persona, you feel just a little bit more tired.”

“Now that you mention it, yea. Each time I order Izanagi to do something, I feel like closing my eyes for a few seconds.”

“Personas derive their power from our mental state, so the more we use them, the less we’ll be able to concentrate. Eventually, it’ll get to the point where we’ll be lucky to summon Personas at all.”

“So we won’t be able to completely infiltrate a Palace in one go. A shame, I wanted to rampage through Shujin Nation to my heart’s content.” Akechi declared.

“Wait, what?” Akechi asked after realizing what he just said.

“Oh dear. I was afraid of this.” Morgana said, casting her eyes down and rubbing her arm.


“Well, you know those clothes Seeker wears? They aren’t just for show. They protect him from the distorted desires of the Palace ruler. Since you aren’t wearing them, you’ll slowly turn into how the Palace viewer sees you. In this case, the fanatic rebel who won’t stop until Kobayakawa is overthrown.”

“Can it be reversed?” Akechi asked.

“Yes. All we need to do is return to the waking world. But we need to hurry.”

“Yes, it appears we’re at an impasse. There has to be something in here that can help us. Why else would there be a Shadow in here?” Akechi reasoned.

“I don’t think it was here to guard something specifically in this room. Just keep us out.” Yu countered, walking over to the open window.

Looking around outside, he saw that they were rather high up, but there was a ledge he could shimmy along, a ledge that went all the way to a water drainage pipe. Looking up, he saw the pipe lead to another open window. On the third floor.

“Alright you two, I found our ticket up to the third floor. Follow me.” Yu ordered, getting out of the window and onto the ledge. As the other two joined him, he heard Akechi speak.

“That was excellent fighting back there Seeker.”

“Told you, a Wild Card is the best of the best, whether they know it or not.”

Yu rolled his eyes as he climbed up the pipe, but he also smiled too. Maybe they were right. Maybe he really was cut out for this. Before he entered, he peeked through the window to see if there were any Shadows. Finding none, he pulled himself in, helping Akechi and Morgana up.

Walking out, Yu made sure to unlock the door that lead to the lower floors before continuing up. But something caught his eye as they walked down the hall.

“Why is this door shimmering?” Yu asked.

The door was in fact shimmering, like it was a pond of water that someone threw a stone into.
Morgana grinned.

“Ah, I was wondering when we’d run into this.” She said, opening the door and walking in. When the two boys followed, they found that the room they stepped into shifted. One moment, they were in another hotel room, the next, they were in a classroom, and then back in a hotel room. The two teenagers looked at Morgana for an explanation.

“This place is called a Safe Room. It’s a spot in the Palace where distortion is weak, and as a result, so is the Palace ruler’s control. Shadows won’t come in here, so we can use these to take a break whenever we want.”

“That sounds like it’ll be useful.” Yu said, looking at his phone, only to find that the map was gone. In its place were two blocks of text; South Hotel Room, and Palace Entrance.

“Hmmm.”

“What is it Seeker?” Morgana asked.

“Can these Safe Rooms be used to teleport us across the Palace?”

“Oh yea! Knew I was forgetting something. Yes, once we reach a new Safe Room, we can use that to teleport to the Palace entrance or any other Safe Room we’ve visited.”

“That will be very useful. Ready to continue when you are Seeker.” Akechi informed.

“Same here.” Morgana added.

“Then let’s get to it.”
The trio left the Safe Room and went to the staircase that led to the fourth floor. Where the previous one was in a zig-zag pattern going up, this one was more like a spiral. The three climbed up, stopping right outside the door when they heard voices.

“One of our guards reported a disturbance. It could be the rebels.”

“It most likely is. Have our guards on high alert marshal.”

“They always are sir. How would you like for us to respond?”

“Wait for them to make the first move, then crush them with overwhelming numbers.”

“By your command, President Kobayakawa.”

“Do you have anything else to report?”

Yu was ready to kick the door open, but Morgana stopped him.

“Wait. This is a special Shadow, one that will no doubt be much stronger than any others we’ve faced. Make sure your ready.”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Yu replied, kicking the door open. There was only one Shadow in the room, and he wore a bullet-proof vest and carried a shotgun, and his badge proudly showed ‘Special Forces’ on his shoulder.

“Akechi. I should have known you would strike once you had another accomplice!” Shadow Kobayakawa snarled from behind a TV screen.

“You are welcome to try, as you always have. Marshal! Show no mercy!” Shadow Kobayakawa ordered. The TV screen turned off as the marshal transformed into a warrior with bright red armor mounted on top of a horse holding a spear, and two girls flying with demon wings flanked him.

“Let’s do this. Izanagi! Zio!” Yu cried out, his Persona striking at the crimson warrior with a lightning bolt, only for it to bounce off harmlessly.

“That all you got scum?!” the warrior yelled, raising his spear and calling a lightning strike on Morgana, who collapsed and fell to one knee.

Akechi pulled out his gun and started to fire, but the bullets ricocheted right off the armor. The two demon girls made their move, one grabbing Morgana and launching her into the ceiling and kneeing her in the gut when she fell back down. Before Morgana had a chance to recover, the demon wrapped both of her hands around Morgana’s neck, preventing the Trickster from calling her inner self. The second one twirled in the air, and the ground beneath Akechi erupted with what could only be described as dark magic. Akechi let out a scream of agony and fell to his knees,
coughing up blood. Yu stood alone now.

_Damnit! Come on Narukami, you can win this!_

Yu ordered Izanagi to attack with his blade, since lightning was clearly this warrior’s element. Izanagi charged, but the warrior was ready, locking blades with the god of Japan. The other demon woman took advantage of Yu’s vulnerability, spinning again, dark magic enveloping Yu shortly after. With his concentration disrupted by the sudden pain, Izanagi faltered for a second. But a second was all the warrior needed. Casting Izanagi to the side, the warrior then impaled the Persona on his spear, turning it to ash, and Yu screamed, holding his head and clawing at it like he was possessed. The warrior saw his opportunity, and ordered his horse to charge. Yu was able to null the pain just enough to process his opponent coming straight for him, but it was too late to do anything. The spear pierced Yu’s chest, just barely missing his left lung, and the Wild Card was pushed to the floor by the impact.

“How disappointing. I expected more.” The warrior taunted as he got off of his horse.

His eyes widened as the reality sunk in; he was going to die here, and there was nothing he could do about it. He didn’t honor his promise to stay out of trouble with Sae, and he had forgotten his promise to send even one letter to Nanako. Thousands of thoughts poured into his brain, all at once.

’Why did you have to get involved?’

’Stay out of trouble.’

’You didn’t think about potential consequences.’

’Another victim of Akechi’s crusade.’

’You can’t save the world. You can only save yourself.’

Yu closed his eyes and let a single tear flow down his cheek. They were right. He only came here at first for answers, but when the opportunity to help presented itself, Yu was all too happy to go. Just like that night. He had one job; stay out of trouble, and he couldn’t do that right. Now, he was going to die, and it would have been prevented if he was smart enough to remember that just because he wanted to do good, didn’t mean he was going to win. Just like that night. He was wrong earlier, when he first awakened Izanagi and thought he could fight back. It was just a false hope, another test he failed, nothing but more proof that he powerless. Just like he was on that night.

_Why? Why me?_

Yu turned to his soon-to-be dead allies. Morgana was struggling, but the demon’s hold was too strong, and she had already tossed Morgana’s scimitar across the room. Every time their guide tried to fight back, physically, or with her Persona, the demon would slap her, twist her wrist, or something else to control her, enjoying her pain like it was a delicious meal. Yu knew that she was just as powerless as he was.

Looking over to Akechi, the man who got them into this mess just to satiate his own personal need for justice, Yu found the detective had tried to rush the warrior, who left his spear in Yu. The warrior simply backhanded Akechi’s cheek, and before the teen could recover, grabbed the back of his neck. Dragging him over to the other side of the room, the warrior turned on the TV.

“President Kobayakawa. The rebels have been crushed, and their leader awaits your judgment.” The warrior stated, taking a bow as he spoke, the two demon women following suit.
“Excellent work Marshal. I knew my faith in you was well-founded. Normally, I’d tell you to make Akechi watch, but after everything, I doubt the brat’s learned that opposing me only leads to death and destruction by now. Kill his companions, and bring me Goro Akechi’s heart on a pike.” Shadow Kobayakawa ordered.

The warrior nodded and with an aggressive turn, threw Akechi into a wall, and walked to Yu, pulling out his spear as Akechi struggled to even stay on all fours.

“Narukami-san, I am so, so sorry. Had I known it would turn out like this, I never would have asked to come here.” Akechi apologized, looking over at his fallen leader.

“What did you think would happen rebel? Did you really think you would win simply because you thought you were heroic? Did you think that you’d be the victor of any battle because your motivations were doing the right thing? Do you not know the definition of insanity? It’s doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results. And you have done the same thing, vermin. Taken good and honorable citizens and turned them into scum, simply because you think you know better, because you want to be a hero. But you’re no hero. Not to me, not to the other piles of trash you call friends, and certainly not the people who you want to save! You are a naive brat who needs to be put down like the insane animal you are!” Shadow Kobayakawa taunted with glee.

Akechi stood up, refusing to let his enemy see his weakness. The warrior raised his spear to separate Yu’s head from his body.

“You’re right about one thing; I was naive and stupid. I thought that no matter how powerful the villain was, they could be beaten. I mistook a work of fiction for real life. But I was wrong. So very wrong. This is an unfair world where mercy is seen as weakness, friends are nothing more than stepping stones to greater power, and kindness is the same as foolishness.”

Yu closed his eyes, accepting of the hand fate had dealt him. He and Akechi were alike after all. And now, they were both going to meet a truly foolish end because of it.

“But you know what? I know better now. I know that I can’t win if I play your game. Shujin is your nation, after all.”

“Wait Marshal. Has this trash finally learned his lesson?” Shadow Kobayakawa asked, a smirk forming on his face.

“And because of that fact, you are allowed to do whatever you please without fear of the consequences, and with every life, every future you stomp out, you do so to stop me from fighting. But I won’t stop, not now, not ever. I refuse to give in to a tyrant, I refuse to bow to a ruler that doesn’t remember his power comes from the people! I will never stop fighting, and with each ally of mine you hurt, you only double my resolve. I will stop you Kobayakawa, and I no longer care what lines I must cross to do it!”

“So, you finally admit the truth.” A spectral voice bellowed, a voice that carried some familiarity as Yu heard it speak. After Akechi those words, his eyes suddenly widened, and his eyes glowed an unnatural yellow. There was a THUMP in the air, like a heartbeat.

(Awakening + Willpower https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjzQXrUXuHk&t=14s)

“This world is a hive of corruption, a place where the rigged system rewards the vile and punishes the honorable.”
Akechi let out a scream of pain and grabbed his head. Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing to watch.

“Justice cannot be done by playing by the rules of such a system. The only way to win a rigged game is to cheat. If the rulers of society decree that you do evil, then their rule must come to an end. And now that you know you cannot do the right thing by following the law, you will have the power to do what the law cannot.”

The agony only seemed to increase with every word, and so did Akechi’s screams.

“At long last, the time has come for us to seal our contract.”

Akechi collapsed to the floor, his veins seemed to be popping out of his neck and skull as the pressure in his head doubled.

“I am thou. Thou art I.”

Akechi howled from a pain that Yu knew all too well.

“The weak need a protector, a warrior with few rivals and no equal. The righteous need a champion, a sword to cut down those who would bring ruin to others for their own selfish desires.”

Akechi felt something on his face. A crimson mask with a very long nose curved downward. The detective smiled as he imitated Yu, grabbing the mask and beginning to tear it off, ignoring the searing pain and the pouring blood. The voice continued on.

“The world needs a hero. And you. Are. That. HERO!!”

Akechi felt the most pain he had ever felt in his whole life at that moment as he finished tearing the mask off. His smirk stretched from ear to ear as a column of blue flames erupted underneath, consuming him completely.

When the flames vanished, gone was the tan pea coat with a police badge, and instead, he wore a royal outfit mixed with a cavalry uniform that was pure white with a red collar and small red cape that was about half his torso in length. Dotted vertically on his chest were golden straps in the shape of a bow that reached to his belt, which had an “A” embroidered on it in the center of a laurel. With the fire gone, a figure stood behind him. His Persona.

His Persona was a tall, silver, muscular figure standing at attention, with a golden bow and arrow in his right hand, ready to fire. He was dressed in medieval archer costume colored with white, gold, and dark grey, with a massive blue cape flowing through a breeze that wasn’t there. On his chest was a blue plaque with the letters “RH” emblazoned proudly in yellow on his chest, as if he was superhero in costume. Finally, on his head was a red, pointed hat with two small golden wings attached to the sides, and the gold extended to a chin guard.

“Let the wicked tremble before us… ROBIN HOOD !!!” Akechi declared with a dramatic pose.

The new power forced all three Shadows to abandon what they were doing and take up battle formations. Morgana coughed and wheezed before whispering her Persona’s name. Lady Trieu raised her sword, and Yu felt his wound close, but the pain was still there, and it burned. Morgana forced herself up and dragged her legs over to Yu and flung him over her shoulder. Her voice rasped as it formed words.
“Come on Seeker. We can’t die here.”

“Akechi, can you... handle these?” Yu wheezed out.

“Of course. I got us into this train wreck, I’ll get us out.” Akechi replied, clapping his hands together, and when they separated, a blue flame formed between them. Reaching into the flame like Yu did before, the fire vanished, leaving only an azure lightsaber in Akechi’s grip.

“Do not be so confi-” one of the demons started, only to be interrupted when Robin Hood twirled his bow, at the command of Akechi, and two rays of light collided into her. Before the other demon could respond, Robin Hood repeated the action.

“Help him, or we’re not getting through this.” Yu ordered weakly, feeling some of his strength return.

“I can’t… focus. Healing you used the last of my power. He’s on his own.” Morgana replied in a hushed whisper, trying to get them to the door as fast as she could.

The warrior charged Akechi, and Robin Hood pulled back the arrow attached to his bow and let loose. The arrow managed to hit the little space between the helmet and the body armor, cutting right through the Shadow’s neck. The warrior vanished in a cloud of ash immediately afterwards, and Akechi ignited his lightsaber and charged at one of the demon girls, the hot plasma cutting through her with ease. The other demon recovered from the previous attack, and tried to fight back. The ground erupted with the same black magic as before, but Akechi was ready, sidestepping it like it was a slow bowling ball. Taking off his mask to summon Robin Hood again, the demon was dead, and she knew it. After repeating the same spell as before, Akechi ran over to Yu and helped Morgana carry him.

“Wait, the code!” She yowled.

“I picked it up while running to get in striking distance of those demons. We must concentrate on leaving while we still can.” Akechi replied.

The three hobbled their way down, and all Yu could think about was what just happened. If Akechi didn’t have the potential, they would have died. If the warrior had moved his spear a little to the left, Yu would have died. And for what? Revenge? Justice? People he hardly knew? None of those thing were worth dying for. Yu felt his anger bubble more and more, both at how he should have known better, and at how his family back home would have been devastated if he had perished here. He remembered all the times he had to drag his father away from the bar after mom died. Yu remembered how hard the two of them tried to help Dojima get over the loss of his wife, how he would always make excuses to not see Nanako because she reminded him of her mother, and how happy the three were when he finally moved on. The two men shared a bond that could only be broken by death, and if that bond was broken, it would in turn break Dojima and Nanako, maybe beyond repair.

The three finally made it to the Safe Room. Yu pulled out his phone and pushed the ‘Palace Entrance’ button, teleporting them out of the hotel. Once they were out, Yu had enough strength to stand on his own again. He turned to Akechi. Everything about Narukami spoke of barely contained fury, from how his hands were clenched so tight that the claws drew blood, to his twitching eye, to how he grinded his jaw.

“I’m so sorry Seeker.” He began with an apologetic look.

“Stop. Just stop Akechi.” Yu ordered, doing everything he could not to yell.
“Seeker! Codena-”

“No Morgana. I’m out.” Yu replied hastily.

“W-what?! No, that’s… but, wait!” Morgana stuttered out, caught off guard.

“You can’t be serious! You can’t abandon us!” Akechi yelled, a mix of fury and terror in his voice.

“I’m very serious Akechi. That was far too close. The only reason we survived was because of dumb luck, and next time, we won’t have someone to awaken to a new Persona. Coming here was a mistake.” Yu said, his frustration starting to bleed into his words.

“But… but, you’re our ace! If we don’t have you, we won’t be able to infiltrate the Palace!” Morgana explained.

“But… you have Personas. You can do just fine.” Yu countered.

“You’d let justice-”

“Mention justice, the greater good, or any other cliche bullshit, and I’ll punch you in the groin Akechi.” Yu threatened.

“You can’t do this! We need you! Please!” Morgana begged.

“Narukami-san, please, think this through!” Akechi also pleaded.

“I have Akechi. Not thinking this through is what almost got me killed.”

“I warned you about the dangers! You still wanted to help!” Morgana reminded.

“I made a bad decision. One that I won’t repeat.”

“Narukami-san-”

“Listen to me Akechi. When I left for Tokyo, I promised my little sister that I’d write to her. I have yet to write a single letter, or call to either her or my dad. Can you imagine how terrified they would be if they didn’t get any word from me?”

“That’s perfectly reasonable Narukami-san, but-”

“NO! I’m not dying for your crusade Akechi!” Yu yelled as his cool and collected mask finally broke. Both Akechi and Morgana recoiled from the sudden outburst.

“I heard what you said loud and clear. That every death only doubles your resolve. Neither you nor your Persona voiced any concern or care for those lives. You never said you’d bring Kobayakawa down to avenge those who were hurt by him, only so that you could be satisfied with your idea of justice. Neither of you said that you wished you could’ve saved them, or that you cared about what happened to them. Everyone that helps you is just a soldier to you, and you send them to the meat grinder while you watch from safety. You’re no hero. In fact, you’re no different than Kobayakawa!!” Yu roared with every bit of strength in his lungs.

Akechi’s eyes widened, and his jaw went slack from Yu’s words. Then his eyes narrowed, his hands clenched into fists, and he felt his teeth grind against each other. Yu turned around to return into the real world, but Akechi grabbed his shoulder. Yu spun around and landed a solid right hook
on Akechi’s face, sending the detective to the ground.

“I’m out Akechi. You want to make a difference? Do it yourself.” Yu said before getting out his phone and leaving his teammates behind.

Chapter End Notes

Oooh, looks like Narukami is having second thoughts. I'm going to try a little experiment here, let me know how it goes.
Yu took out his phone and looked at the time. About 45 minutes had passed, so Makoto would still be finishing up Student Council. He decided to shoot her a text.

Yu: Finished tour with Akechi. Going to wander around for a bit. See you at the apartment.’

He started to walk away from the school, and his phone buzzed and he saw a text in reply.

Makoto: Please don’t do anything reckless, and text me if you get lost. Remember to be back by nine. I’ll see you later.’

Yu put his phone away. He wondered what would happen now, especially given his explosion at his teammates. Were they really his teammates? No. He had only known them for a few days, they could barely be called acquaintances, so he didn’t care what happened to them. Yu felt his stomach churn at that thought, but he didn’t know why. It was true. He then felt a sudden jolt, like he had touched a doorknob and been struck by static electricity.

Is Izanagi… fighting me?

Why not ask me yourself? I am right here.

Yu turned around, then to his left and right, but found no one there.

Right here.

Yu looked in front of him and saw himself, but his eyes were a sickeningly yellow, his face was caked with dried blood, and his mouth was contorted into an unnatural grin. Before Yu had the time to say, or think anything, the mirror image was engulfed in a column of electricity, and when the dust settled, hovered the imposing figure of Japan’s original god. The only thing he was missing was his naginata.

You don’t have to speak in order for me to hear you. Do not worry, no one, not even other Persona users, can either see or hear me, so long as we walk the real world.

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Akechi and Morgana were left wild-eyed and dumbstruck at how quickly and viciously Yu’s attitude changed. When they started, he had the determination like that of a warrior hardened by a thousand wars, and he certainly fit well into the leader role, taking down Shadows with complete ease. But one screw-up, one stroke of bad luck, and he had abandoned them like they were food wrappers. Akechi felt the sting from the punch Yu gave still on his face. Was it a mistake to bring him into this? Was Akechi wrong to ask someone he met only days ago to help him? Akechi thought about what Yu said. He was used to words such as that, and they almost always came from
strangers or Kobayakawa himself, so Akechi brushed it off as rhetoric designed to make him lose control. But to hear it from a comrade was something else. Was he really no different than Kobayakawa? True, he continued to fight, even knowing what had happened to those who helped him, but he told himself that he’d avenge them, that their sacrifices wouldn’t be in vain, and yet…

“Hey, we should probably leave. It’ll be a matter of time before Shadows come looking.” Morgana suggested, her voice sounding just as tired as she looked. But there was something else in it. Hopelessness.

“Aren’t you going to leave and wait for us to come back?”

“What do you mean ‘Us’ evil-eye? Our leader just quit, and I don’t think he’s coming back. Plus, I only left to gather intel. Now that we know how to infiltrate the Palace, even though now we probably never will, I don’t have any reason to stay here, especially since I’ve exhausted my mental power and can’t summon Lady Trieu.”

“Don’t you have a master? Igor I think his name was?”

“Yes, but I can’t enter the Velvet Room at will. My existence is tied to the Metaverse. Which means if I want to get out, I need a way to exit it just like you and Seeker.”

“Oh no. I had forgotten that Naruka- Seeker was the only one with the… app?” Akechi pondered as he pulled out his phone and saw an app he didn’t remember installing. An app in the shape of a black and red eye with a star for an iris.

“What is it evil-eye?”

“I seem to have the same app Seeker does.”

“Really? Think he transferred it to you?”

“Can he do that?”

“I dunno. Not even Master Igor told me much about how the Meta-Nav works.”

“I see. In any event, we need to consider how to steal the Treasure.” Akechi remarked as they neared the entrance and returned to the real world.

“I don’t think we can evil-eye. Yu’s talents would be a massive help later down the line. There’s no way we’ll be able to successfully steal the Treasure without him.” Morgana replied dejectedly as she leaned against a wall in the alley.

“I refuse to give up, especially now that- GAH!!” Akechi yelped after he turned to Morgana.

“What? Is there something wrong?” She asked innocently.

“Y-yes, there’s something wrong!! You’re completely naked!” Akechi pointed out, averting his eyes and trying to block out the sight with his hands.

Morgana looked down. Akechi was right, aside from her bright yellow scarf and a belt that had a golden ‘V’ strapped around her waist, she was as naked as a newborn. The fact that Akechi seemed to be embarrassed for her confused the woman to no end.

“Why are you looking away? Don’t humans take pride in their appearance?”

“Y-yes! But… it’s considered indecent to go running around nude!”
“Why? Don’t human males want to see females like this?” She asked, putting her hands on her hips and flashing a smile, eliciting a blush from Akechi.

“That’s not the point!”

“That’s not a no.” Morgana teased.

“Y-you know what? Here, take this.” Akechi said, taking off his pea coat and handing it to Morgana.

“Why should I wear this? It’s itchy.” Morgana whined as she grabbed and felt it.

“Just do it. Please.” Akechi begged.

Morgana let out a groan, but did as Akechi said. It was about two sizes too big for her, so it came down below the waist, and the sleeves were too long for her. She let out a growl of annoyance as the fabric pulled and scraped against her bare skin.

“Wait here, I’ll be back with some clothes. My place isn’t that far.” Akechi said, breaking into a light jog down the alley.

Was that jolt just now you? Yu thought as he continued walking.

Yes. You were trying to repress your true self, and I wanted to remind you of your contract. Izanagi replied as he hovered behind his user.

Which one? The one with you, or the one with the Velvet Room?

The one that told me you were worth saving. And you are dangerously close to violating its terms.

I meant what I told Akechi. I’m not dying, especially for a man who can’t be bothered to fight his own battles.

Except he did fight. He knew he didn’t have a Persona, yet he still chose to follow you into the lion’s den. He still chose to fight alongside you and help when he could.

And now he has a Persona. He can fight Kobayakawa. Without me.

Except he’s been fighting for two years now, without results. He needs us, and we both know it. You simply refuse to admit it, because your recent brush with death has led you to falter.

Deciding that you don’t want to die isn’t faltering.

Yes it is. You’d rather live as a slave than take the risk that comes with freedom?

At least I’d be alive. I’m sure dad and Nanako would appreciate that fact.

True, Dojima especially would be devastated if you died. But your father goes to work with a gun on his hip and a badge on his chest, knowing full well that this day could be his last. Why? Because he wants to help people. That’s who Dojima Narukami is.
I’m not my father.

No. But you are your father’s son, and you have his compassion for your fellow man. That’s why you helped the woman that night. That’s why you joined Akechi and Morgana. That’s why you vowed to never forget how good freedom feels, because freedom lets you do what your father does.

Yu was silent for a moment and stopped to get his bearings. He had walked all the way from Shujin to a train station, and he boarded one to Sibuya. Finding an open seat and taking it, Izanagi took a seat across from him, and put his hand to his chin, awaiting Yu’s reply. Grey eyes met soft yellow orbs, both daring the other to back off.

That was then. Now, I’m smart enough to know the price of being a good Samaritan.

But will Akechi? He has proven that he will try to fight Kobayakawa and win, even if it kills him. Are you fine letting someone you could have saved die because you were too concerned with your own well-being?

Yu broke the staring contest as the train stopped and he got off.

True, I don’t want Akechi to die, but... I’m willing to sacrifice him if it means keeping my family from falling apart because of my death.

Yellow lightning surged across Izanagi’s body, as if he was ready to attack. Yu felt his skin prickle, his feet refused to move, and his blood ran cold. Izanagi’s next words were quiet, but seemed to silence every other sound as they went through the air.

Now who’s no different than Kobayakawa?

Akechi had returned about 15 minutes later with a pair of jeans, shoes, and a white shirt with a yellow cat paw on it, all in a neatly folded in a pile. Morgana took off Akechi’s coat and tossed on the ground in front of the teen, who had turned away to give her privacy. After a few minutes, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw a fully dressed Morgana, but the clothes were the wrong size. Again. Only this time, instead of being too big, they were too small, with the jeans hugging her figure and the shirt leaving her navel area exposed. But she was decent enough to walk around in public, which was good enough for Akechi.

“Thanks for this. I think I’ll keep it!” Morgana beamed, adjusting her jeans.

“Please, be my guest. It’s too small for me anyway. We can get you new clothes later. Right now, I should let Makoto-san know that I’m heading home.” Akechi said, shooting Makoto a text and turning back to Morgana.

“As for you, how come you came out of the Metaverse completely naked?”

“Well, since I wasn’t made in the waking world and sent straight into the Metaverse, I always had my ‘Metaverse outfit’ that only takes form in there. But I think I understand why you humans cover your bodies. These are very comfortable, like I’m wrapped in a cloud.”

“If you were made in the Metaverse, then that means you won’t have a place to stay. You can stay with me in my apartment for the time being.” Akechi suggested as he picked up his coat.
“That’s a good idea. By the way, I don’t remember what your real name was evil-eye.”

“Goro Akechi.” Akechi answered with a small bow.

“Alright Goro, lead the way.” Morgana replied, mimicking the gesture.

“Please, call me Akechi. I like it more than Goro.”

“Alright. What’s your home like?”

“It’s not much, but there should be enough for the two of us.” Akechi informed as the two left.

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Yu had to pause right then and there. Those words cut through him deeper than the spear had. But he knew Izanagi was right. He first called upon his Persona because he didn’t want Akechi to die, and now here he was, ready to sacrifice the same man, just for his own survival.

Akechi even said that if he knew what would happen, he wouldn’t have wanted to return to the Metaverse. Can he really be faulted for events beyond his control?

Yu shook his head. He really didn’t want to talk about this anymore, and he knew that if he kept arguing, he would lose. Izanagi was his inner self after all. He needed a distraction, something to get his mind off of this. As if God answered his silent prayers, Yu spotted a bob of blonde hair cascading lazily in pigtails and light azure eyes in the massive crowd. Ann. And she was talking on the phone with someone.

Izanagi, since you’re in the real world, can you do anything while you’re here?

I can’t alter how you affect the world, but I can alter how the world affects you.

To show what he meant, Izanagi flew over to where Ann was and Yu felt strange. His vision began to blur, and sounds started to mess into one giant blob that could not be ignored. Among the cacophony of noise, Yu could pick out Ann’s voice among it.

“I’ve been trying sir, but-” Ann pleaded.

A voice interrupted, and Yu couldn’t make out the words, or who it belonged to.

Close your eyes and focus.

Yu did as Izanagi suggested and focused while having his eyes shut. He was now looking and hearing through the eyes and ears of his Persona. To the outside world, he probably looked like someone had just closed his eyes to think. If he did this again, it would have to be sitting down so he didn’t draw suspicion. Izanagi’s eyesight was smaller than normal, but he could hear Ann just fine. And he recognized Kobayakawa’s voice all too easily.

“And? What’s your point?”

“The point is that I can’t do it. Now that he’s been warned to probably treat me like the spawn of Satan, I’ll never get close to him.”

“If he can’t get close to you, then perhaps he will get close to your friend.”

“Shiho clobbered him with a volleyball. I’m pretty sure he wants nothing to do with her.”
“Then you will have to pick up the slack. Use your body, like you always do. You’ve just the right about of foreign and familiar parts to appeal to any man.”

“WHAT?!?!?”

“You heard me. Summer uniforms will be allowed soon enough. I advise you get something… fetching. And should he want to do something… fun, you are to do it.”

“Oh, so I’m just supposed to kiss his ass and lick his balls?!”

“If that’s what it takes. I don’t need to remind you what happens should you fail. The next time I call you, I expect results, not excuses.”

With that, Kobayakawa hung up. Ann had water starting to leak out of the corners of her eyes, and all Yu could think about was how Kobayakawa saw her; a prisoner he whipped whenever he needed something done. Yu couldn’t let this go. So he started to walk to her without realizing. When he did and stopped himself, he was already standing behind her.

_Izanagi, what did you do?_

**Nothing. You walked of your own accord.**

Yu took in a deep breath. He was here now, so he might as well give it a shot. He cleared his mouth loud enough for Ann to hear him, and the blonde turned around and eyes widened in horror at who it was.

“I heard the whole thing.” He said calmly, and Ann looked downcast, her eyes staring at the pavement.

“So you did, huh? Shiho told me she warned you about my deal with Kobayakawa.”

“Yea. I want to talk about that.”

Ann let out a laugh, but it was cold and bitter. She looked at Yu and started to walk away, gesturing him to follow her with her hand.

“Come on, let’s talk in private.” She said.

Yu followed her down a single street that was lined with an arcade, a bookstore and a diner on the left side, while on the right was a DVD store and a fast food restaurant called ‘Big Bang Burger’ and at the end of the street was a movie theater. Ann walked into the Big Bang Burger and found them an empty booth. Once the two were seated, Ann looked at Yu and Yu looked at Ann. Awkward silence filled the air before Ann started.

“So, if you’re here to take advantage of the fact that I’m supposed to do anything to get on your good side, what do want me to do?” She questioned, fiddling with a napkin.

“Be honest with me. If it wasn’t for your deal with Kobayakawa, would you be talking to me right now?”

“Honestly? Probably, but for very different reasons. I consider myself a good judge of character, so, when I see you, I don’t see a violent delinquent that does drugs, was a part of the Yakuza, or whatever those idiots say about you. And I know Ryuji would try to make friends with you, and so would Shiho. Ryuji because he’s a delinquent ever since Kobayakawa forced his family to move to that rotten motel, so he knows what it’s like to be judged by people who won’t
bother trying to get to know you, and Shiho because she’s one of the nicest girls on planet Earth.”

Ann let herself smile as she talked, and it was genuine and warming.

“How did the three of you meet?” Yu asked, enjoying the sight of her smile.

“Back in elementary school. Back then, I was ostracized because of my looks by the other girls, and once puberty hit, the boys would only talk to me because they thought foreign girls were easy. But one day, in art class, Shiho walked up to me. Do you know what she said?”

“Your painting is as awful as your acting?”

Ann let her lips slightly part, and her eyes narrowed, creating a look of ‘Did you just?’.

“No. She just said ‘your painting sucks.’. And come on, my acting isn’t bad.”

“Yes it is. What about Ryuji?”

“Ryuji once saw me getting picked on at school because of my hair color, and got the girls to leave me alone. The next day, he came in with dyed yellow hair. He got in so much trouble for it, and when I asked him about it, you want to know what he said?”

“What’d he say?”

“He told me ‘I did it so you wouldn’t feel so left out.’. I introduced him to Shiho, and the three of us have been side-by-side through most of elementary. But, eventually, Ryuji started to drift from us once he started doing track.”

“Wow. First time I met him, he was extremely vulgar.”

Ann’s eyes narrowed, and her smile vanished, replaced by a scowl.

“You can thank Kobayakawa for that. Hell, pretty much every student with half a soul has had their lives strangled by that glutton. And not just students. Every faculty member except for Ushimaru has been strong armed into doing what he says. And the cops can’t do anything without evidence.”

“Akechi told me the story. Said that mistakes caused the first team to fall apart, and then those members caused the second team to crash and burn.”

“Yea, I was there. Don’t get me wrong, I want him gone just as much as the next guy, but nothing is more important to me than Shiho’s safety.”

“You and her must pretty close.”

“Yea. I guess it’s because we’ve both been pariahs and only had to rely on each other for comfort.”

“I sense a story behind that.”

“Well, my parents are fashion designers. Because of what they do, they’re almost never around in the house. All I have is a maid called Amy to take care of me. But I know they love me, they always visit when they can, and when they do, they always want to do nothing but spread time with me. But, those times are few and far in between, and they’re getting even less frequent.”

“What about Shiho?”
“She has it even worse than me. Her parents are doctors, some of the best in the business. We’re talking called in to operate overseas good. Because of that, they have the heavy burden of expectations placed on them. And since they always meet the high expectations that’s placed on them, whenever Shiho doesn’t perform flawlessly in… well, anything, they yell at her, or if it’s been a bad day, hit her. I was once in her house when she showed them her exam grades. She was 9th in the top ten, but since she wasn’t top of the class, her mom called her a runt, and her dad told her she was a disgrace to the Suzui name.”

Ann started to cry, crumpling a napkin as she broke down.

“Everyone treats her like shit, and she doesn’t deserve any of it! All she gets are slaps from people who are supposed to raise her, even though she does nothing but her best?! Why is it that no matter what she does, no matter how kind and patient she is, everyone around her treats her like she’s a disease?! She’s the only reason I keep going to that hellhole of a school!” Ann screamed, the tears refusing to stop pouring.

It took a few minutes, but Yu sat through her outburst patiently. Once the tears could no longer come, she looked at Yu with red eyes. She sniffled and he offered a napkin, which she took, voicing her gratitude as she used it.

“Sounds like you have quite the history at Shujin.” Yu finally spoke

“That’s putting it mildly. But you wanna know something crazy? If I could go back to when I was with Akechi’s team, I would invite Shiho to join us, just so we could take Kobayakawa down together. Even if we would fail again.”

“You would risk it?”

“Getting rid of Kobayakawa is worth any risk, minus Shiho. But I’ve droned on enough about my problems. I’ll be going now.”

“Wait, I want to ask you something.”

“Look, if it’s about the deal with-”

“How well does the volleyball team perform?”

Ann pulled her head back, caught off-guard.

“Um… what? Where did this come from?”

“I’ve seen Shiho in action. And the season’s starting soon, so, I want to know, how well does the team perform?”

“Ever since Shiho joined? They always win, but that doesn’t make her popular on account of hanging around me.”

Yu let his mind get to work on thinking. The one and only reason she was bothering to talk to him was for Shiho’s sake. But what he saw at the rally told him that Shiho was the star of the team. And a good team would only boost Shujin’s reputation.

“Would Kobayakawa risk potentially damaging Shujin’s volleyball reputation just to keep me under control?”

“That’s… a good question. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t risk Shujin’s reputation for any reason.
Why?"

“Because if that’s true, then that means he isn’t willing to let Shiho get hurt, then he has no leverage over you, and you aren’t obligated to do what he says.” Yu pointed out.

“A-Are you sure? What if you’re wrong?”

“You said you consider yourself a good judge of character. What does it tell you about him?”

Ann was silent for a moment, holding her hand up to her chin. Then she let a coy grin slowly take shape. She looked Yu straight in the eyes and hers seemed to sparkle.

“No. He wouldn’t dare risk Shujin’s volleyball rep. Especially for a new student.”

“Then I guess we’re done here.” Yu said, checking the time.

“I think so too.”

The two students got up and left the restaurant. Yu decided to head home, especially because of how late it was, content that Izanagi was silent. Ann whipped out her phone and scrolled to the number she had saved as ‘Eggman’ and typed a text.

‘You can kiss his ass and lick his balls yourself if you want to know him so badly.’ After hitting ’Send’, the two students went on their merry way, both smiling at what had come of their talk.

But neither knew Shiho was still at Shujin.

Akechi and Morgana had arrived at his home; a shaggy little apartment room that had a kitchen, living room, and bedroom. Scattered all over the walls were sticky notes in circles that had red strings attached to them and a picture. For some sticky note circles the picture was crossed out with a red ‘X’, while for others, the pictures were clearly visible. Most were mugshots, but some were from street cameras. On the table in the living room a briefcase was wide open, and inside was…

“Why do you have Yu’s photo in here?” Morgana asked, picking up the file inside.

“When Sae-san introduced me to her ward, my curiosity was peaked, and as such, I did some research. Imagine my surprise when I found out he had a criminal record.”

Morgana dropped the file, a gasp escaping her as she covered her lips.

“C-criminal?! B-but… he’s a Trickster! And a Wild Card! T-they aren’t supposed to be-”

“Look at the file. If you can read it carefully, you can pick up a few things. First off, the victim’s name is struck out. Normally, I wouldn’t find this odd; there have been many victims that want to stay out of public light, but the piece of evidence that damned Narukami-san was this.”

Akechi pointed at a paragraph in the file.

“A testimony by a woman who also wanted to remain anonymous. According to her, she was returning home from a normal day at work, when she saw Narukami-san attacked the man of his own volition, struck first without warning or threats. So, that begs the question; if she was simply at the right place at the right time to witness this assault, why didn’t she record it? Doing so would
“Maybe she was too surprised to record it.”

“No. We live in an age where any time something out of the ordinary happens, people record it on their phones and post it for all on the internet to see. Plus, she’s the one who supposedly called the cops, so the battery wasn’t dead. There’s also the fact that there wasn’t any check-ups on the victim to see the extent of the damage. No hospital stays, nothing. She also refused to go into any details of the assault. When most people see an attack, they can remember it, even if the rush of adrenaline can muddy the details. This should have set off alarm bells in court, but neither the judge nor the jury seemed to care. Finally, there’s the fact that Narukami-san’s lawyer was a law school dropout and had a history of drinking. What does this tell you?” Akechi asked, laying out all the facts.

“Well… um… it means that… uhhhh….” Morgana dronned, having no clue what to say next. Akechi took that as his cue to answer his own question.

“The incompetence of the lawyer, the witness’s shakey testimony, the victim’s anonymity, and the lax judge and jury all scream of a rigged trial, one where Yu Narukami was set up to take the fall for a crime he didn’t commit. My hypothesis? Narukami-san found the woman being harassed by the so-called ‘victim’ and moved to intervene. A brief struggle occurred, one where the ‘victim’ was injured. Judging by how there were no recent hospital admissions, the injury must have been minor, and as a result of Narukami-san’s actions, the ‘victim’ was enraged and decided to sue Narukami-san. Given how the ‘victim’ was able to single-handedly decide the court case and bypass procedure, I’d say Narukami-san crossed paths with a very wealthy, influential, and powerful politician.”

“You sound like you know who that politician is.”

“I have a guess as to his identity, but I need more proof, or else I will go on a wild goose chase. The final nail in the coffin to prove that Narukami-san was innocent, for me at least, was when we first entered Kobayakawa’s Palace by accident. We were in the middle of being arrested and Narukami-san was starting to despair. I told him we’d be alright on the basis that we did nothing wrong, and Narukami-san said that it didn’t save him last time.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. You were able to figure all that out just by reading his file and one line from him?”

“I wouldn’t be regarded as the Detective Prince if I wasn’t good at my job.”

“Yea, I guess so. Speaking of jobs, congrats on awakening your Persona!”

“Thank you. Though, I wish it was under better circumstances.”

“I know. With Yu leaving us, we are essentially crippled.”

“We can’t give up.”

“I know, but without our Wild Card, it’ll be like trying to run a marathon while waist-high in mud. But still, he had a point. Your speech to Kobayakawa made it seems like you didn’t care at all about who gets hurt in your fight with Kobayakawa, only satisfying what you think qualifies as ‘justice’.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come across that way. In truth, I feel immeasurable guilt over what happened to everyone that helped me and Makoto-san. When Kobayakawa took down
the first team, I wanted to give up, to make sure Kobayakawa didn’t hurt anyone else to get to me.”

“I sense an important ‘but’ coming in.”

“But I had a… rival. Akira Kurusu was his name. He told me that I wasn’t the one that broke Futaba’s mother, I wasn’t the one who put Mishima in a coma, I wasn’t the one who blackmailed Kawakami. But I was the one who chose to fight against Kamoshida, and win. Because of that, he said, I gave the students hope. And if I gave up now, so would everyone else. He told me to keep fighting, to avenge the victims if nothing else. After that talk, I assembled a second team with Makoto-san, and the rest, is history.”

“I see. You should tell Yu that. I’m sure he’ll change his mind once he hears that it was just a misunderstanding.”

“I agree. But at a later time. It’s late enough for dinner, I can warm up some ramen for us. There is also the matter of school tomorrow. You’ll need to find a way to entertain yourself.”

“Can’t I just come with you?”

“No. There are rules, procedures that we’ll have to go through if we want you enrolled, and you don’t have any of the proper qualifications to do so. You need parents, or at least a legal guardian, funding, and other things.”

“Awww, really?”

“I’m afraid so. And I don’t have the kind of pull to get Ushimaru to make an exemption.”

“That sucks.”

“Indeed. But it is what it is. I’ll get to work on the ramen. Make yourself comfortable.” Akechi said as he undid his tie and unbuttoned his top button. After a few moments, the two were happily eating in silence. Once that was over, Akechi went to sleep at Morgana’s insistence.

Yu laid down on his bed, trying to fight off sleep as much as he could. When he had gotten back, Makoto was already cooking dinner, and once they ate, the two finished their homework and went to bed, Yu refusing to go into details about his ‘tour’ with Akechi. He knew he would likely be summoned to the Velvet Room, and there he would have to face the music. Looking at his alarm clock and finding it was 11:30, he knew he’d need his beauty sleep if he wanted to get through school. And no one could stave off sleep forever. With a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes.

When he woke, he saw that he was back in his cell, and his wardens seemed to burrow holes into him with their respective single eyes. He expected them to be furious, to yell at him, but instead they simply looked disappointed. Even Igor’s trademark cheshire grin had seemed to grow dimmer.

“Well well well. I didn’t think you’d give up after a minor inconvenience.” Caroline chastised, but there was no bite in her words, only sorrow.

“You call almost being killed a minor inconvenience?”

“Compared to what will happen in the future? Absolutely.” Justine replied, her monotone voice even more robotic now.
“I must say, I never thought I would be disappointed by a guest, but there is a first for everything.” Igor said, shaking his head.

“Easy for you all to say. All you do is sit here and watch. You weren’t there when I was arrested, you weren’t there when I imprisoned in that Nation, you weren’t there when I was almost killed!” Yu retorted, getting up from the bed.

“True, but that’s because we have rules that prevent us from directly interfering with fate more than we already are. The sole reason you are even allowed access here is because you agreed to a contract.” Igor explained, his voice as soothing and disturbing as before.

“A contract I want out on.”

“Are you sure? The contract clearly states that if the world is to survive, you must seek the truth.”

“What truth?”

“The truth behind what really brought you here.”

Yu had a confused look, but Igor continued on, ignoring it.

“However, if you wish to render our contract null and void, you may do so. If you do, you may never return to the Velvet Room, the Metaverse Navigator will most likely vanish from your phone, never to show itself again, and you will be free to live your life as you see fit. But know this; if you choose this path, you will forfeit the Personas you have collected, and Izanagi. None will heed you should you call, and your fellow Tricksters; Goro Akechi and Morgana, will attempt to continue your battle, regardless of your decision. Maybe they will succeed, maybe they will fail. It all depends on your choice. If you nullify our contract, you will forever be trapped in the prison of your heart.”

Yu looked down at the floor. He was right back at square one, a trapped, helpless person in an unfair world. Igor spoke once more.

“I do not expect you to make your decision right at this moment. Once you have decided, call upon your Persona. He will ask you a question, one that you have answered already. Should your answer change, your contract with both him and me will be rendered null and void. But, should your answer remain the same, then you will have regained your resolve to fight against ruin. Until then, you must think about your decision; will you walk the path of freedom, or the path of security?”

The bell began to ring, signaling that Yu’s time was up.

“Farewell inmate. Good luck.” Caroline wished quietly.

“I hope this is not the last we meet, inmate.” Justine added just as softly.

Before he passed out, he heard two final words from the long nosed man.

“Choose wisely.”

Chapter End Notes
Well, that was a lot of information in so little time.
Next up, we have Shiho's scene. You know the one I'm talking about.
The Will to go on

Yu woke up and headed to school, same as always. He had dozens of texts from Akechi on his phone, both explaining what happened after Yu stormed off, and offering his apologies. The final text asked if they could meet up after school, and Yu was still debating about his answer. He was torn between two desires; the desire to live and the desire to help. Izanagi was quiet this morning, maybe because he needed to be summoned before he could speak his piece. The god wanted Yu to go and help Akechi and Morgana, but Yu’s fear made him hesitate. The sight of Dojima becoming a drunk and almost losing his job, alienating his family, and ruining his life was one Yu had tried to forget with every fiber of his being.

Yu was walking down the street to Shujin right behind two girls when he heard a familiar name pop up in their conversation.

“Volleyball practice was good enough, but the weird part was that Shiho once left to use the bathroom and she never came back.”

“Really? Isn’t she the goddess of that sport? Why would she skip out?”

“I dunno.”

This information sent Yu’s brain into overdrive. Was she sick? Did she get hurt? Would she be at school? Did he underestimate Kobayakawa’s hunger for control? Did he get his hands on her?

The last question made Yu’s blood run cold. If Kobayakawa went after Shiho, it would no doubt be in retaliation for Ann failing to become Yu’s friend. An action Yu encouraged her to take. He shook his head. No. There was a perfectly good reason for why Shiho left early. He was worrying over nothing.

Everything was fine. Right?

“Why is he still here?” One student whispered as Yu entered school.

“Didn’t he get in a fight? How come he hasn’t been expelled yet?” Another replied.

“Don’t worry. Once Akechi-senpai ropes someone into his crusade, it’ll only be a matter of time before they wind up in the hospital.”

“Yea. If he isn’t expelled by being a crook, he’ll get out because he got involved with Akechi. One way or another, he’ll be gone. Think we could hold a party when that happens?”

Yu reached his seat and sat down, getting his notebook out as the rumors did nothing to help his mental state. As school started, he noticed Ann was a bit on edge, fidgeting in her seat and checking her phone every three seconds. She was worried, and it was probably because she heard the same rumors he did. And they both knew the reason why Shiho did so. He put his hand on her shoulder and whispered “It’ll be ok.” She looked back at him, and he could tell she didn’t believe him. Hell, he didn’t even believe himself. Outside, dark storm clouds were rumbling and the occasional thunder cracked. Something bad was going to happen, Yu could feel it in his bones. As the English teacher, Ms.Chiho, was in the middle of a lecture, a student stood up.
“Holy shit, look over there!” he yelled, pointing to a window.

“Quiet! Sit down!” Ms. Chiho ordered.

“Oh my god! Is she going to jump?!” Another student gasped.

By now, the rest of the school had joined in to see the spectacle. Yu was behind most of the students, but he could see what they were looking at; a girl was standing on top of the roof. A beautiful girl with raven black hair tied up in a pink headband.

Yu’s body reacted on instinct. Pushing every bit of energy he had, held in reserve, and didn’t even know he possessed right to his legs. Sprinting up the stairs and to the roof, his mind and body were on autopilot, working with one single goal in mind. A goal that both he and Izanagi voiced. **Save her.**

Flinging the roof door open, Shiho turned around like an animal that heard a noise in the tall grass. Yu examined her, and everything told the story. She had a black eye, several bruises on her arms and legs, and she was clutching her side, not to mention her legs were positioned in a way to relieve the groin area. Her eyes were watery, and if eyes really were the window into the soul, then her soul was shattered. Whereas yesterday was a strong, beautiful person that kicked his ass in volleyball and apologized about it several times, today was a doll that looked like it had been ripped apart by violent children and lazily put back together by indifferent adults using scotch tape. And Yu knew that this wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t encouraged Ann to stand against the boxing coach. He had to make this right.

“Shiho…” he croaked out, his mouth going dry at the sight.

“Don’t… don’t come any closer! I’ll jump!” She screeched, her voice cracking.

“I… I know. Please, don’t do it.” Yu pleaded, his brain scrambling to think of something.

“Why? Why shouldn’t I do it?!” Shiho screamed, her tears starting to fall down her cheeks.

“Because you don’t have to. I can help you.” Yu answered with the first thing that came to mind, and immediately regretted it.

“I don’t want your help! Do you know who did this to me?!”

“Kobayakawa.” He answered, looking down on the ground as guilt and shame began to well up in him.

“Yes. Do you want to know what he did to me? He…”

Shiho fell on her knees, head in her hands as she sobbed.

“He showed me a text he got… from Ann.”

Shiho stopped crying, sorrow replaced by immeasurable fury, a bubbling cauldron of rage finally tipping over. She glowered at Yu, and he knew that if she had a Persona, it would unleash all of its power on him right then and there. And it probably wouldn’t stop until the whole school was a pile of smoldering ash. If Yu was being honest, he knew both deserved worse.

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? I know there’s no way Ann would do that on her own, she would have to be convinced. She wouldn’t listen to Akechi, and Ryuji’s too stupid to
suggest something like that. So, that means she finally got to talk to you, and you told her something like ‘he won’t dare hurt Shiho’. Am I right?” She hissed.

Yu clenched his fist and looked away in shame, giving only a slow nod in response.

“He beat me. Bruised me. And once he was done using me as his own punching bag, do you know what he did? He… he violated me, Narukami. My first time… was with that monster! I was told… that the first time was supposed to be magical, a thing to look forward to, something… truly wonderful. But… there was nothing wonderful about what he did.” Shiho lamented, sobbing into her hands at the horrid memory. But she turned her eyes back to Yu, and the venom returned.

“And after that… he used me however he wanted until he was satisfied. And by then, I barely had the strength to crawl my way home.”

“So why kill yourself? Why not take your anger out on me?” Yu asked.

“Because beating you up won’t change anything, even if I had the strength to do it.” Shiho spat, her anger starting to give way to sadness yet again.

“It wouldn’t help anyone. It won’t make the pain go away, and it won’t return what Kobayakawa robbed me of. There’s a voice screaming in my head to jump, that if I go over that edge, it’ll all be over. The pain will stop.” She explained, this time with all emotion drained from her as she looked at the edge, and stepped up, ready to fall to Earth. Ready to give up.

Save her.

“There are other ways to make the pain go away. Don’t listen to that voice.”

“Why not?”

“Think of all the people that would be hurt if you died. Think about your parents. Think about Ann.”

“My parents don’t care about me. I have tried so hard to see them acknowledge me, but all I got were ‘You could have done better’ or ‘You runt! You’re unworthy of the Suzui name!’ and ‘I’m ashamed to call you my daughter.’ They don’t care about me, they care about their jobs, their reputations. Why else would they not even mention a word when I stumbled into their house, looking like this?! As for Ann…”

Shiho looked back at the school, at the crowds of people watching the exchange between her and Yu go down, recording the whole thing on their phones, like it was just another form of entertainment to them. Among those crowds, she could see a few concerned faces watching with terrified eyes and hands covering open jaws. Ryuji, Akechi, Makoto, Kawakami. And then there was her, the person who mattered the most to Shiho. She looked almost as broken as the once dignified volleyball champion. Rivers of tears had already streamed down her face, silently begging her friend not to jump. Pleading that the girl would come back to her.

“…she’s stronger than I ever could be. She’ll survive.”

“Do you want her to survive, or do you want her to live?” Yu asked, feeling the same power that called his Persona start to reverberate within him, like a drum that was beginning a song. He felt like Izanagi had merged with his heart, and that caused him to speak what he truly thought and felt.

“What… what do you mean?”
“On the night I was arrested, I saw a man harassing a woman, determined to have his way with her. I stepped in, and as a result, he sued me, and because of that fixed trial, my life was ruined. My father was mocked at work, my sister was bullied at school, and I was expelled. Everyone I was willing to take a bullet for turned their backs on me, disgusted and afraid.”

Yu looked her straight into the eyes, his grey orbs seeming to rekindle the fire behind Shiho’s brown. His next words were the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

“I know what it’s like to have everything ripped away from you in an instant. I know how it feels to be powerless against a force dead set on breaking you. And I know all too well the desire to just end it all. But I didn’t give in to that desire. Because I know that there are people in the world that still care about me, and how devastated they would be if I left them. And because I knew that I would have happy times with those people again. If you want to give in, if you don’t believe you’ll ever have a happy day again, then go ahead and jump. I won’t stop you.”

Shiho looked at the ground, the words of Yu Narukami sinking in. She began to falter, she began to doubt if this was what she really wanted. Yu saw her hesitation, and stepped within arms reach of Shiho.

Save. Her.

“I can’t give back what Kobayakawa stole. I can’t undo the damage that wrong has done to you. But I can do everything in my power to help you get better. If you believe you can have another happy day, if you want to see Ann smile again, and if you don’t want to see Kobayakawa win, then take my hand. If you do, I promise, I will help you, no matter what.”

Yu extended his arm, and Shiho looked at it like it was a bear trap. She then looked back at the school. Then she looked at Ann. Finally, she turned back to Yu, and with a shaking hand, accepted his offer. As he pulled her close, he could hear the cheers and applause from everyone all the way on the rooftop. Shiho began to cry into his chest, and Yu heard a voice.

I am thou. Thou art I

Thou has acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth.

With the birth of the Empress Arcana,

thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power

“Come on. Let’s go.” Yu suggested, and Shiho simply nodded.

The two students hobbled their way downstairs, and waiting for them were Ann, Ryuji, Akechi, Makoto, and Ushimaru. Ann bolted immediately to Shiho’s side, hugging the girl tightly as the waterworks went full force.

“Oh my God, are you ok?! You had me worried so much! Thank God you’re alright! Don’t ever scare me like that again!” She yelled rapid fire as the two friends embraced each other. She looked at Yu from the corner of her eye and mouthed ‘thank you’. Ryuji joined in on the hug on the other side of Shiho.

“Don’t worry, we’re here for ya. Anything ya need, just ask.” the boy offered, a sincere smile on his face. He turned to Yu and whispered “Nice work dude.”
Akechi and Makoto walked up to Yu.

“Well done Yu-kun. Your father would be proud, and no one could have done that better.”

“I agree. Narukami-san I owe you an-”

“No. It was unfair of me to explode at you for events out of your control. Meet me after school on the roof.”

Akechi gave a gentle smile and simply nodded. Ushimaru walked up to the group and cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, I don’t mean to intrude.”

Everyone turned their attention to the principle.

“First off, Suzui-san, you are head immediately to the hospital to treat your injuries. I’ve already called an ambulance, so they should be here shortly. You are to take two weeks off to get the help you need, and you will not be required to make up any homework or tests that you miss in that time.”

Shiho gave a weak smile as Ushimaru turned to Yu.

“As for you, Narukami… well done. I certainly didn’t expect you of all people to pull that off, but I am grateful nonetheless. You stopped a student from ending her own life, and in doing so, gave her a second chance. For that, you have my gratitude. If you need one favor, I will grant it, so long as it’s within reason, of course.”

*Guess that means no firing Kobayakawa.*

“I see. Thank you Ushimaru-sensei.”

“You are most welcome. I’ve already dismissed the rest of the school, and canceled all club activities. There’s no way anyone will be able to concentrate after that. Feel free to leave whenever you wish.”

The students simply nodded and headed out while Yu walked back up to the rooftop. By now, the ambulance pulled into the school Yu watched the girl get in, her friends undoubtedly promising to come visit her. He smiled. He would have to talk to Akechi soon, but first…

*Izanagi. I’m ready for your question.*

His Persona materialized from thin air in front of him.

*Very well. Remember, you answered this question before. If your answer has changed, then I and the other Personas within you will vanish and never return. You will also lose your ability to enter the Velvet Room, and most likely, the Metaverse. But if your answer stays the same, then I will remain by your side to the end of your journey and beyond, and you will have decided to commit to finding the truth and delivering justice, no matter the personal cost. With that in mind, are you ready for the question?*

*I am.*

The silence was deafening as Izanagi stopped hovering and walked to Yu. He looked his user dead in the eyes, and his question seemed to echo across the world.
Were your actions that night a mistake?

Yu looked back at the god, his grey eyes never breaking visual contact with the yellow orbs. Any doubts he had before had vanished. He finally understood why Akechi was so determined to see this through. He understood that Kobayakawa wouldn’t stop unless someone made him. And he understood that no one else could do it but him and those like him. He felt a surge of thoughts at that moment.

‘Kobayakawa. There are many words to describe him. Merciful is not one of them.’

‘Kobayakawa will know the price of what he’s done.’

‘Right the wrongs of this world!’

‘Are. You. In?’

I’ll ask once more. Were your actions that night a mistake?

No. And neither were any of my other actions since I got here.

Are you sure you wish to travel the path of freedom? It will be a long, grueling journey, one that will hold many dangers.

Then it’s a good thing I won’t travel alone.

The god chuckled dryly, satisfied with Yu’s answer.

It will not be easy-

-but nothing worth doing ever is.

I am thou.

Thou art I.

The two figures nodded to each other, Yu’s resolve now steeled for the coming storm as Izanagi vanished into Yu’s heart once again. He remembered his promise to never forget how good freedom felt, and he made another. He vowed that he would change Kobayakawa’s heart, as penance for getting Shiho into the current state she was in.

He heard the door open and saw Akechi poke his head through the cracked doorway. Yu tilted his head to signal that it was ok for the detective to come through.

“Hello Narukami-san. You wanted to talk?”

“Yes. After giving it some thought, and, considering what happened today, I’ve changed my mind. I want back in. And this time, I’m here to stay.”

Akechi let a massive grin form on his face and did a fist-bump in the air.

“That’s excellent news, Narukami-san. I’m sure that Morgana-san will appreciate it. When will we resume infiltration of the Palace?” Akechi asked, hopeful and happy.

“Later. If this is going to work, we can’t afford a repeat of last time. We’ll have to prepare, rather than rush in without a plan. We already have intel, so now we need equipment. Since you
have a Persona, we will need guns to balance the playing field among us. We also cannot completely depend on Morgana healing us, so we also need medicine. And we don’t know if we’ll encounter a block like the locked door, so gadgets are a must as well.”

“I can get us the guns, but for medicine and gadgets, I’m afraid you’ll be on your own.”

“That’s alright, we work out the details later. As for right now, I want to go home and try to think about our strategy. Come and get me in about two hours.”

“Understood. I’ll text you when I’ve arrived.”

“Got it.”

The two made their way out of Shujin, the other students having left already. It was still midday, and the sun was blocked out by grey storm clouds, but the foreboding was gone now. As the two teens went their separate ways, Yu called out to his partner.

“Hey Akechi.”

“Yes Narukami-san?”

“I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier.”

“And I’m sorry for giving you the wrong impression. Let us make it up by having each other’s backs in the Palace.”

“Sure thing.”

The two left each other, and Yu felt his bond with Akechi grow stronger. Boarding the train and heading to the apartment, Yu went inside to find Makoto studying. Upon noticing him, the younger Niijima gave him a warm smile.

“That was a good thing you did today Yu-kun. Not many people would have done what you did, especially for a stranger.”

“It was nothing.”

“Saving a person’s life isn’t ‘nothing’ Yu-kun.”

“Yea, that’s true. Hey, Akechi and I are going out in a few hours, so I’m going to try and do my homework before then, ok?”

“Alright. I’m glad that you and Akechi-kun settled your differences. This keeps up, you two might be inseparable.”

“Heh, maybe.” Yu chuckled as he went into his room. He pulled out his probation diary and began to write. If Sae decided to read this, he’d pass it off as a game he and Akechi played.

_Dear Diary…_

_Well, this probation sure hasn’t been boring. I discovered a place called the Metaverse, a dimension that lets me enter and alter the hearts and minds of people who are so cartoonishly evil that they can literally distort said dimension into a spot called a Palace. One of these Palace’s is called ‘Shujin Nation’ which is basically an even more messed up version of Shujin Academy. This Palace is ruled by guy called Kobayakawa. He’s basically like the cops at a frat party; nobody likes him, he thinks he’s doing something good, and he makes life difficult for everyone involved._
Also, there are these hidden demons called Shadows in them, and I get to open a can of whoop ass on them in the form of my inner self; Izanagi.

On a more serious note, I don’t exaggerate when I say that Kobayakawa has made Shujin hell on earth for everyone there. He leaked my record, so I now have zero chance of making any friends outside of Akechi. And trust me, leaking my record is probably the least of his offences according to what Akechi told me. Apparently, he and Kobayakawa have been fighting for the past two years, and each time Akechi came close to ousting Kobayakawa, something would go wrong and those who helped Akechi would suffer. But now, we have a way to fight back, and after some reflection, I’m committed to that fight. Next time I write in here, it’ll be to tell you that we nailed the SOB.

Yu decided to stop there, refusing to mention Shiho’s suicide attempt, as he really didn’t need a reminder of that event. He didn’t need to remember how broken she was, or that he was indirectly responsible for breaking her. No, no thinking about that. If he went down that path, he might never stop, and guilt wasn’t something he needed if he was going to steal Kobayakawa’s heart. He let out a mix of a sigh and a groan. Then he remembered something important. He got up and pulled out his phone, scrolling down until he found what he was looking for.

Home.

Holding his phone up, he waited as the tone rang and rang, until…

“Hello?” Someone asked, and Yu’s eyes almost popped out. He didn’t recognize this voice.

“H-hello. Is this the Narukami residence?” Yu asked, having a mini panic attack at the idea that his phone had somehow been tampered with, or a complete stranger in his house.

“It is.” The voice was male, perhaps a teenager, but it sounded completely disinterested and dead inside.

“I’m Yu Narukami.”

“Oh… you. Dojima-san told me about you. You his son or something?” The voice asked. Under normal circumstances, Yu would assume this guy was a punk talking like that, but something told him that this person was just being friendly. Or at least his definition of friendly.

“Yea. So, who are you and why are you at my house?”

“Hmm? Oh, right. Forgot to introduce myself.”

The boy cleared his throat.

“I’m Minato Arisato. And I’m staying at your house because I transfered to the school here in Inaba.” He continued, still monotone.

“I’ve never heard of you.”

“Neither did your dad until a few days ago. Guess it runs in the family.”

Yu rolled his eyes. Somehow, he knew that Minato wasn’t trying to be rude, but that didn’t make it any less irritating.

“Is he there?”
“No, he’s working. But there’s someone else here.”

Yu heard the boy shout, somehow sounding emotionless at doing that. The next voice he heard brought a smile to his face and a tear to his eye.

“Big bro!! You called us!” a little girl cried from the earpiece, joy overflowing in every syllable.

“Hey Nanako. How have you been? Have the bullies still been bothering you?”

“No, not as much as before. Emo Elmo really helped!”

“Emo… Elmo?”

“She was being bullied and I stepped in. They called me emo. The day right before, I talked to Nanako as a sock puppet named Elmo.” Minato explained. They must have the phone on speaker.

“Oh, I see.”

“Yea! Thanks to Emo Elmo, the bullies have stopped being mean!” Nanako chimed.

“I see. Thanks… Emo Elmo.” Yu said with a coy grin.

“Sure thing.” Minato replied. If he was angry at the nickname, he didn’t show it.

“How’s dad been doing?”

“Daddy’s fine. He’s been playing with me more ever since he and Emo Elmo went away for a few hours!”

“That so? What happened Emo Elmo?”

“You’ll have to ask your dad about that.” Minato answered, almost a little too quickly.

“Alright. Be sure to tell dad that I’m doing alright, and I’ve already made a friend.”

“Yaay! What’s his name?”

“Goro Akechi. He and I have been getting along well.”

“Yaay! I’m glad you’re making friends. Does anyone know about… that night?”

“No, they don’t.” Yu answered, then paused. He waited for a few seconds, but much to his surprise, Minato didn’t say anything. Why? Any normal person would be mildly curious.

“Aren’t you going to ask about what we mean?” Yu questioned.

“No. Should I?” was Minato’s bored response.

“Well, it’s just, I thought that you’d be curious.”

“No. It’s your business, which I’m pretty sure it is not that interesting.”

Oh, if only you knew what has happened to me since then. If only you knew.

“Alright. I have to leave now, so you take care Nanako. Be sure to tell dad that I’m doing ok, and be good for him, ok?”
“I will. Goodbye big bro!”

“This won’t be the last we talk. You can be sure of that.” Minato warned.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we’ll probably talk again. Nanako said that you’d call often, so I’ll probably have to answer. Why? What did you think it meant?”

“Oh. Uh… nothing. Goodbye.” Yu said with a huff, ending the call. That Minato was something else.

He looked at the time and knew that Akechi would be dropping by anytime soon, so he decided to get dressed in more casual clothes. Flinging on a simple grey t-shirt and jeans, he got a knock on the door and a call from Makoto. Going through to the living room, he saw Akechi, who had also changed his attire. Instead of his pea coat uniform, he wore clothes that looked like they belonged to an old man. A sleeveless sweater with blue and grey colors in a diamond pattern on top of a white button-up shirt. Standing next to him was Morgana, who wore her yellow scarf on top of her head like it was a headband. She was also dressed in a white t-shirt with a yellow paw on it that barely covered her navel area and jeans that clung to her lower body and were held up by her ‘V’ belt. She gave a small wave which Yu returned.

“Hello Narukami-san. Ready?”

Chapter End Notes

All right, now that our hero has rejoined the fight, we can get on with the Confidants. And they're not who you think they are. Also, what did you think of the Minato cameo?
“Of course.” Yu answered.

“Ready for what? What are you three up to? And who is this?” Makoto questioned, raising an eyebrow and looking at the woman by Akechi’s side.

“This is Morgana. She’s a huge fan of mine and she’s offered to help me out in my duties.”

Makoto looked at the girl, now even more suspicious, which prompted Morgana to speak up.

“Yup! Akechi’s a real hero! I look forward to fighting by his side.”

Makoto rolled her eyes, her skepticism gone.

“And why are you here?”

“Oh nothing. There was a movie we were going to watch with Narukami-san after school let out, but since it’s early, we thought we’d go to an earlier showtime to avoid paying the afternoon fee. Want to come with us?” Akechi asked.

“What movie?” Makoto asked, trying, and failing, to keep her voice even. She was probably hoping it’d be a Yakuza film.

“Night at Grandma’s. You know, the newest addition to the Grandma trilogy reboot?”

The mention of the movie caused Makoto’s face to go pale.

“Does Yu-kun… like… those kinds of movies?” She asked in a hushed whisper.

“I’m not really sure. I plan on finding out.” Akechi replied in an attempt at whispering that was too loud to be successful, like he was doing it on purpose for comedic effect. Makoto let out a gulp and turned to Yu, her knees starting to shake.

“Well… alright then. Enjoy the movie! Please don’t tell me the details when you get back.” She pleaded as Yu left, hastily closing the door behind him.

“A little tip if you ever want to get Makoto-san to leave you alone; tell her your going to see a horror movie.” Akechi informed as they started walking.

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to keep it in mind. Now, where are we going?”

“Right this way.”

Yu followed Akechi and Morgana out of the apartment and down to the train station. The two boys and girl were pressed rather tightly together, due to the fact that it was the lunchtime rush. Once the doors opened, they were shoved out and had to stumble to get their footing to keep themselves from falling. Akechi continued to lead through the Shibuya Square, all the way up to their destination. Neither noticed through the crowd of people that there was a certain man with a camera following them.

“Akechi. Why are we at a police station?” Yu asked, a bit of worry in his voice.

“Because you wanted a gun?”
“Ok, but…”

“Narukami-san, I am aware that the authorities may put you on edge, but just trust me on this, alright?”

“Fine. After you, Detective Prince.” Yu said with a bow and outstretched arm.

“Very well. Oh, and Morgana, please wait out here.”

“Sure thing!” Morgana chirped with a nod.

The two entered the station, and saw a rather fat officer with brown hair slicked back eating donuts at the reception desk. Once he saw the two, he shoved the last 2/3rds of the donut he was eating right into his mouth and sat up. He raised an eyebrow at Yu as the two approached.

“Akechi, who’s the rookie?” The fat officer asked, suspicion oozing from his voice.

“Yu Narukami. Narukami-san, this is Junya Kaneshiro.”

“Narukami? Well hot damn boy, your old man’s a legend here.” The officer, now known as Kaneshiro, exclaimed, his mood lightened greatly as he leaned back in his chair.

“He’s a legend everywhere in Japan.” Yu replied.

“Especially to Akechi-kid here. You know, your old man is the reason our tween detective started his career in the first place.” Kaneshiro explained, pointing at Akechi, who felt heat rushing to his cheeks.

“H-He doesn’t need to know that!” Akechi shouted a little too loudly.

“Bahahaha! Totally worth seeing the look on your face Akechi-kid. Now, what can I get you? Pistol not working out for ya?” Kaneshiro asked, smiling at Akechi’s embarrassment.

“N-No, it’s not that. In fact, it’s everything I could have hoped for. No, we’re here because we need to get Narukami-san here a weapon.”

Kaneshiro’s face turned grim as he leaned forward.

“Look Akechi.” He started, dropping the playful ‘kid’ and his tone far more serious.

“The reason why I let you skip the paperwork was because I owed you and because you are technically a member of the police. But this kid, even if he is Dojima’s, is still a kid. I can’t go around handing weapons to high schoolers without the proper identification and paperwork.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not asking that we give him a real weapon. We simply need a model. And to bypass all that bureaucracy.”

“Hmmmm… I could get in big trouble for this ya know. You could too. The director, even that Niijima woman treat you like a pain in the ass when they don’t need you. You sure ya wanna risk getting on their bad side?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well I’m not. So find someone else.” Kaneshiro replied, turning his attention to some paper stacks.
“How much?” Yu asked before the cop could turn his attention away completely.

“What’s that now?” Kaneshiro asked, looking out the corner of his eye.

“You heard me. How much would it take to make it worth the risk?” Yu asked, pulling out all the money his dad had given him before he left and slamming it on the counter.

“Narukami-san!!” Akechi gasped.

Kaneshiro smiled.

“Heh. I like you kid, you got guts. Follow me.” Kaneshiro ordered, getting out of his chair and taking the money.

“Remember, I’m only going to be selling models. If you want real guns, don’t come to me. I ain’t getting ya in trouble.” He added, getting a key out of his pocket and unlocking a door.

Inside were several boxes that had been opened and emptied. Proudly on display were several weapons, from shotguns, to assault rifles, to grenade launchers. Walking through the armory, Kaneshiro led the three to the back, to a door that read ‘Display’. Kaneshiro opened it up. It was far more cluttered and less organized than the armory, but Yu could see just as various weapons as outside.

“We use the ones in here for demonstrations, showing them off to the public, and so on. Now… Pick a gun. Any gun.” Kaneshiro suggested with a smirk, delighting in the fact that they shouldn’t be doing this.

Yu looked around, testing the grip, weight, and so forth, pretending they were real. The rifles were too bulky for his taste, the shotguns had no finesse, and the grenade launchers would be too heavy for him to carry around all the time. Finally, he saw something, a pistol tucked behind a cardboard box, like it was hiding in order to test him.

“I like this one.” Yu said, picking up and examining the gun.

“Wow, good eyes kid. That’s a Mauser C96 machine pistol. Not sure what that’s doing here though, we’re supposed to keep our models up-to-date.” Kaneshiro said, scratching his chin.

“How much?”

“Consider this a freebie. But next time, you’ll have to pay a pretty penny.” Kaneshiro answered, tossing Yu’s money back at him. He didn’t bother picking up something for Morgana, remembering that her slingshot’s pelts hurt just as much as a gun’s bullets.

“Alright. In that case, we’ll be leaving.”

Yu put the pistol in the back of his pants and made sure his shirt covered it. He and Akechi left the police station, and Yu looked around once they were outside. There was no one there, aside from Morgana to walked to them once she noticed. He decided to pull out the pistol and examine it, testing the weight, sights, and grip. Once he was done with his evaluation, he put it in the back of his pants and smiled. Yes, this would do nicely indeed.

“That looks so cool! I can’t wait to see how it performs!” Morgana said excitedly.

“What happens now?” Akechi asked, turning to their leader.
“Now, I’d like to visit Shiho, see how she’s doing. Along the way, we’ll have to brainstorm how we’re going to get the other items we need.” Yu informed, walking down to the train station.

“Akechi told me about the gadgets. Don’t worry about those, I can teach you how to make things like lockpicks and smoke bombs, and what I can’t make, my utility belt probably has. That leaves medicine. Any ideas?” Morgana asked as they boarded the train.

“I don’t know. But we know that you have healing spells, so we may have to keep you and your power reserved for medic.” Yu replied.

“That means you and I will have to do all the fighting.” Akechi pointed out.

“True, but we can’t risk having another member. Especially since there’s a chance Kobayakawa could have his hands on their throats.”

“Very well Narukami-san. You’re the leader.”

“Actually… I realized something.” Yu began.

“What?”

“Since Shiho’s still conscious, it means that she can rat out Kobayakawa.”

“True. And since she’s had no prior contact with me, or squabbles with the coach, Ushimaru-san will have to take her word as gospel. It’ll be enough to get him fired, at least.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ in there.” Morgana interrupted.

“Kobayakawa has a lot of money. He’ll be able to afford a good lawyer, and then there’s going to be Morooka’s testimony that will, naturally, claim the opposite. He’ll get off the hook, and he’ll rule Shujin through the shadows.”

“And then we’re back to square one.” Yu sighed dejectedly.

The train doors opened up, and thankfully, lunch time rush had ended. The three stepped out into the open air and made their way to the Tokyo Central Hospital. Like all hospitals, it was clean, with swept floors and tiles, not a speck of dust to be found. It was also busy, both with doctors going about their usual routines, and visitors sitting in various waiting rooms or talking to the reception desk. But inside the pristine waiting room, there was a man arguing with a nurse. The nurse stomped her foot, causing the man to recoil as she screamed at him.

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!! I refuse to endanger a patient for your ‘medical experiments’ you washed up quack!!”

“P-please, just-” he pleaded

“The answer is no!! Now get the hell out of here before I call security!!”

The man hung his head low and turned to leave. He was dressed in a lab coat with a pair of torn cargo pants that were tainted by ketchup, mustard, bleach, and various other stains along with blue polo shirt complimented a loose white tie with a red Caduceus running down it. There was also a name tag attached to the coat. Shoichi Oyamada. Shoichi was a man who had greasy, short, black hair that was just as disheveled as his fully grown beard, which had crumbs of food in it.

Yu was curious with what that nurse meant by ‘medical trails’, and made a mental bookmark
to ask the nurse about it. Apparently, Morgana also noticed, as she nudged Yu with her elbow and whispered to him.

“Be sure to keep that guy in mind. He could be willing to give us some drugs.”

Yu nodded, hoping no one else heard that. Now, it was time to see how Shiho was doing. After figuring out what her room number was, they went upward and found a doctor talking to a couple, presumably Shiho’s parents.

“How bad is it?” the woman asked.

“Thankfully, this rape was intended more to traumatize than actual sexual pleasure. Tests show that it was done anally and orally, so she won’t have to worry about a surprise in nine months. As for the physical damage, she has a few cracked bones, but nothing is broken. She’ll have pain walking, but none of it seems to be permanent, but the bruises will take time to heal, and I highly advise against any strenuous activities, like volleyball. Given a few weeks in here, she’ll be right as rain.”

“Thank god.” The man sighed, relief heavy in his voice.

“She’s conscious right now. Her friends are in there already.”

“We would like to talk to her, if that’s alright.” Yu requested.

“Hmmm? Who are you two?” The doctor asked.

“We are also friends of hers. Goro Akechi, Yu Narukami, and Morgana Carmen.” Akechi introduced with a small bow.

“I see. I still need to talk to her parents to fill out the required paperwork and finer details, but you two can head on inside.” The doctor permitted.

The two simply nodded as they head in. Shiho was lying in bed, talking to Ann and Ryuji. All three looked at the new arrivals and each giving a smile when their eyes drifted to Yu. Ryuji gave a wave from his chair.

“You. Glad to see ya. We were wondering when you’d show up. Who’s the chick?” Ryuji asked, eyeing Morgana up and down.

“This is the woman who helped me get back home.” Shiho explained.

“Really? You helped her get back Morgana?” Yu asked.

“Yea. Why wouldn’t I? She’s a fellow human.”

Morgana then gave the most over-exaggerated wink possible. Everyone but Shiho expressed some form of discomfort. The bedridden student continued.

“I was stumbling through an alleyway, constantly falling to the ground, struggling to support myself on the walls, when this woman came up to me. And her very next words were… ‘excuse me, but could you get out of the way?’”

There was a brief chuckle from everyone except Morgana.

“What’s so funny? She was in my way.”
“As you can see, Morgana-san isn’t from around here.” Akechi replied with a nervous grin.

“Anyway, once she saw how injured I was, she offered to help, and took me all the way back to my house. I asked her what her name was, she gave it, and now we’re here.”

“Wow, that was awfully nice of you Morgana. Thanks for helping her.” Ann thanked.

“What were you doing at that time Morgana-san?” Akechi asked.

“Oh, mostly exploring. This is my first time in the waking world—” Morgana started, but was soon cut off by Akechi placing his hand on her mouth. Ann, Ryuji, and Shiho gave the two questioning looks before Yu spoke up.

“In any event, I’m glad to see you’re alright Shiho.” Yu said, trying to change the subject.

“Yea. Thanks for stopping me. I’m so sorry for worrying all of you.” Shiho apologized.

“Don’t apologize. You’re safe now, and all’s well that ends well, right?” Yu replied.

“Speaking of ends, hopefully, Ushimaru-sensei will come by to check up on her. And when he does, that boxing coach is as good as gone.” Ann declared, pumping her fist into the air, a smirk forming with her mouth.

“It’ll get him fired, but I’m afraid one testimony won’t be enough against Morooka’s.”

“What about the other students? If they testify about Kobayakawa’s blackmail and abuse, then it’ll have to get him at least some time in prison.” Shiho retorted.

“That’s… hmm. I never thought about that. And if Sae-san is heading up the case, and worries about Makoto-san…yes.” Akechi muttered to himself, a grin starting to form.

“Yes, I think that will do nicely. If we can get all of the members of my former teams to talk, Sae-san will be able to get him locked up for a substantial time.”

“Hell yea! Then count me in! That asshole is going down!” Ryuji cheered with a cheeky grin. But as if those were magic words, Yu’s phone chimed. Pulling it out, his eyes almost popped out, color vanished from his face, and his skin prickled as he read the message.

“Yu-kun? What’s wrong?” Shiho asked.

“I got a text from an unknown number. It says ‘if you don’t want your guardian to see this, you’ll tell Shiho to not implicate Kobayakawa’. It’s a picture of me and Akechi.”

Akechi looked over Yu’s shoulder and grimaced. On Yu’s phone was a picture of him holding his newest gun, Akechi and Morgana by his side.

“It’s blackmail material. On Narukami-san.” Akechi said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“H-how bad is it?” Ann asked.

“Bad. Very, very, bad. Worse, Morgana-san and I are in this as well. If Sae-san sees this, forget throwing you out, she’ll turn you in straight to the police. I’ll lose my job, and Morgana-san will most likely be put in jail as well.”

All the joy and excitement evaporated like rain on lava as the news set in. Ryuji punched a wall, Ann clenched her hands into fists, and Shiho rubbed her eyes with her hand. They were so
close, but a simple mistake landed them right back to where they started. Yu noticed how quiet they were.

“Aren’t you going to ask what it is?”

“Kobayakawa taught us what happens to people when we pry too deeply. Besides, we’re better off not knowing, considering that Kobayakawa has us on a leash too. If Akechi-senpai says it’s that bad, I believe it.” Ann answered, her fists now trembling.

There was a knock on the door and in stepped a big-boned man with square glasses, suspenders, and a plain button up shirt with a red tie.

“Hello Suzui-san, I hope that you are well, considering the circumstances.” A stern voice boomed.


“I came here to check up on Suzui-san. I also intend to find out who did this to her. Are you in a condition to talk about it?”

Shiho looked at Yu. She had a decision to make.

If she told Ushimaru about Kobayakawa, she would be able to at least get him fired, but it would also mean that she’d condemn Yu and Morgana, the two people who saved her life. If she kept quiet, Kobayakawa would be free, and would use Yu's blackmail material to do who knows what, and when that was done, there was no guarantee that he'd still be a free man. Maybe Yu was better off if he got turned in now. With all that in mind, she made her decision.

“I-I… no sir. I am not. And I don’t think I will be until a few more days.”

“I see. In that case, please get well. If you change mind, please don’t hesitate to talk to either me or Akechi, alright?”

“I will sir, thank you.”

“Alright, here’s my number, should you wish to talk.” Ushimaru explained, handing her a slip of paper with numbers written on it.

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll leave you be.”

With that, Ushimaru walked out, and Shiho shot Akechi an apologetic look. The doctor ushered everyone out; their time was up. The four made their way to an obscure area of the hospital lobby to talk. Ryuji and Ann turned to Akechi and Yu, the fragrance of victory turned into the stench of defeat too quickly.

“Damnit! We were so effin’ close to nailing that bastard!” Ryuji yelled.

“Hush Ryuji! There are other people here. But… he is right. I don’t think we’ll ever get a better chance at removing Kobayakawa.” Ann said.

“How did that happen? Did Kobayakawa follow us?” Morgana asked.

“He must have. If it was Futaba, she’d probably sit and wait for us to make our move, and only act at the last possible minute. Kobayakawa probably sent her the picture and gave her orders to contact us with the threat. Text her back, let her know the message is received. Kobayakawa will
want proof, or else he’ll hurt her.”

“What happens now?” Yu asked as he did as instructed.

“Now, we all head home. There’s nothing else to do here.” Akechi answered, giving a curt nod to his classmates, which they returned.

The others left, but Yu went back to Shiho’s room. By now, the doctors had done what they needed to do, and Yu was able to slip in behind their backs. Shiho was in blissful sleep, but Yu could tell that they had to administer something to make it that way. There was no way she would be at peace given everything that’s happened to her. Yu remembered the cute girl in with a pink hairband that seemed so meek and humble outside of volleyball, and he turned her into this: a broken shell of a human being that would probably need therapy for the rest of her life. He had to make this right. Pulling out his phone, he pulled out his phone and dialed Akechi’s number.

“Hello Narukami-san. Is there something wrong?”

“Hey Akechi. Just wanted you to know where and when to meet for our backup plan.”

“Involving Kobayakawa?”

“Yes. I figured since we couldn’t talk about it in front of Ann and Ryuji, we might as well talk over the phone. Anyway. Tomorrow, after school, meet me at the alleyway. Also, send Morgana to the Niijima apartment in a few hours so she can teach me how to make gadgets.” Yu said.

“Understood. In the meantime, I’ll start to get in shape. We’ll have to be at our best in order to win this war.”

“Alright. See you then.”

Yu turned to the sleeping Shiho.

“I’ll make this right. I promise.” He whispered, having no idea that Shiho was awake the whole time.

Getting out of her room, he began to track down the nurse from before, he decided to try and track down that Shoichi Oyamada.
“Excuse me miss.” Yu introduced.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for someone, his name is Shoichi Oyamada.”

“Why?” She asked, her expression turning foul at the mention of the name.

“He’s a friend of my family, we wanted to check up on him.”

“Really? Didn’t think he’d have any friends after what he did. You can find him in a clinic in the Yongen Gia area. But if he asks you to partake in any trails, refuse. You don’t want to get involved in that.”

“I’ll take the warning to heart. Thanks for helping.”

“Be careful kid. That quack is dangerous.”

Yu gave a nod and left the hospital. After making sure that Kobayakawa wasn’t in the crowd, made his way to the train station. It was about afternoon now, if it was a normal school day, he would just be finishing up his class. By now, he had gotten used to the Tokyo subway, so he was able to navigate his way to Yongen easily enough. It was a rather dirty, and very cramped. The only remarkable thing that stuck out was a building that looked like it was a cafe of sorts. At the entrance, his suspicion was confirmed with an awning called “Cafe Leblanc.” He’d like to visit this place later, but right now, he was on a mission. It took some searching, but he was able to find a secluded building in an alley that had two blue crosses on its double doors. If this wasn’t the place, he’d have to ask for directions or give up on the medicine.

He entered the waiting room and found it was very small. There were about five seats lined along a wall, and it was decorated with various health posters. Sitting behind a counter was the man he was looking for; Shoici Oyamada. He didn’t look any different than he did at the hospital. Granted, it was about twenty minutes, but Yu thought he’d at least clean his beard of food crumbs. The man looked up at the teen.

“Welcome to the Hermes Clinic. How may I help you?” Shoichi asked, casting an upward glance at the student.

“Hello, I’m… looking for some meds.”

“You’ll have to be more specific, I know medicine like Sakura-san knows coffee beans.”

“Ummm… I’m looking for any kind of medicine that’s good for first-aid treatment, especially for burns, slashes, and other physical injuries. Particularly fast-acting ones. Got anything like that?”

Shoichi suddenly leaned forward and pulled Yu close by the collar, and upon closer inspection, Yu noticed the heavy bags under his eyes. Eyes that were giving a hard stare at Yu. His free hand frisked Yu’s shirt before giving a small nod.
“Well, it doesn’t look like you’re a stooge. Who told you about this place?”

“The nurse who yelled at you.”

“Oh. Heh, was worried you were a corporate stooge. But she hates me with a passion, there’s no way she’d advocate for stealing from me.”

“Steal what, exactly?”

“Meet me in the exam room young one.” Shoichi ordered, getting up from the counter.

Yu went through the door that had ‘exam room’ labeled on it. Upon entering, he saw that it was even smaller than the waiting room, with only enough room for two people. Shoichi gestured for Yu to take a seat on the bed, and Yu obeyed. He was expecting to be bombarded with questions that he’d have to answer with half-truths, but instead, the doc went straight to work performing an examination on Yu. From shining light in his eyes to checking his heartbeat, Shoichi was very thorough. Once he was satisfied, he jotted down some notes, scratched his scruffy beard and smiled.

“Well good news, young one. You are eligible to receive some of my top secret medicine. The kind you’re looking for.”

“But?”

“Ah, you’re sharp. But, if you want to have them, then you’ll have to be my test subject for some experiments.”

“Experiments? For what?”

“Irrelevant. All you need to know is that you have to drink this.” Shoichi ordered, opening a medicinal cabinet and pulling out a large plastic container with an orange sludge. Pulling out a small plastic cup, he poured the container’s contents out and handed the cup to Yu. The teenager looked at the cup like it was poison.

“What is this exactly?” He asked, trying to hide the fear in his voice.

“Irrelevant. If you want the medicine, you must be my test subject. But rest assured, it will not kill you. Hopefully. Probably.”

Yu closed his eyes. The stench was awful, almost like it was week old garbage stacked on top of a decomposing corpse. That imagery did not help Yu at all as he gulped the liquid down, the slime seeming to absorb the saliva in his mouth and make his throat sore. It tasted just as badly as it smelled.

“You appear to be alright. Excellent, it is survivable.”

“Survivable? This-hic-tastes like leftover, moldy-hic-food.” Yu said between hiccups.

“Irrelevant. How do you feel?”

“Like I-hic-ate leftover, moldy-hic-food.”

“That. Is. Irrelevant. Tell me how you feel? Increased sex drive, crippling depression, watery eyes, anything like that?”

“My throat is-hic-sore, and my mouth-hic-feels like it’s on-hic-fire.”
“Anything else?” The doctor asked as he scribbled down some notes.

“No, that’s-hic-about it.”

“Hmmmm.” Shoichi hummed, scratching his chin as he finished the last of his notes and setting them down on a desk.

“Very well. You’ve done your part splendidly. Now, it’s my turn. What kind of first aid do you require, young one?”

“Well… umm… fast acting-hic-ones that help with-hic-cuts, bruises, burns, basically-hic-general healing stuff.”

“Alright. I’ve got some experimental pills right here. I was planning on testing them on the newest patient in the hospital, but since you’re volunteering, please, let me know how it goes.” Shoichi informed, tossing a bottle full of pills.

“Wait, just like-hic-that? Aren’t you the-hic-least bit curious?” Yu asked, catching the pill bottle.

“That knowledge is irrelevant to me or your ability to be my test subject. However, I am prepared to cut you a deal. In exchange for volunteering for further experimentation, I will allow you to purchase whatever medicine you may require. Does that sound reasonable, young one?”

“Umm… why will-hic-I have to buy-hic-the meds?”

“I have bills to pay and a mouth to feed.”

“Oh. Well, alright-hic-then.”

“Most excellent. Let us exchange contact information, and you can be on our way.”

_I am thou. Thou art I._

_Thou hast acquired a new vow_

_It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth_

_With the birth of the Death arcana,_

_Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power._

As Yu finished exchanging his information, he couldn’t help but shiver. The Death arcana. Nothing bad could possibly go wrong with a name like that. Nope, nothing bad at all.

Yu left the clinic, looking for a vending machine to parch the dryness of his throat. Sadly, there was only a second-hand store, a bath house, and batting cages. His only option was the ‘Cafe Leblanc’ he had spotted earlier, so he entered. The cafe held a homey atmosphere, and sported a few booths and stools along the wooden counter that was the bar, as well as a TV secluded in the top corner that was reporting the news. It was very crowded, almost all the seats were taken. All except one along the bar, which Yu took as a man walked out from the kitchen, a hot plate of curry in his hands. Handing it to a woman in a wheelchair who was on a computer, he then turned his attention to the silver-haired boy.

“Ah, welcome. Never seen you around here.” The man greeted. He was dressed in a pink button up shirt and khakis which he wore under an apron. He had black hair with a receding
hairline and a black beard that curled up at the end, like it was a goat’s beard. He had half-rimmed glasses on, and his eyes had a gleam of experience in them as he regarded Yu.

“So, what’ll you be having?”

“Something that’ll-hic-get rid of this-hic-dryness.”

“I think you should get water or something kid. Coffee isn’t known for helping people cool down.”

“Then-hic-whatever’s sweetest.”

“Blue Mountain, coming right up.”

“In other news, the Minister of Transportation suffered a mental shutdown and died today. This marks the thirteenth public figure to die in such a manner this year. Health officials urge the public to take proper care of themselves.” The news anchor reported. Before Yu could listen in some more, the barista came back with the coffee.

“Here you go. Blue Mountain with three sugars. That’ll be 500 Yen, please.”

Yu fished into his pocket and handed it to the barista. He took in the aroma of the coffee. It was a lovely scent, that seemed to make his nostrils flare up and water start to return to his mouth. He moved the china cup to his lips and took a sip. The flavor made his eyes widen as the drink danced across his taste buds, the delicious fluid consuming his sense of taste. The bastira chuckled warmly at Yu’s reaction.

“Never had any proper coffee have you? Nothing but that Starbucks slog, right?” he asked.

“No, I tasted my dad’s once, but it tasted too bitter for me. This is delicious. Hey, my hiccups are gone.” Yu answered.

“Heh. Glad to see it did the trick. Now drink up, that cup of joe won’t stay warm forever. And not even my coffee tastes good cold.”

Yu nodded, drinking in the delicious drink and savoring the flavor. He would definitely have to come back here. Giving a simple ‘thank you’, he left, the coffee working fast against the effects of Shoichi’s ‘medicine’. Once he got on the train home, he felt a buzz in his pocket and checked his phone. Akechi sent a text saying that Morgana was waiting outside of his room, materials ready to make some gadgets. By now, it was late afternoon, so he should have some time to work with his fellow Trickster. Yu made his way back to the appartement, where Morgana was holding a red toolbox like it was a lunchbox. She smiled wide when she saw Yu approaching and waved enthusiastically.

“Hey there leader. I’ve got the tools and materials. You have a workbench, right?”

“Yup. Let me.” Yu offered as he got out his room key.

Once they entered, Morgana gingerly set the tool box down, so as to not disturb Makoto, who was no doubt studying in the living room. She opened it up and filled his workbench with all the tools, and unloaded the materials.

“Alright, so today, we’re going to be focusing on making lockpicks. We haven’t encountered them yet, but I’m sure there will be all sorts of goodies hidden within the Palaces.” she whispered
“Why’s that?”

“If I’m being perfectly honest, I have no idea. Maybe people’s cognition of their money also shows up in their Palace, maybe it’s another item that’s valuable to them. But that’s beside the point. Some of these are gonna be in locked chests, so if ya want the goods, you’ll need something good kiddo.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Saw something on Akechi’s electric window. I think he called it a TV show?”

“Oh. Well, talk like you normally do. So walk me through it.” Yu ordered as he took a seat.

“Let me explain.” Morgana started, picking up some materials.

Within about 45 minutes, Yu had successfully made two new lockpicks, mimicking Morgana’s own. Though he had failed three times prior, he finally managed to get it nailed down. He reached in the toolbox to get another batch of materials, but found it to be empty.

“Yea, I didn’t have much. If we’re gonna have more lockpicks, we’ll have to get more materials.”

“Yea. I’ll see if I can find some place that’ll sell me them. Maybe a second-hand store.” Yu suggested.

“That’s a good idea. But, it’s probably best that we stop now.” Morgana suggested, looking outside. By now, the sun had begun to set, the city of Tokyo was covered in the orange blanket of the sun’s rays. Morgana was right, it was pretty late, and he’d have to eat dinner soon.

“Agreed. Meet Akechi and me tomorrow at the alleyway near school. We’ll begin our infiltration after classes end.”

“Alright! Looking forward to it.” Morgan exclaimed with a fist bump to the air.

There was a knock on the door, and Yu heard Makoto’s voice.

“Yu-kun, is someone else in there?”

“No Makoto. Is dinner going to be ready soon? I’m starting to get hungry.”

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. You alright? You’ve been in there a long time.”

“I’m fine. Just reviewing some materials.”

“Alright. I’ll call you in a few minutes.”

“Ok.” Yu finished, opening the door to Morgana.

“Oh, wait!” She exclaimed as she stopped right outside and spun on her heel, turning to Yu.

“Akechi said to give you ‘contact info’. Do you know what he means by that?” She asked, rubbing her arm.

“Oh. Do you have a phone? Something like this?” Yu asked, pulling out his own phone.
“So that’s what a phone is! Yup, Akechi bought it for me, but I haven’t figured it out. At all.”

“That’s ok. Here, let me set up my contact info.”

Yu took Morgana’s phone, which had the casting of a black cat, and went to work setting up his contact information in her phone, and vice versa. Once that was done, he handed her back her mobile device, and shot her a text.

‘These things let us talk to each other’ it read and she let out a gasp.

“Oh wow, that’s so cool! What else can it do?” She asked, giddy as a schoolgirl that just got a gift.

“You’ll have to ask Akechi next time you see him. Right now, I have to eat dinner.”

“Alright. Remember what I taught you, and practice when you get the chance!” Morgana yelled as she ran down the halls. Yu smiled as he heard Makoto call him through the door. Tomorrow, they’d resume infiltration, and if all went well, maybe get to steal the Treasure.

Chapter End Notes

Up next, Shiho's awakening!
Yu walked to school with renewed purpose. Before, he saw Shujin as a prison, a place where he would be tortured for the rest of his time on probation. A place where no one would touch him with a ten foot pole and escalating rumors were made left and right with no credibility whatsoever. But now, he saw the school as a hideout, a place where he can lay low while he went to work changing Kobayakawa’s heart. And now, the students started to rethink their opinions of him, if the whispers were any indication.

“Are we sure he’s that bad?”

“I mean, he stopped Suzui-san from jumping.”

“Yea. I thought he was the reason she was going to jump in the first place.”

“Maybe he’s not that bad a guy. For a criminal.”

Well, they weren’t exactly throwing him a life preserver, but they were at least not peppering him mercilessly with foul talk behind his back. That alone gave him a sigh of relief. He would need as much mental fortitude as possible for the coming infiltration. He felt Izanagi stir within him in anticipation as the seconds of the final class ticked by, and when the bell finally rang, he grabbed his bag and borderline ran out of the building. In his bag weren’t just his text and notebooks, but also his model weapon, lockpicks, and medicine. He also made sure that, once dinner was over yesterday, he texted both Akechi and Morgana the time they should meet him in the alleyway.

“Pssst! Leader! Over here!” A familiar voice called from the alleyway. Yu looked and saw a blob of black hair peeking out from a trash can.

“Morgana, why are you hiding behind trash can?”

“So that the enemy can’t see us! Akechi told me that Kobayakawa guy goes here too!”

“Morgana, he’s not going to attack us in the real world. Hopefully Akechi meets us with us soon. I don’t want to push our luck with Makoto any more than we have to.”

“Oh! There he is!” Morgana pointed, jumping out like a pet that saw its owner.

“Are you sure it’s wise to come so soon after school? There are plenty of people who can see us if we enter the Metaverse.” Akechi criticized.

“Which is why we’ll go deeper into the alleyway. It’ll look like we’re just taking a shortcut.” Yu countered.

Akechi simply nodded and stretched out his hand, signaling for Yu to lead the way. After
getting further in, the group turned around and saw that no one was looking. Pulling out their phones, they all activated the Metaverse app, ignorant of the girl behind them who just turned the corner and was walking towards them in the precious few moments they turned around.

Shiho had to struggle a great deal to get past the doctors at the hospital, but she had to get to Shujin. Yu had come back to check up on her, but she had closed her eyes to try to rest after the doctors gave her the news. She’d have to give up playing volleyball for a few weeks to prevent the damage in her arms from getting worse. So, when Yu first came in, she wasn’t awake until he started talking with Akechi, judging by the voice on the other end. Then he mentioned a backup plan, and she heard Akechi mention Kobayakawa. Sadly, she didn’t get to press for answers, as the sedatives had already done their job. The last thing she heard was “I’ll make this right. I promise.”

The next day, she decided to walk to Shujin to confront the man. She wasn’t sure what, exactly, this backup plan was, but if they got hurt, it would be because she wasn’t strong enough to keep herself together. If they got hurt because of her, she never would forgive herself, especially since she owed Yu for what he did. The face of relief from Ann, the shocked and horrified expressions of her parents, even Ryuji’s inappropriate jokes, all opened her eyes to how much she had to live for. All thanks to a kindness she intended to repay.

So when she saw Akechi and Yu waiting in an alleyway, she didn’t waste her chance. Almost sprinting to them, she was about to call out to them until she felt a sharp throbbing in her head. Then the world started to spin and shift and it became hard for her to stand as colors seemed to bleed together. She grabbed her head and closed her eyes tight, trying to force the pain to stop. Then she heard the chirping of a bird, and opened her eyes, all the pain ceasing instantly. She then felt much warmer, and looking around, she understood why. She was in the middle of a road leading to a resort and coming from a forest. And in front of her were Akechi, Narukami, and Morgana. But what happened to their clothes? Why were there weapons with him? Why did Yu pull out a gun?

“Alright, let’s get to work.” Yu ordered.

“Yes, but before we go, I would like to have a codename.” Akechi raised.

“But you already have one, evil-eye.” Morgana pointed out.

“Then let me rephrase. I want a better codename.”

Codenames? What was going on? She tried to speak, but her jaw refused to pick itself up.

“Alright. Let’s see, maybe Prince, if we’re going by your attire?” Yu suggested.

“No, I’m nothing like a prince. In fact, my Persona is named after an individual who stole from a prince.”

“Well then, how about… Crow, since your mask has a long nose?” Morgana replied.

“If we’re going by the length of his mask’s nose, we might as well call him Woodpecker.” Yu retorted.

“No and no.”

“Then what do you want to be called Mr. Detective?” Morgana demanded, irritated.
“Hmmm… detective. How about Ace?” Yu replied after some thought.

“Ace?” Morgana pondered.

“Yes. Yes, that’s perfect. From now on, my codename is Ace.”

“Alright, then let’s get going. We’ll pick up where we left off in the hotel.” Yu told his team members, pulling out his phone and teleporting the group to the last Safe Room they entered.

Shiho was too dumbstruck to say anything. One moment, she was about to get their attention in the alleyway, the next, she was standing in a tropical forest on the outskirts of something straight out of a travel brochure. And now, she was alone, her only company having literally vanished into thin air. She shook her head, trying to get the confusion out of her mind. She had to focus. They said they’d be leaving from a hotel, so that’s where she’d go. She’d get her answers, both to her original questions and the new ones that now filled her mind. With a fiery determination swelling up in her, she started to walk towards civilization, ignoring the welcome sign.

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After the distortion in the Safe Room settled itself, the three left, and thankfully, the door in the hall remained unlocked. Fighting through the Shadows that stood in their way, they soon found themselves in the lobby of the hotel they were in. This time, they didn’t bother to sneak through, Akechi’s Persona and Yu’s gun gave them a leg up over their enemies. The Shadows that patrolled the lobby surrounded the group. Five men with owl heads and owl wings on their backs began to simultaneously assault them with barrages of ice spells. Yu was careful not to have Incubus, as that was weak to ice. Summoning Izanagi, his persona went to work, battling two of owl-men while Morgana and Akechi handled the other three. Using his gun, he was able to stun them long enough to let up the unending attacks, giving Izanagi the opening to cut down one and use a lightning bolt to fry the other.

Yu looked over to the other two Tricksters. Akechi had Robin Hood launch an arrow to the one on the right, the sharp object puncturing the creature’s throat and turning it to ash. Taking advantage of the opening, Akechi leapt to the side, causing the two to split their attention. Morgana ordered Lady Trieu to cleave the one on the left and before the center could react, Yu launched another lightning bolt. The owl-man fell to the floor, still alive, and this time, it was the intruders that surrounded it, guns holstered and out of arm’s reach. Yu decided to negotiate.

“The hell are you doing?” The Shadow asked.

“I want you to join my cause.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because it means you get to live.”

“Heh, as if. But you know sonny, if you’re gonna kill me, think ya could grant me one last request?”

“No.”

“Heh. That’s cold sonny. But I’d do the-WAIT!! I remember!”

The owl-man stood up and at attention.

“I am thou. Thou art I. From the Sea of Souls I cometh. I am Andras, and I shall lend you my
strength.” the now claimed Persona declared as he joined the other residence of Yu’s heart. Suddenly, Yu felt a burst of energy spread across his chest, and there was a new word of power within him, a word whispered in Izanagi’s voice. Tarukaja. It would appear that the more he fought, the more powerful he and his personas would become.

Yu smiled and gave a small wave, signaling for them to move forward, but quickly noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A golden chest on a pedestal. Turning and walking to it, he opened it slowly, expecting a trap, but instead saw a soft glow emerge from the cracked opening. Lifting the roof of the case completely, he saw that there were a few items in it. Stones, with a green heart on them and a gem with a small galaxy trapped inside.

“Oooooo, we got lucky. Three Life Stones and a Megido Bomb. Very nice.”

“What does the Medigo Bomb do? I’m guessing the Life Stones heal us?”

“Correct Ace! The Medigo Bomb deals Almighty damage, the greatest kind of damage that can’t be blocked or resisted. So this is an amazing find!”

“Alright then. Let’s go. Other Shadows are bound to come here, and we need to start to infiltrate the second hotel.” Yu ordered, stepping out into the outdoors. It was a good walk to the other hotel, but Morgana pulled out her whistle and summoned the Mona-mobile. Meanwhile, someone else was roaming the place.

Shiho still couldn’t make heads or tails of this strange place. There were people in Shujin uniforms roaming around, but whenever she tried to talk to them, she’d get nowhere, their conversations with her and each other going on a loop forever. What was even stranger was the fact that Kobayakawa’s face was everywhere, and non-stop propaganda with his voice could be heard for miles on end. Whatever this place was, it seemed to hold Kobayakawa in high regard, and that made Shiho sick to no end. Then she noticed something even stranger. There were two police officers here, but they had tar in the shape of heads hiding behind riot masks, with two red orbs where the eyes should be. Upon seeing these strange things, Shiho decided it would be best if she left. She didn’t know anything about where she was, or what she was dealing with.

She turned around and bumped right into what she wanted to avoid. The monster dressed like a cop sounded as disturbing as it looked.

“Hello citizen. Are you lost?”

“Um, n-no, I’m just leaving.”

“I hope you mean returning to your home. No one leaves Shujin Nation alive without our amazing President Kobayakawa’s say-so.”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean ‘amazing’?” Shiho asked, disgust in her voice.

“He is the glorious man who took Shujin from a sorry village into the utopia you see now.”

“Oh yea? And does he stomp all over students here too?”

“The citizens here are unruly, and require the benevolent Kobayakawa’s hand to show them the way to maintaining Shujin’s reputation. And he won’t stop with just this resort. Once that troublesome rabble Akechi and his new acomplaces are removed, he will help expand Shujin’s reputation across the seas. The world will be green with envy once our beloved President has had
his appetite satiated.”

Shiho did her best not to vomit at the officer’s words. Kobayakawa wanted to go even further? He had driven her to almost attempting suicide in the name of Shujin, and he didn’t feel an ounce of remorse. Instead, he decided to go even further, expanding Shujin’s reputation to the point it was known across the world? And if he was going to go this far to make Shujin look the best in just Tokyo, who knows what damage he’d do to make Shujin renowned in the world.

“What a load of crap.” She spat.

“What did you say citizen?”

“You heard me. Kobayakawa? Benevolent? Don’t give me that rehearsed garbage. He doesn’t offer a guided hand to suggest what path people should take, he offers a clenched fist to force them into a way of life that only benefits him.”

“How dare you!!”

The officer gave her cheek a swift backhanded strike that drew blood from the impact. Shiho would have normally backed down after that, begged for forgiveness. But not this time. This time, she returned the slap, and struck with just as much force as the officer. The cop looked at her with contempt, and rubbed his jaw.

“Very well. It’s now clear that you are a sympathizer of the rebel Akechi. For that, you will be punished.”

“Go to hell.” Was Shiho’s retort, followed by a swift kick to the officer’s groin. She then turned around to run, but much to her surprise, the kick didn’t do anything to the cop, who swiftly forced her to the ground, snapping cuffs on her.

“Command, this is Unit 234. I have captured and detained a rebel sympathizer.”

“Good work. We have had reports of intruders that have rampaged through the north hotel. All available units have been ordered to barricade and fortify the entrance of the south hotel to stop them once they arrive. Bring the sympathizer there. We can use them as bait.”

“Understood. On your feet, scum.”

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Yu had managed to finish lockpicking a golden chest in one of the hotel rooms. The second hotel was far larger, and as a result, infiltration took longer. His plan to divert their attention worked perfectly. By tearing through the lobby, rather than sneaking through, he managed to get the security to focus their efforts on the other hotel. And since they thought he was the kind of person to go in guns blazing, they set up shop right at the entrance. Betting on the idea that the second building would have a vent like the first, his gamble paid off, and now, they were free to roam through the hotel. There were a few Shadows, but he and the other two were able to deal with them before they could cause a ruckus. He even got an angel and slime Persona out of it.

“What’s inside Seeker?” Morgana asked, peering over his shoulder.

“Let me see. A piece of gum called ‘Chewing Soul’. And… a few precious jewels..”

“If we can find a pawn shop, I’m sure we can earn a hefty sum for those.” Akechi replied.
Yu pocketed the jewels, and turned to leave. They climbed up to the sixth floor, not running into anymore Shadows. Yu saw one of the doors start to simmer and melt before returning to normal. Entering, they felt the familiar weak distortion of a Safe Room.

“Alright, let’s take a small break. How’s everyone feeling?” Yu asked.

“I’m still good to go. How about you Carmen?” Akechi asked

“I’m doing fine as well. We should be only four floors away from the Marshal’s room. After that, we can fly to Kobayakawa’s island.”

“What’s our plan of infiltration there? Cognitive me said that the mansion’s most protected door could only be unlocked by a key held by what I assume is Cognitive Morooka.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we reach it. For now, let’s get through this hotel. If there’s nothing-” Yu was interrupted by the PA system blaring on.

“Attention rebel scum! This is the Marshal of the south hotel! We have one of your sympathizers at our mercy. Say your name, scum.”

There was silence for a few moments before a slap was heard, followed by a grunt of pain.

“I said, speak your name!”

“Or what?”

There was another slap, louder this time, and it was a yelp, rather than a grunt, of pain.

“If you wish to see your sympathizer alive, turn yourself in at once. You have three hours to comply.”

The three turned to each other.

“It looks like we have a new objective. Once we reach the Marshal, we get him to tell us where to find our ‘sympathizer’. Let’s hurry.” Yu ordered.

The three left the Safe Room, and began to make their way up the floors. Thankfully, most of the Shadows were still downstairs, so they had no problems climbing up. Any obstacles like locked doors were circumvented, either by climbing outside like last time, or by crawling through the vents.

In no time, they found themselves standing outside the double doors that would lead them to the Marshal. Pulling out the medicine bottle he got yesterday, he passed a single pill to each of them. Thankfully, they didn’t need any water, but the pill tasted almost as bad as the orange sludge in Shoichi’s clinic. Almost. The rest of the team shared his distaste, with Morgana gagging and Akechi covering his mouth to keep him from vomiting the medicine up. But it did its work, Yu could feel the pain from previous battles starting to lessen.

“Everyone ready?”

“Always Seeker.” Was Morgana’s answer.

“I act on your orders.” Was Akechi’s.

They heard a scream of pain from the other side of the door, followed by muffled voices.
“Alright. Have your Personas ready, and no guns. We can’t risk a stray bullet hitting whoever it is.”

The others nodded in acknowledgement, and Yu delivered a swift kick to the door.

Shiho had just finished being tied up to a wall in a spread eagle, fresh bruises forming on her face from the recent slaps and a metal collar decorating her neck. The Marshal was bigger than the other cops, and was dressed in full military equipment. She already knew who the intruders were, and she knew that at least Akechi would try to save her. But would Morgana or Yu? True, both seemed nice, and they visited her in the hospital, but that didn’t mean they’d be willing to risk their lives for her. The Marshal walked over to a screen and in a few moments, the face of the person she hated the most in this world. While his eyes were a glowing yellow, it did nothing to abate the unease that came from their gaze.

“President Kobayakawa, I have captured a rebel sympathizer, and sent the message.”

“Excellent. Once the rebels are dealt with, you may let her go.”

“Sir, pardon me for questioning your wisdom, but I believe the law states that all rebel sympathizers are to be jailed or executed.”

“True. But I have already broken this one. She is docile, and will cause no further problems once the rebels have been removed.”

“Will she not become a rebel herself to avenge them?”

“No. Shiho is about as threatening as a hamster once you remind her of her place.”

Shiho clenched her fist at the insult.

“Not only that, but she always waits for someone else to do something for her. She only works with the rebels because she’s too pathetic to get what she wants herself.”

“The same could be said about you, Mr. I-use-high-schoolers-to-do-my-dirty-work.” Shiho retorted. The collar on her neck lit up and gave a loud hum, and she soon felt electricity surging through her every vein in her body. With an agonizing scream, she slumped as much as her binding would allow, smoke wafting off of her neck.

“See Marshal? Weak and pathetic once you remind her how low she is.”

That was when the door burst open, and she looked up, both hopeful and scared. Standing in the doorway were Akechi, Morgana, and Yu, dressed like a prince, cat burglar, and a crime boss at a masquerade party, respectively. And she had to admit, Yu wore his outfit well.

“Ah, there you are. Come to turn yourselves in?”

“No. We’re here to find and rescue- SHIHO?!” Akechi gasped.

“I’m sorry guys.”

“Don’t be. In fact, this saves us the trouble of having to look for you. Now, we don’t have to hold back.” Yu replied.

“Don’t be so sure. Sitting around her neck is a shock collar. Very recently, I gave her a small
dosage of what it’s capable of. If you don’t turn yourselves in right now, I will turn up the dosage
to lethal levels.”

The three looked at each other.

“No! Don’t do it. You have to take him down, no matter what!” Shiho yelled, her energy
returning, only to be stopped by another shock.

“Stop! Stop! We yield!” Yu said, putting up his hands.

“Haha, as I suspected. Marshal, you may fire when ready.”

“NO! No, you can’t!! Don’t give up just to save me! You have to take him down!” Shiho
pleaded.

“Quiet!” the Marshal ordered, turning up the voltage for the next shock.

Something snapped inside Shiho at that moment.

“I. Will. NOT.” Shiho’s voice boomed, the pain from the shock collar barely registering for
her as the sheer power of her voice forced everyone to stagger.

“I’m done being weak! I won’t be the pathetic runt that everyone has to look out for! I will not
be the reason you survive Kobayakawa! I will have my revenge, no matter what price I have to pay
to get it!!” Shiho yelled, her resolution almost palatable as the Marshal tried frantically to put her
down with the collar. Then, there was a THUMP heard in the air.

(Awakening + Willpower: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjzQXrUXuHk&t=14s)

At long last. You have finally decided to show your strength.

Shiho let out a scream as her eyes turned yellow, but Akechi and Yu knew it wasn’t from the
electricity.

No longer will you obey and squirm simply because you are told to do so. The rage, the
power, that you have bottled up for so long, is finally ready to be unleashed. If you want
something done right, you have to do it yourself. To achieve a goal, you must act.

Shiho started to squirm, her arms and legs writhing in untold pain.

Vengeance will not come to those who wait. If you wish to punish those who have
wronged you, you will need a firm hand and a conviction of steel. You will need the power to
save yourself. A power I can give you.”

“Whatever… it… takes.” Shiho grunted out through a clenched jaw.

Excellent.

Suddenly, Shiho tore off her restraints, screaming like a madwoman.

I am thou. Thou art I.

With her newfound strength, Shiho grabbed the still active shock collar and tore it in two. As
she did, there was a blinding flash of light. It vanished as suddenly as it appeared, and on Shiho’s
face was a roman emperor masquerade mask, its colors red and black. Shiho grabbed and began to pull.

The time to take control is now. Those who have used you will no longer have a say in your life. Those who have showed you no mercy will get none in return. From this moment forth, your power is yours alone, to be displayed for all to see.

Shiho finished tearing the mask, a blue column of flames erupting at her feet.

Now, use that power, and set the world on fire!

“Oh, I intend to… Boudica !!” Shiho screamed as the flames vanished.

Shiho’s clothes were gone, and in their place was a gladiator outfit. On her chest was an armored torso that was sculpted to accommodate her feminine figure, with a torn crimson cape held by one strap. The armor was decorated with cuts and burns with its crimson paint starting to fade. Around her waist, a torn red skirt with steel belts decorating it, and on her arms, steel bracers with broken steel chains wrapped around them. On her feet were leather sandals with spiked soles. Across her chest was a black sash with the words ‘violence begets violence’ written in red on it. Shiho clapped her hands, and grabbing into the fire, she pulled out a morning star flail.
Standing behind her was her Persona, Boudica. A woman standing on a pile of ash, with a wooden pole behind her. She wore a tattered, tan cloak that reached down to her knees and was torn from her collarbone to her midriff. Around her hands were loosely tied ropes that looked like they were used to restrain her, but were now torn in half. Dotting across her entire body, from her...
legs, arms, chest were several cuts, bruises and scars. On her face was a burn that took up her whole mouth, and her black hair was ragged, messy, and full of sweat, while on her neck was a rusted torc.

“Another one?! Marshal! Kill them! Kill them all!” Kobayakawa ordered before cutting the transmission. The Marshal transformed, as well as the other Shadows that were with him. In their place were a male angel with red wings and full armor, and by his side were two small men with long beards and holding two leaves bigger than themselves.

“I hope you’re ready Kobayakawa. Once I’m done with these, I’m coming for you!”

“Well, someone’s excited. Carmen, hit those guys with the beards!”

“On it! Garru!” Morgana yelled, only to have the green vortex barely affect the small men.

“Please, allow me. Agi!” Shiho commanded, and Boudica snapped her fingers in response.

Small explosions of fire knocked him off his feet, and she repeated the process with the other man. The archangel, however, was occupied with Akechi, who was trying to get a shot off, but found his arrows constantly deflected by the warrior’s sword. The angel lifted his weapon, and two small arrows collided into Akechi, doing next to nothing. Yu summoned Izanagi and decided to put the new spell to the test.

“Tarukaja!”

Izanagi twirled his blade, and suddenly, Yu felt stronger, both mentally and physically. With newfound strength, he charged the archangel from behind, slashing three times with his katana before doing a backflip and shooting the archangel square in the face when it turned around. With all enemies on the ground, Yu gave the order.

“All-Out Attack! Show no mercy!”

The four leapt into the air like professional acrobats, the Shadows as good as gone. Once the smoke cleared, Yu looked to the fading corpse of the Marshal and saw a card lying on the floor. Picking it up, he saw ‘code’ written in bold print. Putting it in his pocket, he turned to Shiho.

“You alright?”

“You kidding? I’ve never felt more alive! Though, I have a lot of questions.”

“I’m sure you do. But chances are Kobayakawa has ordered all those Shadows at the entrance to come up. We made sure to leave some of the doors locked, but we shouldn’t tempt fate. Follow me.” Yu ordered with a wave of his hand.

The group made their way into a Safe Room, Yu swiftly teleporting them out of there, and then to the real world. Back in relative safety, he turned to their latest addition.

“So… what do you want to know?” Yu asked her.
“And that’s about it.” Yu finished. He had explained everything to the novice Persona user, from Palaces, to Personas, to the fake guns.

“That’s… wow.”

“Yea.”

“I mean, you guys…”

“Pretty much.”

“I… I don’t know what to say.”

“Then I’ll start.” Yu said, prompting a raised eyebrow from Shiho.

“You now know what we’re doing, and now, you have the same power as us. If you want, you can join us.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. It’s going to be tough, so we can use all the help we can get.”

“You even have to ask? Of course I’m in, so long as we make that bastard beg. When do we get back?” Shiho asked, slamming a fist into an open palm.

“Well, we can’t do it tomorrow, lest we raise suspicions from Makoto.” Yu pointed out.

“I agree. We’ll have to pace ourselves if we are to succeed. I advise we continue on Sunday, assuming no one has plans.” Akechi suggested.

“I have a kickboxing lesson with Sae-san, so I should be good after that.”

“W-what? Y-you’re going to have a kickboxing lesson with Sae-san?”

“Yea. Why do you make it sound like I’m knocking on death’s door?”

“Because you are, Narukami-san. Sae-san is among the best, if not the best hand-to-hand combatant in the SIU. And that’s because of how ruthless and surgical she is with defeating her opponents, on top of how much she fighting experience she has.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an exagger-”

“The SIU Director, Tatsumi Azuma, uses Sae-san’s instruction sessions as a threat.”

“Well, have you yourself experienced-”

“Yes, I have. I had to leave work for two weeks in order to heal.”

Yu let out a gulp.

“W-well, I’m sure that she’ll go easy on me since she’s my guardian, right?”

“Eeehhh…” was all Akechi could offer as he adjusted his tie.
“Well, that’s just great. Oh, Shiho, take a few of these. I don’t know what the dosage is, so just take once a day. Hopefully, they’ll help you heal faster.” Yu said, pouring about a handful of pills into her palm. She gave a nod of appreciation.

“So, what happens now?” Morgana asked.

“Right now, I say we focus on schoolwork. If my grades slip, Mokoto will get to decide how to spend my free time. Then we’ll definitely won’t be able to infiltrate the Palace.”

“That makes since. Very well. For the next few days, we’ll focus on our personal lives. Also, I recall Ushimaru-sensei saying he owed you a favor. Think you could perhaps get Morgana-san enrolled? In the third year class, so I can keep an eye on her.” Akechi suggested.

“Hey! I don’t need a babysitter!”

“I think it’s a good idea. I’ll talk to Ushimaru about it.” Yu replied.

“... Fine. So long as it’s Akechi.” Morgana said.

“Now that that’s settled, let’s exchange contact info.” Shiho suggested, holding out her phone.

After the exchange of contact info, the four went their separate ways, each steeling themselves for the many battles to come.

Yu woke to the sound of chains, and his eyes were greeted with familiar blue padding. Then he heard faint clapping and stood up from his bed. Standing before him were two smiling women in warden outfits and a long-nosed man.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room, Trickster.”

“I’m happy to see you have returned, inmate.” Justine informed, though her voice didn’t show any happiness.

“You had us worried there for a moment, inmate. We thought you’d be the first Wild Card to back out of their contract.” Caroline added, though her warm smile betrayed her harsh tone.

“I am delighted to see you Trickster. It appears that not only have you overcome your crisis, but you’ve also made bonds with new Confidants. Even in doubt and uncertainty, you made progress on your rehabilitation. Well done.” Igor congratulated.

“Thanks. About the Confidants, I always hear a voice say that there’s a birth of an Arcana. What does it mean?”

“Ah. Each Confidant you establish is represented by an Arcana. Each Arcana is tied to their personality and fate.”

“Am I an Arcana as well?”

“But of course.”

“Really? Which one?”

“The Fool.”
“...........What? You saying I’m like an idiot?”

“The Fool is the number 0 in the Tarot deck. And like the number 0, it is empty, but holds limitless potential. For example, take the Justice Arcana, the number 8. Alone, 8 and 0 are not that remarkable, but together, they form 80, a far greater power than either were individually.”

“Don’t underestimate the Fool Arcana, inmate. It represents potential, creativity, and the beginning of a life-changing journey.” Justine explained.

“People with the Fool Arcana are pretty much the jack-of-all-trades, and hold infinite potential. If you want to tap into that potential, you’ll have to work hard on your rehabilitation.” Caroline continued.

“Alright. How many Arcana are there?”

“There are 22 in total, including the Confidants you’ve already established bonds with, and the Fool.” Igor answered

“22. Holy shit.”

“Remember, the year has only just begun. You have plenty of time to forge strong bonds.” Igor reminded.

“Yea, but only if you have enough proficiency, charm, knowledge, guts, and kindness.”

“Um… that’s oddly specific.”

Before either warden could reply, a bell rang, and Yu knew he’d have to return to the waking world soon enough. Lying down on his bed, he closed his eyes.

The next morning was almost completely without incident. There was another news report about an official suffering from a mental shutdown, but that’s all there was. Lunch break had ended, and Kawakami was in the middle of a lecture. Then there was an announcement on the PA system, and the message filled him with dread.

“Yu Narukami, please report to the PE Office, Yu Narukami to the PE office.”

There were murmurs among his peers, ranging from how he’s going out of the school in a body bag, to calling him another casualty in Akechi’s crusade. Yu marched to the office, like a prisoner on death row. This was the real world. If he wanted to survive, he’d have to heel. Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Came the gruff reply.

Yu opened the door and came face-to-face with Kobayakawa himself. Alone and without Izanagi or any other Personas. And yet, despite his impressive physique, his malicious aura, and the piercing gaze, Yu didn’t feel fear. Not anymore.

“Sit down.” He ordered, and Yu numbly obeyed.

“Now, young man, I’ve heard that you’ve been a busy bee lately.”

“I have to be, or else the stress really gets to me.”
“And how exactly would that stress get to you?”

“I have a tendency of lashing out at total scumbags.”

“Haha! Well, I hope for your sake, you don’t consider me a scumbag. Because if you did, well… I might have to contact the police out of fear for my safety.”

Yu narrowed his eyes, the spark of rebellion flashing behind him. Kobayakawa pulled out his phone, and sure enough, there it was. The picture of Yu holding his gun, with Akechi and Morgana looking at him. The picture that could end his second chance at life.

“I did as you said. Shiho won’t implicate you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I do not know what Shiho would implicate me of, or why. But back to the issue of a dangerous juvenile delinquent being in possession of... this. I wish to see you succeed, doing so would be a boon to Shujin’s renown. And because of that generosity, I’m willing to make a deal with you.”

“One I can’t refuse?”

“Only if you want to stay a free man. Now, it is most unfortunate that Akechi was mixed up in this terrible business because of you, but it is what it is. To keep him from throwing his future away, I’ll have to intervene in his life for the rest of his time in Shujin, and probably for when he goes to college. A detective in my pocket will be very useful indeed. However, there’s someone who would try to stop me. Someone you should be familiar with.”

“Makoto.”

“Correct.”

“She isn’t interested in fighting you. Not anymore.”

“I don’t believe you. Besides, with her grades and resume, she’s bound to have a bright future. One that I intend to capitalize on for the benefit of Shujin.”

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want, young man. You have two weeks to give me something I can chain Makoto with, or your probation officer sees this photo. Understood?”

“Yes.” Yu said, getting up and leaving.

“Yes, what?”

“I already gave you my answer.” Yu answered, opening the door.

“Defy me all you want. You’ll fold, just like those before you.” Kobayakawa foretold as Yu made his way back to homeroom.

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Yu had finished texting his friends what happened, and got a variety of responses. Akechi said that it was only a matter of time before he was blackmailed, Morgana said this meant they had to work overtime with the Palace, and Shiho promised that she’d be ready when they need her. Yu rubbed his head. Two weeks. He was on a time limit, and he was going to spend the first three days of that time limit goofing off. He took in a deep breath as the bell rang, signaling the end of school.
Packing up his things, Yu told Makoto he was heading out, and decided to try and focus on his studies. But as he was heading out, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw a slouching student with spiky hair dyed blonde.

“Ryuji? Is something wrong?”

“Nah, nothing’s wrong. It’s just… well…”

“What? Did Kobayakawa tell you to do something?”

“Nah. And even if he did, I sure as shit wouldn’t do it. I mean, what else can he take from me? Family’s living in a shithole without that much cash, I’ve been kicked off the track team, and I ain’t that bright. So no chance of college for me.”

“Don’t think that way. You can do anything if you try hard enough. I could help, if you want. I was an honor student back home.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I’ll just find some fast food place or some other place to work at. Besides, I may not have a future, but thanks to you, I’ll still have one of my friends.”

“It was nothing.”

“That’s a load of bullshit, and even I know it. But I also know just how to thank ya.”

“Is that so?”

“Hell yea! I know the best ramen place in Tokyo.” The spiky-haired boy exclaimed, leading the way through the thinning crowd of students. Onboard the subway, Yu had to admit, he was a little curious into how this blonde, foul-mouthed boy ticked. He seemed to care about Shiho, and have plenty of reasons to hate Kobayakawa. Yet, Yu felt like he was missing something, something important. This trip would be the perfect opportunity to satiate his curiosity. Arriving at the ramen shop, they saw a long line stretching all the way to the end of the alley.

“Wow, line’s pretty short today.” Ryuji told him, amazed.

*Of course this is its version of short.*

“How long is it usually?”

“Let’s just say that if it was it’s usual longness, we’d be here till midnight.”

“Seriously?”

“Yea. I wasn’t kidding when I said it was the best ramen place in Tokyo. Now, let’s get in line. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.” Ryuji promised, dragging him and Yu into line. It took a few hours, but they were eventually seated, and were served in minutes. Yu put the noodles into his mouth, and had to stop himself so that he could fully appreciate the delicious flavor. He let out a groan of appreciation and heard Ryuji chuckle.

“Everyone got that response when they eat here.”

“Ryuji, ‘best ramen in Tokyo’ doesn’t do this place justice.” Yu replied as the spiky-haired delinquent started on his own bowl of noodles. Within minutes, both boys had completely devoured the food, even drinking the broth. Ryuji let out a loud burp, and if he noticed the other guests’ looks, he paid them no mind.
“Ryuji, why’d you ask me here?” Yu questioned.

“Huh? Thought I told ya, it was-”

“No, that was an excuse. Why did you really want to talk to me?”

“Heh. Guess Akechi’s smarts must be rubbing off on ya. I heard ya get called to that bastard’s office. That can only mean he’s finally got his effin’ hooks in ya. I want ya to know, no matter how much shit everyone else gives ya for whatever he’s gonna make you do, you’ve got me in your corner.”

Yu smiled, and felt like Ryuji was a person he could count on.

I am thou. Thou art I

Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of rebellion that will lead thee to the truth

With the birth of the Chariot Arcana,

Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power.

“Thanks Ryuji. It means a lot to hear that.”

“No problem. I know how it feels to be treated like a sack of shit.”

“One more bowl?”

“Hell yea! This is all on me!” Ryuji said, not trying to hide his wide smile.

Yu and Ryuji had a mini eating contest with the ramen. After a good few hours, and thoroughly draining Ryuji’s wallet, Yu checked the time, and saw it was high time to get back to the apartment. Thanking Ryuji for the huge weight gain, Yu headed back home.

On the way back home, Yu suddenly remembered something. Shiho was now officially a member of their little group, but she didn’t have a gun like the rest of them. Deciding to correct this, he decided to make a detour to a police station. Texting Shiho what gun she wanted, she replied to next time ask her over a call instead of a text because she didn’t want someone reading the messages while she slept. She then answered by telling him to buy whatever he felt was best for her. Armed with this knowledge, Yu entered the police station, and when he made eye contact with the fat receptionist, the cop smirked.

“Heh, didn’t expect to see you back so soon kid.” Kaneshiro greeted, wolfing down a whole donut in one bite.

“I need a model SMG.”

“An SMG? Oh, you’ll have plenty of variety to choose from.”

“I got a few precious stones.”

“That it? You gotta offer something better kid.”
Yu fished into his pockets and pulled out the small pouch full of rubies, sapphires, and jades. Kaneshiro examined each and every one of them. After he finished with the last one, he looked at Yu and smiled.

“Heh, well, well. Where’d you get these?”

“Does it matter?”

“Heh. Guess not. I’ll take them for... 30,000 yen.”

Yu was about to accept the deal, but he felt he had enough guts to try and haggle.

“Make it 35,000.”

“Hahaha! You got balls kid. Here you are, on probation, and you’re bargaining with a cop?”

“No, I’m bargaining with you.”

“Awww, so this badge doesn’t exist when I’m talking to you?”

“On people like you, it’s just a piece of tin. On people like my father, it means something.”

“Bwahaha! Oh, that is rich. But you’re right about one thing, it is just a piece of tin. But we can argue about that kind of shit later. Right now, I believe you have an order you’d like to place.” Kaneshiro reminded, leading him the way to the display room.

“Alright. Pick your-”

Suddenly, the both heard the front door open, followed by the clacking of heels, and a woman’s voice demanding to see Kaneshiro. The cop’s face took a grim expression. Kaneshiro simply held a hand up, and Yu understood that he was to stay behind. But staying behind didn’t mean that he couldn’t watch. His curiosity was piqued. Sending out Izanagi, Yu was able to get a clear view of the conversation. Kaneshiro was arguing with a woman, one who had short, chestnut hair tied up in a much too tight bun, and her face was caked with mascara, lip gloss, and other forms of makeup.

“The hell do you want, bitch?” Kaneshiro’s voice echoed.

“I want what you owe me.” The woman replied.

“I owe you a punch to the jaw.”

“Now now now. You remember what happened last time you tried something like that.”

“You had it coming then too.”

“Is that any way to treat a lady?”

“No, it’s not. So it’s a good thing you ain’t a lady.”

“Excuse me?”

“Listen bitch, my shift is gonna end in a bit. So you can take your fanny ass and walk right out. Unless there’s a crime you’d like to report.”

“The only crime there is, is your horrid manners.”
The sound of heels left, followed by a hefty sigh from Kaneshiro. Yu picked up the first weapon he saw, and decided to leave his hiding spot. Kaneshiro looked at Yu as he approached, and rubbed his temples.

“How much did you hear?”

“Pretty much all of it.”

“Heh. At least she didn’t see you. Now, did you pick something out?”

“I did.” Yu answered, showing the SMG to the cop, who simply smiled.

“An MP5? That’s an expensive piece kid. I’m not sure you can afford it with just these rocks.” Kaneshiro lamented with fake sorrow.

“You want me to help you deal with your lady problem.” Yu cut right to the point.

“Heh, there’s that Narukami intuition. Yea. Given how you were able to get your hands on these, I’d say that you’re a resourceful man. The best kind of man to have when you need something done.” Kaneshiro thought out loud, gesturing to the jewels in his hand.

“The jewels could be fake.”

“Nah. You wouldn’t risk pissing off a cop with contraband. Besides, I’m the only guy who could supply you with weapons, so you’d lose a lot if you screwed me over. So, here’s the deal. You give me a hand once in awhile, and I give you a discount. Sound good?”

“I feel like I don’t have a choice.”

“Look kid, this whole business will just be easier with you helping out. You don’t want to get involved? Fine, you can pay full price. But this’ll be the only time I’ll make the offer. Back out now, and you won’t know what that talk was all about.” Kaneshiro informed, smirking.

Yu felt his eye twitch. Kaneshiro may be a fat, corrupt thug, but if he was smart enough to figure out Yu’s curiosity would always get the best of him, then he was not to be taken lightly. Yu crossed his arms.

“If I’m going to help you, I’m gonna need information.”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis. For now, we’ll start at a ten percent discount. You in?”

Yu took in a deep breath.

“Fine.”

“Perfect. Here’s to a healthy partnership.” Kaneshiro said, extending his hand. Yu shook it with disgust.

_I am thou. Thou art I._

_Thou has acquired a new vow._

_It will become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth._

_With the birth of the Tower Arcana,_
“Alright. You got the gun right? Then head on out. I’ll call you when I need you.” Kaneshiro ordered as Yu stuffed the model weapon into his school bag. Leaving the police station, Yu was able to smuggle it into the apartment, and texted Shiho where she could find it. After she replied, he stashed it in the closet, and went to bed, the thoughts of the.
The Saturday school day went without much incidents, but Kobayakawa’s threat still lingered in the back of Yu’s mind. They had less than two weeks to give him a change of heart, or else his life would be over. He told his team members that they would resume infiltration on Monday, but Akechi told Yu that he would most likely have to take Monday off if he still planned on going to Sae’s kickboxing. Yu told him it would be fine, while Akechi told him it would not be fine. Their arguing was broken up with a single text from Morgana.

Morgana: I’m bored. Can any of you guys show me around?
Yu: Akechi?
Akechi: Sorry. Sae-san needs help with a case today.
Yu: Shiho?
Shiho: Still healing. Shoichi’s meds have been a lot of help, but the docs still want to keep me locked up for today.
Morgana: Oh come on! You were just fine when you first entered the Metaverse!
Shiho: I know, but the docs don’t want me out. I’m sorry Morgana.
Yu: I’ll go. Don’t have anything planned.
Morgana: Alright! Wild Card to the rescue!
Yu: Meet me outside school.
Morgana: Going there now.

Yu sat outside the school gates until he heard his name being called. Looking over, he saw Morgana strutting over to him. Unlike before, she was dressed in a black sundress with several yellow cat faces printed on it, high-heel leather boots that went up to her knees, with a purse that had a cat paw stitched in. The final touch was the scarf that covered up her collarbone, and her ‘V’ belt secure around her waist.

“Oh Yu! I’m ready!” She squealed like a spoiled schoolgirl.

“Hello yourself, Morgana. Where do you want to go?”

“Hmmmmmm... how about a diner Akechi told me about? He said that it serves something called sushi.”

“Sushi? Alright. Do you know where it is?”

“Yup! Akechi showed me the way, but no one was inside when we got there. Akechi said it was because the place was ‘closed’, even though the door wasn’t boarded up or anything. But it should be open now! All I need is what you humans call money!”

“Oh, so that’s why you wanted someone.”

“Heheh. Yea, sorry. But, look at this way, you get to make sure I don’t embarrass myself.”
Morgana suggested.

“Yea, better I come with you so we don’t get any complications from you getting arrested.” Yu agreed.

“That’s the spirit! Follow me! I know the way.”

Morgana did not, in fact, know the way. At least, not from school. After getting lost for a whole hour, they had to backpedal to school, then head to Akechi’s appartement, then go to the sushi place. Thankfully, most of the customers were clearing out by the time they arrived, so they were able to place their orders. While they were waiting, Yu knew that Morgana looked like a tourist with all of her ‘Oohh's and ‘Aahh's at everything. And, to be fair, she technically was.

“Is this what all food providing places look like?”

“No. This place is called a sit-down restaurant. Different places serve different foods.”

“Oh, then that explains why Akechi wanted to go to the… oh, what did he call it… ‘American Diner’, I think. He said they served something called pancakes.”

“Pancakes, huh? Didn’t know Akechi liked those.”

“What are they like?”

“Well, they’re very different from sushi, that’s for sure.”

“Well, in that case, I’d like to try it some time. What else is there in the way of restaurants?”

Before the two could continue their discussion, the chef came by with their meals. While Yu ordered regular sushi, Morgana ordered everything on the menu, and her food came in on various plates. Yu knew he would have to spend his life savings this time for sure. He ate his sushi casually, but when Morgana tried her first piece, she froze. For a moment, Yu was worried that she didn’t like it, and all that money would go to waste. But instead, she grabbed the plate and started to wolf it all down her throat like there was no tomorrow. Yu let out a gasp and quickly stopped her, but the damage was already done. He could hear everyone around them mutter to themselves how disrespectful the foreign girl was. Yu rubbed his eyes, expecting the shop owner to kick them out, but instead, he simply laughed.

“Haha! You love sushi that much girl?”

“Yush sher!”

“HAHA! Well, in that case, please, try not to kill yourself with that much. I’d hate to lose such a valuable customer.”

The man returned to his work, and the two resumed eating, ignoring the small glares sent their way. Yu was afraid that Morgana wouldn’t be able to finish what she had, but to his surprise, she was going strong long after he himself finished his food. Once she put in the final bite and washed it down, she let out a burp so loud and obnoxious, one could be forgiven for thinking it was a sound effect for a text or whatnot. The other customers shot looks, but Morgana was not fazed in the slightest, so Yu was embarrassed for her. The chef came over, taking the loud and sudden noise as his cue.
“Well god damn, you actually managed to eat it all lady! You want anything else?”

Morgana opened her mouth, but whatever she was going to say got cut off by Yu.

“No, we will not. Could we have the check now, please?”

“Sure sure. One minute.”

This is going to bankrupt me.

The man returned with the bill, and as Yu suspected, this time he would have to cough up all of his money to pay. But when he handed the cash to the chef, he saw Morgana’s puzzled look.

“Wait, that’s money?”

“Yea, it is.”

“But… it’s paper.”

“Yea, it is.” Yu repeated.

“Why is it paper? I thought money would be something that could actually be useful.”

“Money is useful.”

“It’s paper. Paper can’t be eaten, or used as a weapon. It’s flimsy, is destroyed easily, and-”

Morgana let out a gasp, like she came to a sudden realization.

“Paper makes excellent kindling! Is money used to keep someone warm?”

“What? No.”

“Then… what’s the purpose of money? It’s completely worthless.”

“That’s not true. Some money comes in the form of coins.”

“Ahhh, and coins come in the form of metal. And since humans grow in number, but metal doesn’t, the paper is meant to be a substitute. I see now.”

“Correct. Hey, shouldn’t you know this already? I mean, you already know movies, since you thought Akechi was evil just because of his eye color.”

“Movies? What are those? I just thought he was evil because Shadows also have red eyes.”

“Oh.”

The chef returned with the receipt. Yu took it and thanked the man for his hospitality, and when they got out of the restaurant, Morgana stretched and licked her lips, followed by a belch. She turned to regard Yu, a huge smile on her face.

“This was all kinds of fun Yu! Thanks for taking me here!”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“I wonder: If this is where humans go to feed, I wonder what other aspects of human life are like. Like those things you called movies!”
“Well, I’ll be happy to show you, but not today. Today, I need to head back. If you want to head to somewhere else, then I advise you take Akechi with you.”

“Yea, ok. I’d prefer you, but if you can’t take me, then hey, nothing I can do. Thanks again Yu!” Morgana thanked as she turned around and started to run back to Akechi’s apartment.

*I am thou. Thou art I.  
Thou hast acquired a new vow.  
It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth.  
With the birth of the *Magician* Arcana,  
Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power.

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Yu had returned to his room and decided to study, which lead to an increase in his knowledge. As soon as he finished, his cell phone began to ring. Examining the number, he smiled.

“Hi dad.” Yu greeted with a smile.

“Hey son. How’s my favorite son doing?”

“Your only son is doing fine. I’ve made a few friends here.”

“I’m glad to hear that. How are Sae and Makoto treating you?”

“They’ve been very considerate. I have to be back by 9, and write in a probation diary, but I’ll manage.”

“I see. I’m glad you’re doing well. Nanako told me you called.”

“Yea, I did. Speaking of that, I heard that you’ve taken someone in.”

“Ah, right. Minato Arisato. Apparently, his parents died, and he was sent to live with his godfather since then. And that godfather just so happened to be married to your aunt.”

“So… he’s my cousin?”

“In name only. He doesn’t have Narukami blood in him.”

“How’s he been treating you? When I talked to him, he seemed like a stuck up prick.”

“WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!” Dojima ordered so loudly Yu had to pull the phone back.

“Sorry dad.” Yu apologized after a few seconds.

“Yea, yea. Back to your question… yea, Minato can be… blunt sometimes, but so far, I haven’t seen any malice from him. He’s been around Nanako plenty of times, and she’s only seemed happier afterwards.”

“Huh, interesting. So what have you been up to?”

“There’s been a serial murder case. But don’t worry, I’ll have the perp behind bars before you come back.”
“A serial killer? Is everyone safe?”

“He’s only struck twice, but so far, no one close to you has been hurt.”

“I’m glad to hear it. How have my work places been faring?”

“Well… the kids at the daycare miss you, the hospital’s been more filthy since you left, and Shu Nakujima’s grades have started slipping since you stopped tutoring him, or at least according to his mother.”

“What about Yosuke?”

“He… he’s been better, if I’m honest. When you were around, he was just an outcast, but now, he’s straight up hated because he was your friend. People give him the silent treatment, push and shove him whenever they walk side-by-side, and some restaurants straight up refuse to serve him.”

“Wow. I figured it would be bad, but that’s on another level.”

“Yea. But Minato’s been nice to him at least. Or rather, his version of nice.”

“I’m glad not everyone treats him bad. What’s Minato like?”

“He’s… he’s honest. And quiet.”

“Describe ‘honest’.”

“I once cooked for him-”

“Oh dear God.”

“And he said that I should be arrested for testing chemical warfare on a civilian.”

Yu let out a hearty laugh, and Dojima joined in shortly after. They both knew that Dojima couldn’t cook, relying on his wife for food, and after she passed away, it fell on Yu. Once, Dojima tried to cook to show his son that he was grateful for everything Yu did for him. The result was Yu needing to have his stomach pumped so he wouldn’t die of food poisoning. After the two had calmed down, Dojima spoke again.

“How about you, son? Anything interesting happen?”

“I’ve befriended Goro Akechi. The Goro Akechi.”

“Wait, really? I’ve met him. He asked me to sign his pea coat, said I was the reason that he joined the police to begin with. Didn’t think you’d manage to befriend someone famous.”

“I managed to get a date with Rise Kujikawa.”

“That’s different.”

Yu heard a voice that sounded suspiciously like Minato’s in the background, and Dojima regarded his son shortly after.

“Look Yu, I have to go. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Alright dad. I love you.”
“Love you too, son. Make me proud.”

The line went dead, and Yu hung up as well. Then he heard it buzz and saw a text from none other than Akechi himself.

Akechi: Excuse me for bothering you so late an hour, Narukami-san, I just wanted to say thank you for indulging in Morgana-san’s desires.

Yu: It’s no problem Akechi. And word of advise; if she wants to go somewhere, go with her. And be prepared to keep her in eyesight.

Akechi: She told me about the restaurant. Her wolfing down sushi sounds like a humorous sight. And you can bet some students caught wind of that and will no doubt bring it up at school.

Yu: Great. Just great.

Akechi: Yes…

Yu: Akechi, what’s the real reason you wanted to talk to me?

Akechi: It’s about your training session tomorrow with Sae-san.

Yu: I thought we settled this.’

Akechi: I’m still worried about you. Especially since you’re our leader, and the success of our infiltration is dependant on your health.’

Yu: Well, stop worrying. I’ll be fine.’

Akechi: I doubt it.’

Yu: Look, even if I do get beaten to a pulp, I still have a few personas that can heal, not to mention Shoichi’s meds. Don’t worry, we’ll steal Kobayakawa’s heart before the deadline.

Akechi: I hope you’re right. I have to go now, Morgana’s adamant about me going to bed.

Yu: Hehe. Good night.

Akechi: Good night.

Before Yu went to bed for the night, he decided to get some studying done. He felt his knowledge increase afterwords.
Yu woke up early for today. It was finally here, the day where Sae would give some instruction on kickboxing, an instance that was feared across all in the SIU. Standing outside the SIU building with a bag containing his workout clothes, Yu took a deep breath and went in. After finding and talking to the receptionist, he was able to get directions to the training gym. He heard a ‘Class dismissed’ from inside, and the doors opened up, revealing several officers dressed in gym clothes march out, covered in bruises. There were various groans of pain as Yu let them by. Inside, he saw various workout machines, punching bags, and in the center was a ring. The sole occupant of that ring was Sae Niijima, who was leaning against the ropes.

Sae was not dressed in her usual black suit, but dark black short shorts and a dark black sports bra to match. On her hands were boxing gloves and wrapped around her feet were bandages, like they were ripped straight out of a fighting game. But dangling delicately around her neck was the same section sign necklace. With her midriff exposed, Yu could see her chest area was toned and chiseled with a six-pack, and her arm and leg muscles were pronounced and clear to see, the product of years of hard work. Her silver locks were no longer parted to the left, but tied up behind in a loose ponytail drooping down. Sweat glistened on her body, matted her hair, and dampened her clothes. Her ruby eyes landed on Yu, and she gave a faint smile.

“Ah, good morning Narukami. I hope you found your way here alright.”

“Yea I did. Seemed I missed the instruction.”

“Well, you’re a beginner, and you volunteered for this, so I figured I’d give you the special treatment.”

Hehehe. That’s what she said.

“Now, get changed, and we’ll begin the lesson.”

Yu went to the locker room and emerged changed into a pair of grey sports pants and a plain white tank top. As he got into the ring, he noticed that Sae examined him thoroughly, sizing him up.

“Alright, let’s start with the basics. Form a fist.”

Yu did as he was told, making sure to keep his thumb outside.

“Very good. Now, I’m not going to teach you how to win tournaments or the Olympics. I’m going to teach you how to survive. The top three mistakes most people make in a street fight are: One; they assume it’s going to be a fair fight, never assume that they don’t have a weapon, or that they don’t have friends. Your job is to get back home to your family, so you have to do whatever it takes to make it back alive. Two; they let their opponent know that they want to fight, which gives the opponent a huge advantage, so if you’re about to someone who’s completely calm, not nervous at all in body language, either run or exercise extreme caution. Three; they underestimate how much time and space they have to land an attack. I’ll show you what I mean.”

“Got it.”
“Now, when it comes to boxing, kick or otherwise, all of the power comes from the hips.”

To demonstrate, Sae put one leg back, and Yu’s eyes were drawn to her hips. It was then he really started to appreciate her figure. Years of what he can only assume to be training and working for the greatest criminal investigation units in Japan had sculpted her beautifully. Her smooth skin and fair complexion complemented her body to the point she looked like something out of a model magazine, and that beauty was only further added by her silky silver hair and red wine eyes. Yu’s mind started to wander, wondering if she has a boyfriend. With a body like that, even if she hid it underneath a business suit, would attract all kinds of men. Then Yu’s mind jumped to sudden questions. Did she have a boyfriend? An ex?

“NARUKAMI!”

Yu snapped out of it and realized that he had been staring at Sae’s posterior this entire time. He dared to make eye contact and saw and accusatory stare greet him. His guardian cocked an eyebrow.

“Now, if you’d pick your jaw off the floor, we can continue.”

“Yes Sae-san. Sorry Sae-san.”

“Now, where did I lose you?”

“All power comes from the hips.” Yu answered, trying not to make a saucy joke from that.

“Well then, allow me to explain.”

Sae explained the intricacies of kickboxing, from the different kinds of kickboxers there were, to the training exercises Yu could do in his free time, to showing him actual moves. For a good few hours they did exercises and practicing moves. Eventually, Sae decided to take a break, and the two of them slumped against a wall, sweat drenching their clothes and coating their skin. After Yu began to drink some water, he decided it was time to try and get to know Sae better.

“Hey Sae-san?”

“What is it Narukami?”

“If you work as a prosecutor, and if that’s a desk job, why do you practice kickboxing?”

A sly smirk formed on Sae’s lips.

“That’s a good question. I want to say it’s because, since I deal mostly with wealthy criminals, it’s for self-defense against their goons that try to shut me up, but that’s not the truth. The truth is that, before he died, my father started to teach me kickboxing to defend myself. After we were left to fend for ourselves, I continued taking them to protect myself and Makoto. It’s one of the few things left I have from him.”

“Is your father also why you became a prosecutor?”

Sae looked off in a distance, a forlorn look in her eyes.

“Yes. I wanted to make him proud, to be worthy of the Niijima name.”

“I know what that’s like. To have people expect you to be flawless simply because you’re the descendant of someone great. To have high expectations placed on you because of your name. And
the consequences of failing those expectations.”

“Heh, I can imagine. You know, I worked with your father a few times.”

“I imagine the first meeting was awkward.”

“Only a little. We managed to power through it by focusing on the case.”

“What case was it?”

“Drug and human trafficking. Nothing unusual. But we found out one of the victims was supposed to be you, as leverage on Dojima.”

“I think I remember those guys. I remember they tried to grab me when I went to the shopping district. Probably would have grabbed me if it wasn’t for Yosuke.”

“Who?”

“He’s a friend. Or rather, was a friend. He’s the son of a manager at a local Junes store. It’s running all the local stores out of business, so people always gave him the cold shoulder, or were nice to him because they wanted a discount. We became friends after I pulled him out of a trash can.”

Sae let out a soft giggle, but her expression slowly turned grim.

“I take it he abandoned you after your arrest?”

“Pretty much. He told me to never talk to him again. Everyone minus Nanako and dad hate me back home. Even after everything I did for them.”

“Like I said, everyone has gratitude, but when push comes to shove, people will always choose their own hides over sticking their necks out.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Even with the evidence you’ve gotten first-hand?”

“Dad and Nanako stood up for me.”

Sae let out a mocking laugh at the statement.

“If they didn’t, you’d be better off living without them. Family is the only group of people that should stick together, no matter what.”

“Now that, I agree with.”

There was a small silence between the two, and Sae turned to Yu, a solemn look on her face.

“Narukami, why did you agree to let me teach you kickboxing?”

“I want to get to know you better Sae-san. Especially since you’re going to be my officer for a year.”

“Want to get on my good side so that you can slide whenever you screw up?”

Yu pulled his head back and recoiled from the sudden spite. Sae cast her eyes down a grimace
on her face, before looking back with a softer look.

“I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. I have to keep reminding myself about our deal.”

“Why do you do that? Always jump to the worst conclusions?”

“Honestly? It’s because of how long I’ve been forced to provide for my sister and I in this back-breaking, dead-end slave job. If you aren’t smart, trust your gut, and have a realistic outlook on life, you’ll end up a hobo in no time. And if you were a woman forced into that position, the only alternative would be prostitution, and my dignity is one of the few things I haven’t had to sacrifice to survive.”

“I understand. If it makes you feel any better, I’ve had to fend for myself and my sister too.”

“I know. I’m sorry about your mother. Great, now I feel even worse for snapping at you.”

“That was then. We’re past that.”

“I’m glad you think that. How has school been, considering your record was leaked?”

“Well, believe it or not, I’ve made a few friends outside of Makoto and Akechi.”

“So I’ve heard. Well done on stopping that girl from jumping. You could join the police force after you’ve graduated. Be a hostage negotiator.”

“Thanks, but… I’m still getting flashbacks to when I was arrested.”

“Right. Dojima never told me the details.”

“He said that I should tell you myself if I feel comfortable.”

“And, are you comfortable? If you aren’t, then I won’t pry.”

“No. Maybe if I tell you, then the two of us will understand each other. That’s the whole reason I came here to begin with.”

“Alright. In that case, I’m ready whenever you are.”

Yu nodded and took in a deep breath. Yu recalled the night he was arrested, and took a deep breath to steel himself. He told her of how he heard someone crying desperately out for help. He recounted how he was expelled and ostracized for being a good person. He regaled Sae with the rigged trial, his suicide attempt, and the ferocity of his father. It took some time, and more than a great deal of effort, but he was able to tell it start to finish without breaking down. When he was finished, Sae had a mixture of guilt and anger in her ruby eyes. She took a deep breath and spoke.

“I… I’m sorry to hear that. If I had known those events had such a devastating impact on you, I would’ve been a lot more… gentle during our first meeting.”

“It’s alright Sae-san. You at least admit when you’ve done something wrong, and work to undo it. Which is more than I can say for some.”

“You’re too kind.”

Sae wiped her brow and took a swig of water, and Yu noticed something.

“Hey, are you alright? You got serious bags under your eyes.”
“Yes, I am, thank you. Sadly I don’t get a lot of free time. Most of the time, I have to go to bed around 11 and wake up at 7.”

“That can’t be healthy. How do you power through?”

“Lots and lots of coffee. Specifically the kind from a little cafe in Yongen.”

“Cafe Leblanc?”

“Yes, exactly. Have you been?”

“Once. Throat was a little too dry.”

“I see. Charming little place, isn’t it?”

“Yea, I can see why it’s so popular. Why don’t you go there to work on… well, work?”

“Because it often closes by the time I get out. Besides, I take what time I can to see Makoto.”

“She wants to help, you know.”

“I… I know. It’s just…”

Sae let out an exasperated sigh and once again rubbed her temples.

“I’m supposed to be her guardian. I can’t have her distract herself with my troubles.”

“I thought the same thing when dad was in a coma. I tried to take care of ‘Nako, keep three jobs, and maintain my grades. I pushed away everyone who wanted to help, because I didn’t want to burden them with what I thought were petty problems. I almost destroyed myself because of it. So I’ll tell you what they told me. You may be Makoto’s guardian, but you’re also her family.”

Sae looked down. This may have been the first time she was the one getting a lecture.

“And your family isn’t a petty problem. Let them help you when they offer. If you don’t, you’ll keep going until you break. Then who’s going to protect them?”

Sae let out a heavy sigh, and turned to regard Yu.

“Alright, I’ll cut you a deal. Using what I’ve taught you, I want you to spar with me. If you manage to beat me, I’ll take some time off to spend with you and Makoto. But if you lose, you’ll have to do my paperwork for me. And don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you, since you’re a beginner.”

“Deal.” Yu replied without any hesitation.

Sae stood to her full height and looked down on Yu. Her lips turned into a smirk, one of ice and malice, like a lion eyeing deer. She offered a hand to help him up, and he took it. The two grabbed the gear, got into the ring, and took up positions. Yu was sure that it would be fine.

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It wasn’t fine. It wasn’t fine at all. Yu had just been launched into the ropes by another punch from Sae, which this time hit him square in the ribs. As he hit the edges of the ring and the ropes supported him, he slumped to the floor, exhausted. This was round three. In round two, his jaw almost came loose, and in round one, he got a black eye. Yu seriously doubted that this was her going easy, because, if it was, he was the emperor of China. Rubbing his now black eye, he saw
Sae get a towel and sling over her shoulder, and he couldn’t believe just how amazing she looked, even though she must be completely exhausted. She extended her hand and began to talk to him.

“All that Narukami. Not bad at all. You need to keep up your guard on your left, but if you keep at it, you might be a challenge to even me.”

*That’s load of crap, and you know it!*

“All that Akechi told me that training with you is considered punishment in the SIU. Now I know why.” Yu grunted as he took her hand and stood up. Sae let out a soft laugh.

“All admit, I do get… carried away. Guess I have a lot of pent up anger from work.”

“All speaking of work, guess you’ll have to show me how to do my new job.”

“All true. Let’s get changed, and I can show you to my office.”

Yu went into the locker room and started taking off his shirt. He winced as new pain flared through his body, the bruises starting to become visible. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out Shoichi’s pills and gulped one down, powering through the vile taste. He made a mental note to pick up more seeing how low he was getting. With the aching starting to subside, he got dressed in his regular clothes and walked out. Shortly after, Sae stepped out of her side, dressed in her black suit, her hair neatly parted to one side. If it wasn’t for the fact that he got mauled earlier, he would never had thought she had been in a fight. She tossed him a water bottle, and he chugged it eagerly.

The two made way to the higher floors, and when they reached the one Sae worked on, Yu was expecting it to be quiet with only maybe a few phone calls to break up the tranquility. But it wasn’t tranquil. At all.

This place’s people were acting like a bomb went off. There was yelling, frantic shoving, people trying to move stacks of paper without being pushed, and failing. It must be a nightmare to work here. But the moment people noticed that Sae was here, the chaos seemed to just evaporate. As she walked, any bystander watching would swear that she was a military colonel by how the others reacted. People looked at her with both fear and awe, tried their best to force themselves out of her way, and whenever they made eye contact with her, they, would quickly break it and stare at their desk. Suddenly, Yu felt like he was back in Shujin Nation.

“Ah, good evening Sae-san. It’s unusual for you to come back so late. Did a recruit get lucky?” A pleasant voice asked, and Yu was relieved to see Akechi.

“No, but you will have a rookie to show the ropes to. Someone you’re familiar with.” Sae answered, gesturing to Yu.

“Narukami-san? You actually went through with the sparring practice.” Akechi said.

“You sound surprised.”

Akechi reached out and grabbed Yu’s jaw, forcing it open and examining it.

“Well, you still have all of your teeth, so I’m guessing Sae-san went easy on you.”

Yu let out an involuntary shiver at the mental image of himself if Sae didn’t hold back. The three made their way over to Sae’s desk.

“Now Akechi, Narukami and I made a bet before we spared, and now he will help you with being my assistant.”
“Is he getting paid for that?”

“No. He made a bet with me and lost. Besides, if I had to pay you and him, there’d be almost nothing left of my paycheck.”

“I see. Will he be starting today?”

“No. Next Sunday however, I expect you to work hard, understood?”

“Understood.”

“Good to hear. Now, head back home and try to get some rest.” Sae ordered, and Yu nodded in agreement. As he was about to head out, he heard Sae call out to him.

“And Narukami.”

“Yes Sae-san?”

“Thanks for the spar. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Anytime Sae.”

_I am thou. Thou art I._

_Thou hast acquired a new vow._

_It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth._

_With the birth of the Judgement Arcana,_

_Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power._

Yu smiled as he walked down the stairs. He may have a few bruises, and is now a legal slave to his probation officer, but at least he accomplished what he set out to do. He felt like he got an increase in guts thanks to that match with her. He smiled and made his way back to the apartment.

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After working on some lockpicks to increase his proficiency, he got a text from Akechi. It was about four in the afternoon.

Akechi: ‘Narukami-san, think you could come over to the SIU? Sae-san has gone to run some errands, and I think I should get to work on teaching you how your new job works.’

Yu: ‘Sure. I think I could impress Sae-san.’

Yu grabbed his key, his phone, and walked to the train station, Akechi sent him another text.

Akechi: ‘I’ll get started on some of it while I wait. How long until you get here?’

Yu: ‘about 5 minutes.’

Akechi: ‘Understood. I’ll be waiting.’

By now, Yu had arrived back to the SIU building, and walked up to Akechi’s desk, and the detective looked up to him with a warm smile, and a fat stack of paperwork.
“There you are Narukami-san. Let’s get to work, shall we?”

Yu gave a nod, and the two went to work, Akechi showing the rookie the ropes to slaying the vile stacks of paperwork.

Hours had gone by, and with two pairs of hands, the paperwork laid in different stacks, and according to Akechi, such as task would have usually taken six hours. They got it done in two. Leaning back with a heavy sigh, Akechi spoke. Or rather, his stomach spoke for him with a low growl. Yu’s own stomach responded with an even louder growl, as if the two digestive systems were having a hunger contest.

“I take it you haven’t eaten?” Akechi asked. Yu simply nodded to the rhetorical question.

“Well, in that case, would you care to join me for some delicious pancakes? I know a place that imitates an American diner almost flawlessly.”

“Didn’t know that you’d like that kind of stuff.”

“Say what you want about the West, but if it’s food is half as good there as it is here, then they know how to cook.”

“Lead the way.” Yu ordered.

The diner Akechi lead Yu to was very close by, so close they didn’t even have to take the train. If there ever was a place in Japan that made one feel like they were living in the United States, this diner was that place. Waitresses dressed in plaid dresses, newspaper clippings praising the restaurant were dotting the place, the tiles were in a black and white checkerboard pattern, and the pictures were in black and white. By the time they arrived, they stopped serving breakfast, much to Akechi’s dismay. The two of them sat in seats along the counter, opting to instead order chili dogs and milkshakes. Akechi decided to strike up a conversation.

“So, and be honest, will you be able to help out with our… activities after school tomorrow?”

“Yea. The bruises are already healing.” Yu answered.

“I’m still impressed you managed to walk after the brawl.”

“Just how aggressive is Sae-san when she fights?”

“Hungry pack of wolves aggressive. Given how she’s treated in the workspace, I’m not surprised she has a lot of pent up anger.”

“What do you mean by how’s she treated? Does she get abused?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking. The SIU is almost completely made up of men. Because of that, Sae-san has to do twice the work for half the respect. She gets cat-called, talked down on, and always stuck with menial work fit for interns. That is, until they need her. Then they go and borderline beg her to take up the job because anyone with less talent and drive would fail the case.”

“I thought the SIU hasn’t lost a single case in 50 years?”

“That’s because they’ve made many behind-the-scene deals. If you have a well-known last
name, and if your family still has influence and money, you will get off with maybe nine months in jail time for human trafficking and child murder.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised, given my experience.”

“That was the problem, until Sae-san entered the picture. First case she was allowed to take was against a wealthy and well-known surgeon. He was accused and arrested on the charges that he was being paid to fail on surgeries for high-class individuals; CEOs, Cabinet members, and so on.”

“I heard of that. His name was Wei Po, right? Dad talked about him.”

“Correct. Everyone expected Sae to lose. The judge was bribed, the jury, bought. For the first time, the SIU would lose, and it would’ve given the Director the perfect excuse to fire her.”

“So how’d she do it? Makoto said that you and her met when you took Kobayakawa’s predecessor down, and if this was her first case, she wouldn’t have you.”

“Kamoshida, yes. But to answer: Her hard work, dedication, charisma, and talents allowed her to wield an ironclad argument that trapped Wei. If the jury and judge were to let him off the hook, then people would know they were bought, and would call for their heads. And so, a nobody woman managed to best a wealthy and well-known individual, all without the backing of the SIU.”

“And I take it she became rather popular because of it.”

“Actually, yes, but it was very short-lived. The only reason she isn’t a national celebrity is because she spends more time on work than on TV shows.”

“Jeez, and I thought dad was a workaholic.”

“My friend, Sae-san is the living, breathing definition of a workaholic.”

The waitress now came over and delivered their meals. As they started to dig in, they continued talking, albeit with enough food to be understandable.

“So, is Shiho good enough to head back?” Yu asked.

“Yes. She told me that Shoichi’s pills have almost completely undone the damage Kobayakawa inflicted.”

“I’m glad, but we should use what we have sparingly. Between getting her her little… booster, and Morgana, I’ve completely run dry in the money department.”

“Yes, Morgana-san told me about it. Here.”

Akechi fished into his wallet and pulled out three 60,000 Yen bills.

“Akechi, I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. And you have to. You’re in charge of getting our supplies, remember?” Akechi insisted, handing Yu the bills.

“Fine. But I’ll keep these for supplies and supplies only.” Yu replied, taking the bills.

“That’s fine. And I would still give you them even if we weren’t going to that place.”
“Really?”

“Of course! What are friends for?”

*Stabbing you in the back when you need them.*

In spite of that thought, Yu smiled. Akechi really did consider each other friends, as opposed to just partners working to a common goal. Yu gave a curt nod at the statement.

“Alright then. You know what else friends do? Pay the check.” Yu said as he finished the last of his milkshake, giving Akechi a pat on the back as he got up to leave.

Akechi opened his mouth, agast and stunned. Before Yu left, he turned one last time to the Detective Prince.

“Oh and Akechi?” Yu called.

“Yes Narukami-san?”

“Just call me Yu. Narukami-san is a bit too formal for friends.”

“Alright Naruka-er-Yu.”

The waitress gave Akechi the check, and the silver-eyed teen bidded his Confidant farewell.

Chapter End Notes

Alright dear readers, that will be it for the Confidants this arc! From here on out, they'll be infiltrating Kobayakawa’s Palace
It had been a few days since Yu stiffed Akechi with the bill. Now, less than a week remained for the deadline before Kobayakawa revealed the pictures to Sae. Because of this, Yu, Akechi, Shiho, and Morgana decided to resume infiltration and had successfully returned to Kobayakawa’s Palace.

(Palace music- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsvTHgfM7LQ)

As their metaverse outfits replaced their school uniforms, Shiho examined her outfit, she let out a small giggle.

“You know, this outfit is pretty badass. How come you guys aren’t dressed in armor?”

“That’s a good question. I thought, based on Akechi’s and my outfits, we’d all get dressed in fancy clothes.” Yu asked, looking to Morgana.

“Because Metaverse outfits take shape based on how you see yourselves. For example, in my case, I see myself as a cat burglar, and my outfit takes shape accordingly.”

“Oh that reminds me, here.” Yu said, reaching inside his backpack and pulling out a model MP5. Shiho’s face beamed at the sight.

“Oh, we need to decide a codename for the rookie.” Morgana pointed out.

“A codename?”

“Yea. Since yelling our real names might cause further problems, we go by codenames.” Yu explained.

“Oh yea, I remember now. Didn’t you guys go by Seeker, Ace, and Carmen?”

“Yup. Now, what should we call you?” Morgana asked.

“Gladiator. It's obvious from her attire and weapon.” Akechi answered.

“No, sounds too barbaric.” Shiho countered.

“What about Inferno, since you’re Persona’s a fire type?” Yu asked

“It’s a Persona, not a Pokemon. Besides, it’s supposed to be for me, not my inner self.”

“Alright, what do you want to be called?” Morgana demanded.

“Hmmmm. I think… I’ll be called what I am: a Pariah.”

“Pariah? Very well. In that case, let’s get to… it…” Yu trailed off as he saw something strange.

“What’s wrong Seeker?” Akechi asked, only to be ignored as Yu walked right past him.

Yu approached what got his attention: a blue cell door with Justine standing beside it, flipping a book between her fingers in boredom. As he approached, she tilted her head to regard him.
“Ah, there you are, inmate. Please step in, the Master, my sister and I have something to show you.”

Justine opened the door, gesturing for Yu to enter, which he did, the cell door closing right behind him. Looking around, he found that not only was he in prisoner clothes, but in cuffs and had a metal ball weighing him down. He was in the Velvet Room, and the only difference was that this time, he had a way out; the cell door that he entered from hung open by just a crack. Standing in front of him were Igor and the Twin Wardens.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room.” Igor greeted.

“Why did you ask me here?”

“As you know, your contract dictates that we offer you our assistance with your rehabilitation. And from this moment forth, we offer that assistance. The Velvet Room offers a variety of services. The most common one is fusion, a magic ritual that my assistants and I perform to merge two or more Personas. The result is a singular strong Persona that contains the previous Personas’ abilities.”

“Really? That’s amazing!”

“Indeed. And should you need a Persona you have already fused, simply ask access the Persona Compendium, select the Persona you wish to call from the sea of your soul, and you will have it, for a price.”

“That’s good to-wait, WHAT?! Even entities that live on another plane of existence are charging me?!” Yu yelled.

“There are other services that we can give you, but they will be made available to you over time.” Igor replied, ignoring the outburst.

“But the fusing itself is free?”

“Of course. But, there is also a catch with it.”

“Of course there is.”

“At your current state, you can barely wield two percent of all known Personas.”

“Are you calling me weak?”

“Yes. But there is some good news, however. As you continue with your rehabilitation, you will be able to wield more and more Personas. With each Shadow you defeat, a fraction of its power becomes yours. As you accumulate more and more power, you will be able to wield stronger Personas. That power is shared with whatever Persona you are currently using. If enough power is acquired, that Persona will use it to learn a new move.” Igor explained.

“The same goes for the other Tricksters, even if they aren’t fighting by your side at that moment. So long as they’re in the Metaverse when you defeat a Shadow, they’ll get a fraction of its power too.” Caroline added.

“That’ll come in handy if one of us is too injured to go on.”

“There is one final thing you must know before we get to fusing. You recall the bonds you’ve begun to forge with Confidants?” Igor asked.
“You mean every time a voice goes off in my head? Yea.”

“Each Persona can be classified in one of 22 Arcana, and you have a confidant for each. Whenever you fuse a Persona, the Confidant of the matching Arcana will lend its strength to the new Persona. The stronger your bonds with that Confidant, the more power it will give. And once you’ve established an unbreakable bond with a certain Confidant, you will be able to fuse the highest Persona of the matching Arcana.”

“I think I understand. This is kind of like a video game.”

“If that’s how you understand it, then please, think of it that way. Now that you know everything, let us begin with the fusing, if you so desire.”

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Once Yu was done with his first fusion ritual, he exited the Velvet Room. And soon saw a hand waving in his face. He blinked twice and his vision focused to see his team members standing in front of him, their faces a mix between worry and confusion.

“You still with us Seeker?” Akechi asked, snapping his fingers.

“Yea, I’m fine. Didn’t you see me go through the door?”

“What door?”

“This door.” Yu gestured to the blue cell door behind him.

“Uhh Seeker? There’s nothing there.” Akechi pointed out.

Yu looked back. The blue door was still there, and Justine was still twirling her book.

*Maybe they just can’t see it? Wait, Igor said only those with a contract can enter the Velvet Room*

“You sure you’re alright? You were spacing out just now.” Shiho said, crossing her arms.

“Yea, I just entered the Velvet Room.”

“Ah, so Master Igor is offering his services! Was wondering when he’d make them available. I take it you have a new Persona now?” Morgana inquired.

“Yea, and I’m eager to try it out. We have both of the codes, so let’s get on the jet.”

Morgana simply nodded, and blew into her whistle, summoning the Mona-mobile as Akechi filled Shiho in. The four got in, Shiho taking a moment to admire the vehicle, earning some beams of pride from Morgana. The mini-bus speed off in the direction of the airport. Strangely enough, there were no checkpoints or security stations, which only put the group on high alert. By the time they reached the airport, no Shadow had tried to stop or even interact with them. Once they made it to the airstrip itself, there was a private jet waiting for them, with a single Shadow in the form of a pilot waiting in the plane at the top of the stairs.

“Guess no one will attack unless provoked.” Morgana hypothesised.

“Either that, or all the security is still focused on the hotels.” Yu countered.

The four got out and approached the Shadow, which bowed when they started to climb the
stairs into the plane.

“Welcome to Shujin Airlines. Before we begin, I ask that you please turn in your codes.”

“Right here.” Yu replied, handing the codes to the pilot.

“Thank you, please wait here while we verify.”

The pilot walked into the jet. The seconds felt like hours, and the four stood awkwardly in place, ready to unleash their Personas should they see any sign of security. The pilot returned a few minutes later.

“The code has been verified. Please come in and get comfortable while we make preparations for take-off.”

The Tricksters smiled as they boarded. The jet had everything one expected a private jet to have: leather seats, a bar, and a large plasma screen TV with a couch under it. There was a door that lead into a bedroom, but it was only enough for two. Hopefully, this trip wouldn’t take very long. Then there was a whirl in the air as the pilots started the engines. The four took to their seats and watched as the plane accelerated and lifted itself into the air. Yu and the others looked out and admired the sight; the sea bathing in the glow of the setting sun seemed like something straight out of a movie. His team went to various parts of the plane, Morgana went behind the bar, Shiho took a seat on the couch, and Akechi turned on the TV, and immediately turned it off when it was nothing but propaganda. Morgana pulled out a shot glass and a bottle of whiskey.

“I hope you know that you shouldn’t drink right before the mission.” Yu pointed out before she started to pour.

“Oh come on! I want to try it!” Morgana protested.

“I would like to remind you that we’re all minors here.” Akechi added.

“Correction; you guys are minors. I’m a timeless entity whose existence is linked to a universe formed by human thought, and the only reason I appear in the shape of a human is to put you guys at ease and blend into the waking world.” Morgana argued.

“Carmen, please. If you’re drunk, you won’t be very good at fighting.” Shiho replied with a gentle tone.

“Well… yea, but.”

“If you die, who will help us with problems involving the Metaverse? Do you know how sad we would be if you left us?” Shiho interrupted, her voice still soft.

“Awww… fine.” Morgana whined.

“How about this? You can bring the whiskey with you out of the Metaverse, and once you’re with Akechi, you can drink it. That sound ok?” Shiho offered.

“Yea. Yea! That sounds like a good idea!” Morgana agreed, stuffing the whole bottle into one of her belt pockets.

Akechi smiled and went back to his seat and looked out to the ocean.

“Damn shame this isn’t real.” He thought aloud.
“The view, or the fact that we’re traveling first class?” Yu asked.

“Both. Though, I do feel a certain thrill as we get closer and closer to Kobayakawa’s fortress. Like the calm before the storm. Just thinking about what we’re here to do makes me feel like some sort of superhero.” Akechi answered thoughtfully.

“I’d compare it to more of an anti-hero. Though you’re right, I kind of feel like Batman right now. Going outside the law to deliver justice to criminals.” Yu added.

“I’d rather be Superman than Batman, and inspire people to be better. Using violence to remove violence will never work.”

“But sometimes violence is the only thing that works. I mean, if what you guys said is true, and there is a Shadow version of Kobayakawa in here, and if he has even a fraction of the real thing’s personality, then there’s no way he’ll let us give him a change of heart easily.” Shiho countered, her voice much heavier than how she dealt with Morgana.

“Yea, and we’ll have to be careful when we do encounter it.” Their guide told them.

“I take it that, as Palace ruler, he will be significantly more powerful than the other Shadows here?”

“Not only that, but if we destroy a person’s Shadow, it will kill them in the real world.”

This caused everyone’s face to go white.

“Are… are you sure?” Yu stammered out.

“Completely.”

“Then we’ll have to keep that in mind when we confront him.” Akechi said, more composed than his leader.

“Let’s change the subject. What’s our plan when we arrive at the island?” Shiho asked.

“Well, our top priority will be finding a Safe Room. That way we have an escape route in case the infiltration goes south. After that, according to Cognitive Akechi, we need to track down a General Morooka who holds the only key that lets us enter Kobayakawa’s home.” Yu answered.

“Do we know what to expect?”

“More of the same. Judging by how the phone is going blank, I’d say we will have to find another map if we want to navigate the base.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be sure to look out for you Pariah, as this will be your first time helping us with infiltration.” Morgana reminded.

“Didn’t I help you guys already when we took down the second marshal?”

“Oh, right. Forgot about that.”

“It’s ok, I appreciate the sentiment. But don’t worry about me, I’ll make those Shadows bleed.” Shiho stated, cracking her knuckles.

“Well someone’s excited.”
The conversation was cut short with a beep from the PA system.

“Attention all passengers, we are transmitting the landing code to Central Control now. Please fasten your seatbelts and prepare for descent.”

“Alright, once we land, we’re going to get out and try to make a break for the flight tower. Hopefully we’ll find some information there.” Yu ordered.

“And if we don’t?” Akechi asked.

“Then we go in blind.”

“Look! I can see it!” Morgana exclaimed.

The other three joined her, and sure enough, they saw it as well: It was a single island, one with a volcano on it. Carved out on the mountainside, the group could see what was unmistakably Kobayakawa’s house. It looked like an old school Spanish mansion, complete with a courtyard, pool, everything. But what was strange was that the house seemed to be spread out diagonally across the volcano. In one area was the main entrance, at another, higher area, the pool, and even higher was the courtyard. And at the peak was a small domed building, big enough to be a single room, and that building was emitting a small light.

“I’m guessing that that’s where we’ll find the Treasure.” Akechi stated, looking at the domed building.

“Most likely. But remember, we need Morooka’s key first.”

“All passengers, we are beginning our descent.”

The jet came in low, and the four held on tight to whatever they could to brace for the impact. The plane came to a screeching halt as soon as it hit the pavement. Once it came to a complete stop, the PA system chimed again.

“We would like to thank you for traveling with Shujin Airlines. Please be patient while our most gracious president Kobayakawa makes his way to give you a personal tour.”

Yea, not going to happen

Yu pulled his pistol and fired at a window, shattering the glass. With the new opening, he leaped through it, landing on the wing of the plane, and the rest of his teammates followed shortly after. Once they were free, the group made a break for the nearby control building, hoping to get to the Shadows before they knew what was up. After their mad dash was complete, Yu decided to creep into the door and saw a Shadow making the rounds. Hiding behind a corner, he waited until the Shadow got close enough to ambush. When it finally did, Yu leapt onto the top of its shoulders.

“Reveal the truth unto me!” He demanded as he ripped the mask right off, forcing the Shadow to transform. Two knights on top of horses. Thanks to the confined area, they had little to no maneuvering room.

“This will be a slaughter. Pariah! Time for some practice!” Yu ordered.

“On it! Melt that armor to slag Boudica!” Shiho ordered, removing her mask.

The scarred and burned woman materialized from the mask and hurled fireballs at the monsters, earning groans of pain from both of them. Shiho readied for another blast, but they
forgot one thing: Shadows can cast magic too. Yu saw one raise its spear up and call down a bolt of lightning on their attackers. Thankfully Shiho was able to get out of the way, but Morgana wasn’t so lucky. Yu knew these guys resisted electricity, so he decided to switch to a new Persona, the one he made in the Velvet Room.

“Come, **Jack Frost**!” He ordered, taking off a mask.

Materializing behind him was a figure that looked so soft, cuddly, and adorable that if it was any smaller, it would be a doll.

“Hee-ho-hee!” It cheered.

“**Bufula!**” Yu ordered.

Jack Frost did a backflip, its gaping smile shooting four icicles at the knight that had yet to attack. The soldier got hit by all four, and soon, was frozen solid. Shiho saw this as an opportunity, and charged at the frozen Shadow, dodging the efforts of the second knight to stop her, smacking the frozen opponent to pieces with her flail. But now, she was exposed. The knight raised his sword to attack.

“**Garru!**” Morgana yelled, having got back up.

The green blast knocked the knight back and off balance, and Akechi took it as his que to let Robin Hood fire an arrow. The pointed weapon pierced the armor, and he let out a howl of agony. Yu decided to finish it off, pulling out his machine pistol and unleashing a barrage of metal. With the Shadow fading to ash, he could feel power coursing through him.

“Alright, everyone ok?” Yu asked.

“My skill set has expanded.” Akechi answered.

“Now I’m even more amazing!” Morgana added.

“I got a new skill!” Shiho finished.

“Good work all. Especially you, Pariah.” Yu congratulated.

“Awww, thank you! Though seriously Seeker?”

“What?”

“Reveal the truth unto me? That’s the best you had?”

“W-well, it’s better than saying nothing at all!”

“It makes you sound like a drama queen.” Akechi said.

“You know what? I don’t have to explain myself. Let’s keep moving.” Yu ordered.

“Touchy.” Morgana whispered to the others.

The four made their way up the stairs and saw five Shadows in the control tower. By now, they had realized that their ‘guests’ were in fact the rebels and were now scrambling to find them.

“There’s no way that we’ll be able to take these guys head on, and you can bet they’ll try to call for reinforcements when the fighting starts.” Morgana pointed out.
Yu reached inside his pockets and found an item that he picked up all the way back to the first hotel.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan.” Yu told his team as he confidently walked up the stairs. Once he reached the top, he shot a pistol at one of the guards, forcing it to transform. The sound attracted the other Shadows, which also transformed. Before they new it, the Tricksters were outnumbered five-to-one, facing off against various Shadows. That’s when Yu pulled out what he had in his pocket.

“The Megido Bomb?!” Morgana cried as Yu pushed a button and threw it at the enemies. There was a blinding light as a pure white sphere erupted from the impact point, and continued to expand until the swirling destructive white-blue energy engulfed the entire room and consumed everyone in it, including the Tricksters. When it vanished, all the Shadows had turned to dust, and the infiltrators were unharmed.

“See? Told you.” Yu remarked smugly.

“Look, that door looks a little… distorted.” Shiho pointed out, looking at a door in the control room.

“That’s what we’re looking for.” Yu replied as he entered the Safe Room.

“Alright, now that we have a line to the entrance of the Palace and back.” Akechi stated.

“Now that that’s out of the way, let’s start gathering intel.” Morgana said as Yu exited the Safe Room, a new bookmark on the Meta-Nav added. The group split up into the now almost empty room. As Yu looked around, he heard Izanagi in his head.

Remember how I was able to assist you in the real world?

You can do the same here?

Yes, although it will be different. In here, I can augment your sight to highlight items that are relevant to whatever it is you seek. Think of it as a Third Eye of sorts. I cannot enhance your hearing, however.

Alright. I presume I activate it the same way?

Yes. Concentrate.

Yu focused his mind, picturing what he wanted to find; anything that could help them navigate this part of the Palace. He opened his eyes, which were now glowing the same sickly yellow as they were when he summoned Izanagi, and the world seemed… dimmer. The world around him faded to blackness, grey lines the only thing to make out anything in the world. And then he saw it. A bright azure object. A stack of paper. Yu walked over to it and saw that what he was looking for was underneath the stack, so he tipped it over, and saw not one, but two maps: One labeled ‘Kobayakawa’s Sanctuary’ and the other ‘Military Base Blueprints’. Yu smiled as he stopped focusing, his eyes, and vision, returning to normal.

“Hey guys, I found it!” Yu called.

As he examined the maps, his phone let out a PING and he knew that they won’t be going in blind now. The others gathered around him and had a look as well.

“Look at this. This says ‘Command Center’” Akechi pointed.
“Yea, and according to my phone, it’s connected to an elevator that shared with Kobayakawa’s private residence.”

“So if we get to the Command Center, we can get into the house.” Shiho finished.

“And then we’re one step away from the Treasure!” Morgana yelled excitedly.

“Then all we have to do is defeat General Morooka. He’d have to be in the Command Center.” Akechi finalized.

“Yea. How’s everyone doing? Think we can make it there?”

“I’ve barely broken a sweat.” Shiho said, flexing.

“I’m ready, willing, and able.” Akechi replied.

“That Megido Bomb you used earlier really saved us a lot of work. I’m confident we can make our way through to the Command Center and beat this Morooka character, at the bare minimum.” Morgana finished.

“Alright. Then let’s get to it.”
The group made their way out of the control tower and into the airport itself. Following the map, they found an elevator that would take them to the underground complex that was the military base. The front doors were completely made of glass, and after they piled in and hit the button, it began its descent. Soon they found out why the doors were made of glass: Standing in front of them was a massive army, complete with tanks, aircraft, and ground troops were stretching out in front of them in rows upon rows that seemed to stretch for eternity. The elevator came to a halt at a catwalk and the group survived the colossal force in front of them.

“This looks like an invasion.” Morgana pointed out.

“A soldier once told me Kobayakawa plans to escalate Shujin’s renown to global levels.” said Shiho.

“And he’s forcing me to gather blackmail material on Makoto, whom he sees as the last obstacle. If we don’t give him a change of heart, you can bet that all of these will be deployed.” Yu added.

“Alright ya worthless tramps, shuddup and siddown!” A man yelled. The voice on the other end was nasally, sick, and just plain uncomfortable to listen to.

“Just because some worthless brat is getting some intel for us doesn’t mean ya get to sit around twiddling your thumbs up your asses! I’ve been burdened with making sure you measure up to glorious Kobayakawa’s standards, so get your scrawny tushes in gear for practice! Failure to comply will land you on my shit list!”

Yu turned and looked at his teammates, who had looks varying from confusion to disgust.

“Was that… Morooka?” Morgana asked.

“I’d recognize that nasally voice anywhere. He’s just as unpleasant in personality as he is in voice.” Akechi answered with a grimace.

The four soldiered on, walking through the catwalk until they heard entered a small decontamination room. The spray from small tubes above started to coat them and the door in front opened up, along with a quaint little saying from Morooka.

“Congrats, you passed the anti-degenerate test! Now quit slacking off!”

As they tried to walk through the open doors, some unknown force pushed them back. An alarm suddenly blared. Immediately, Yu activated his new Third Eye ability to find an exit. Seeing a vent highlighted in blue, he quickly tore it off and the group crawled in just as a Shadow turned the corner to investigate the alarm. As they started to crawl through the vent upwards, they heard the same gravelly voice.

“Well well well. Looks like we got some snarky brats in our compound! They probably are a buncha weirdos who are gonna infect the servers with that pervert trash from the city! Everyone,
get on alert!” Morooka ordered.

As the group crawled through the vent, the metal changed to steel grating, allowing the group to see through below them. They saw a man dressed in a dark blue military uniform with a star badge on it addressing two shadows. He had a short bowl haircut, yellow tie, but what stuck out the most was the buck teeth that poured over and covered his lower lip. When he spoke, his unpleasant voice confirmed everyone’s unspoken suspicions of who he was.

“Alright you two, we got a buncha little shits crawling around! If you see any, be sure to give them an asswhooping they won’t forget! I’ll be in the command room if you’re too incompetent to do your job.”

“Let’s keep moving, with any luck, this vent can take us right to that ass.” Yu said, but the moment he took one step forward, the grating gave out under him, causing the four Persona users to fall right in front of the Shadows.

“Crap, thought that would hold!” Yu blurted out.

“Intruders!”

The two shadows dissolved and combined their tar puddles to combine into a few succubi. The Tricksters summoned their inner selves, with Shiho in the lead.

“Melt them!” She ordered, Boudica snapping her fingers at the demon women, explosions of fire erupting all around them in a critical strike. One of the demons actually fell from the burst of power, and Akechi spoke up.

“Allow me to take care of this! Robin Hood can take them all down.”

“Alright. Pariah, let Ace handle this, then join Carmen and to prepare for an All-Out Attack.” Yu ordered.

“Got it!” Shiho acknowledged, passing next Akechi and giving him a high-five. Akechi felt a surge of power from the passing of the baton, so to speak. Power he unleashed on the remaining two demons, the beams of light stunning the enemies. The group closed in, awaiting Yu’s orders to finish them.

“What a powerful man. Would you please consider showing mercy?” One demon begged, her voice sultry and alluring.

“Perhaps. If you join my cause.”

“Hehe. What? You lacking a girlfriend? I didn’t think a hunk like you would have trouble getting women.”

“I don’t want a regular girlfriend. I want you.”

“Oh my! Bold and direct! Just how I like- WAIT! I remember now!”

The girl floated into the air, the other demons vanishing into nothing.

“I am thou. Thou art I. From the sea of thy soul I cometh. I am Succubus, and I will aid thee on thy quest.”

With that, Succubus turned into a mask and joined the company Yu kept inside his mind. The
team gave various stares of disapproval.

“What?”

“Did you really need her Seeker?” Akechi asked.

“Yes.” Yu answered much too hastily.

“Why?” Shiho asked, crossing her arms.

“Because she might’ve had skills we don’t, and now, I know she does.”

“Oh yea? And what skills are those?” Morgana asked with a frown.

“Mudo. Curse magic.” Yu countered.

“Are you sure it was that, and not the fact she was a sex demon?” Shiho asked.

“Let’s keep moving.” Yu ordered with a wave of his hand.

“Notice how he didn’t answer.” Akechi whispered.

They didn’t have to travel far until they entered a new room, but it was shaped more like a silo. It was a massive laboratory, one that stretched several floors above, almost as tall as the hotels from before. On each floor was a single room, one that was dedicated to testing equipment, from rockets to lasers. After taking a moment to admire the massive array of The door in front of them was locked, with a keypad that read ‘Warning! Equipment testing in progress! Will not open until all equipment is deactivated for safety.’ The team proceeded to turn their attention to the first piece; armor stress testing. Inside the room was armor being fired upon to test it’s durability. There was also an elevator that led up to the second lab; bullet experimentation. In that room was a catwalk that climbed up to the lab at the top of the silo, which was testing various fuels for rockets, and finally, right next to that was a bridge that would take someone across the lab to the laser testing room. With their goals laid out in front of them, the infiltrators began their task.

In the control room, a general in a blue pushed a few buttons on a keyboard and on a massive screen was the face of the man whom he swore loyalty to.

“Report.” Kobayakawa ordered.

“You were correct in your suspicions Mr. President. The jet was deceived into ferrying the rebels over here. I suspect that they are sneaking into this base now, with the intent of killing me.” Morooka replied.

“Do you require reinforcements?”

“Negative Mr. President. I assure you, I have everything under control.”

“If you insist. But be cautious of Narukami. Akechi has never made it this far before, and it’s no doubt because of his most recent accomplice.”

“You have nothing to fear. That little shit will make it this far, but no further.”

“I hope you are correct. For your sake.”
The widescreen turned off, and Morooka just noticed a blinking red light. Pushing it, a live camera feed showed up of what was happening in the testing lab. Morooka frowned. He hadn’t expected them to get this close to the Control Room so fast. By now, the group had managed to disable two of the four testing rooms; the armor and gun testing rooms. He needed to stop this, and now. As the rebels approached the door that would lead them to the next testing room, he hit the lock button right before it opened. He smiled as the group struggled to open it, and turned on the microphone.

“Well well, look at what we have here! I knew that there would be some rats, but you look even more pathetic than I thought!”

The group turned and began talking amongst themselves, and Morooka pushed another button, opening the floor of the lab.

“Alright ya sorry ingrates! There are a buncha brats in here, trying to take down our awesome President! If you want to earn your food for the week, then bring me their heads on a platter!” The general ordered as a platform carrying the soldiers made its way to the surface. The Shadows immediately spread out. Yu decided to retreat to the previous room, ordering his team to split up and hide while he tried to make his way to the panel that controlled this lab’s equipment. One Shadow managed to spot him, and he and the others came running. Turning on the computer, Yu searched frantically for what he was looking for.

“Bullet tests… incendiary, armor piercing… aha! Here we go.” He said to himself as the screen popped up ‘Are you sure you want to test this bullet type?’. Yu turned the turrets that would fire and hit ‘Yes’. As the Shadows finally arrived, and the turrets roared to life, spewing bullets at a lightning pace. With each bullet that made impact, an explosion tore a hole through a Shadow, or made a hole on the wall. Within seconds, all of the guards were dead from the explosive bullets before they even had a chance to transform. Morooka let out a shriek of anger.

“Years of academy training WASTED!” He lamented as Yu turned the explosive bullets on the door. The turrets clicked, signaling that they were now empty.

“Alright you little shit. Now you pissed me off.”

Morooka pushed a button and alarms started to blare in the lab. A green mist began to fill the lower levels. Poison.

“We need to get out of here, and fast.” Yu said as he and the others rushed into the third testing room; the rocket room. Various tubes of several different types of rockets were currently offline, but one of them was still burning. Yu turned to the control panel and began to rotate the exhaust, straight to the door. By now, the poison had reached the first lab. The flames from the rocket began to melt the locked doors, granting the four access to the bridge to the lab.

“Great, so how do we get into the lab itself?” Morgana asked.

“This is how.”

Yu turned the rocket so that it was facing the lab door, and released its hinges, sending the rocket flying into the room. A massive explosion shook the whole compound, and the laser room was not even intact anymore.

“You goddamn brats! Do you know how expensive that equipment is to replace?!” Morooka shrieked.
“That didn’t manage to punch through the wall. We’re trapped.” Akechi pointed out.

“No, we aren’t.” Yu replied, sprinting across the bridge, his teammates following close behind. When he entered what remained of the laser lab, he looked at the map on his phone and saw a small sliver on it. He activated his Third Eye, and saw a small blue square among the rubble; a vent cover. The poison had made it to just over halfway.

“Alright, good eyes Seeker!” Shiho congratulated as Yu tore off the cover and they began to crawl through. Morooka yelled at them as they escaped.

“Hey! Where the hell do you think you’re going you little shits?!”

“That’s a good question. Where does this lead Seeker?” Akechi asked as they crawled.

“Right to the Command Center. How’s everyone holding up?”

“Good to go.” Morgana replied.

“Ready for whatever that jerk can throw at us!” Shiho added.

“Ready, willing, and able.” Akechi finished.

“Alright. Then let’s get to it.”

Yu reached the end and pushed the vent cover, dislodging it. Coming out, he saw Morooka, yelling at the computer screen. The others came out of the vent and silently called their Personas, pulled out their weapons and took battle positions. Yu revealed his katana and summoned Izanagi, slowly walking to the general.

“Where’d they go?! Where the hell did those damn brats go?!”

“Hello Morooka. I’m Seeker. These are my friends. Prepare to die.”

Chapter End Notes

Man, writing for Morooka was so much fun
“What the shit?!” Was all Morooka could yell out before he was hit hard by an electric blast from Izanagi.

He slammed into the big computer screen, with Boudica, Lady Trieu, and Robin Hood following up with fire, wind, and holy magic. The group moved in position for an All-Out Attack. It appeared to be an easy kill, even easier than Yu dropping the Megido Bomb in the airport. But appearances could be deceiving, especially for the buck-toothed Morooka. He let out a roar just before the weapons came into contact with him. The sudden explosion of energy forced everyone back, and Morooka’s form began to melt into a puddle of tar, and then reformed itself into a giant, fat, elephant man with a single eye and a giant curved blade in his hand.

“I ain’t gonna go down like a total pussy, you little bitches!” Morooka yelled, slamming his stomach with his hand and launching a purple wave of energy at the group. The four let out screams of pain, the energy impact feeling like being hit with a thousand hands. Morooka charged, and Akechi summoned Robin Hood to cast holy magic, but the general didn’t even slow down from the impact. Morooka ran over Akechi and performed an elbow drop, the impact landing square on his chest. Morgana pelted him with several slinger balls, but all this did was anger him. She pulled out her scimitar and dueled him for a short while, emphasis on ‘short’. Morooka hit her with a powerful right hook, forcing her body to turn around, and when her back was exposed, he slashed it with his blade.

*Shit. Barely two minutes in, and he already incapacitated Carmen and Ace.*

Yu summoned Jack Frost, hurdling ice at him. The cold slowed the general, but little else. Shiho assaulted him with fire, also with little effect. Yu switched Personas, this time going to Andras, who pelted wind attacks at the monster, again to no avail.

“What the hell is this guy made of?!” Shiho yelled as she fired her SMG the bullets seeming to be like sticky darts to him. Yu summoned Izanagi, and not even his lightning could get the general to yield. Morooka began to assault Shiho, and the girl was doing everything she could to get away from his flurry, but she was dangerously close to being backed into a corner. Yu fired his machine pistol, but nothing could seem to get his attention off of Shiho. He was almost out of options, there was only one other thing he didn’t try.

“Succubus!” Yu yelled, the demon heeding his call a little too quickly.

“Mudo!”

Morooka finally had Shiho cornered, and raised his sword to cleave her in half. Suddenly, a straw doll appeared in front of him. He stopped mid swing as a needle began to poke into the doll, making his eye narrow.

“Is this thing supposed to kill me?” Were his last words before the doll exploded, killing him.

Yu grabbed his knees and started panting. That was the closest he’d come to being killed since Akechi awakened his Persona. He looked over to Shiho, who gave him a meager thumbs up, also breathing heavily. He turned to Morgana and Akechi. Despite her serious back injury, Morgana
was alive, and Akechi was beginning to get up, coughing up a storm from the elbow drop. Yu gently tapped Morgana’s cheek to get her to respond.

“She’s out cold. And that means we lost our medic.” Akechi pointed out between coughs.

“Hold on, I think I can patch her up.” Shiho replied, summoning Boudica.

“Dia.” She said calmly, mending the carved skin until it was mended, the only trace of it being a nasty scar that ran from her shoulders to the bottom of her back. She let out a pained groan as her eyes fluttered open.

“Owwww.”

“You alright?” Akechi asked.

“Yea, I am. I’m guessing we won.”

“You’d guess correctly. Ace, help her up and support her.” Yu ordered.

“Of course.”

Yu walked to the pile of ashes that used to be General Morooka, and saw something shining in the pile. Pulling it out, it was a golden key, one with the Shujin emblem on it. He looked back at his team, now able to stand on their own two feet thanks to Shiho’s magic. Yu nodded as they walked over to him and looked at his phone. According to the map, there was an elevator in the room, one that would take them straight to the first basement of Kobayakawa’s mansion. It didn’t take long for him to find it, and soon, the team was flying up to the mansion.

“Alright, let’s get in the mansion, find a Safe Room, and leave. Everyone think you can last that long?” He asked as they continued to ascend.

“I think I can last a little longer. I can feel us getting closer to the Treasure. This key is supposed to unlock the room that holds it, and after that, we’re ready to give him a change of heart.”

“I’m with Carmen. My body may be bruised, but this is the closest I’ve come to stopping Kobayakawa, and I don’t intend to stop now on account of an upset stomach.” Akechi added.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere. Boudica and I are seeing this through to the end.”

Yu smiled as the elevator doors opened. Peeking through, he saw that there were no Shadows. But there was a door that shimmered before returning to normal. Stepping into the Safe Room, the group immediately took seats to get a quick rest.

“Carmen, you say we’re only one step away from the Treasure, but just how big is that step?”

“Well, it depends on this mansion’s size. Cognitive Akechi said that this place is Kobayakawa’s most heavily defended area. The Shadows here will be stronger, no doubt, but I can sense the Treasure more clearly than before.”

“The mansion’s size.” Yu mumbled as he pulled up his phone again. There were three floors, and one giant spiral that led up to one last room at the top of the volcano. He gave a small nod to his teammates, the signal that break time was over.
After they were out of the Safe Room, they immediately went upstairs, to what was without a doubt, the lobby of the mansion. The floor and pillars were made of flawless marble, the furnishings were expensive, and looked very comfortable, with two massive doors carved from oak wood acting as the main entrance. A painting of Kobayakawa hung proudly on a wall directly across from the front door, with a massive chandelier hanging overhead. There were two balconies, one on the left and right, and the one on the right had a patrolling Shadow. Waiting for him to leave to a nearby room, the group took the left balcony, only to find it lead to a massive library. Rows and columns of books went as far as the eye could see, and their only direction was a single sign that said ‘Welcome to the Archive of Secrets! Please don’t remove any books without President Kobayakawa’s permission!’.

“This library… represents the collective amount of secrets he has?” Morgana asked.

“It’d be more accurate to say that every book probably represents a piece of blackmail, but yes.” Akechi answered.

“There’s so many. And these secrets are used to hurt each student they came from.” Shiho said in horror.

“And I wouldn’t be surprised if it extends to Shujin graduates and faculty.” Akechi pointed out.

“This place will burn by the time we’re done. Come on, let’s see what we can use here.” Yu ordered, activating his Third Eye. For a moment, they found nothing, so Yu went to the second level and saw a book glowing and out of the bookshelf. He picked it up and saw the title ‘Work in Progress: Yu Narukami.’

“Huh. Looks like those who haven’t completely bowed to him are referred to as ‘Works in Progress’. Let’s see how many of these we can find.” Yu said, turning around when he heard the library door open.

“Command, this is Secret Service Agent 45, what is it?” A Shadow asked.

“This is Command, General Morooka is nowhere to be found, so we assume that rebels have managed to infiltrate the mansion. What is the President’s condition?”

“Alive. Proper security measures are in place. Status of other Secret Service agents?”

“Alive. Proceed with caution Agent 45. If they got past the General, they are very dangerous indeed.”

The Shadow cut off the radio and began to start walking up the second floor, looking for the Work in Progress book, and potential intruders. It found neither as the group jumped down to the first floor behind its back, landing silently and walking out of the library. Using the chandelier as a makeshift bridge to the other balcony, they entered what was looked like a study, with a single bookshelf that was curiously missing a single book. Yu walked up to it and inserted the book with his name on it. The sound of cogs and gears were heard inside the walls could be heard, and the bookshelf soon moved to the left of the wall, revealing a secret passage.

Once they stepped through the passage, the group suddenly felt very, very toasty. And it didn’t take long to find out why; the passage led to the inside of the volcano’s chimney. Down below, they saw the lava, and the smoke that spewed out almost choked their lungs. To their right, they saw a ramp going up to another level. Desperate to get out of this hot, toxic area, they ran up the ramp, and it ended at a lever, that once pulled, revealed another hidden passage. This time, it lead
to a balcony that overlooked a pool. A really big pool that was being patrolled by two Shadows.

“Hey guys, think you can take on those two without me?”

“Maybe. I’d feel better if you were with us.” Akechi replied.

“Why do you ask? You’re not feeling tired are you?” Morgana asked.

“No, it’s just that I have a sneaking suspicion that whatever unlocks the next secret passage is in that pool. Just thought we should divide and conquer.”

“Alright. Besides, if you do find yourself incapacitated in the future for whatever reason, it’ll be good to know that we can handle ourselves.” Morgana agreed.

“Ok then. You guys deal with the Shadows, I’ll see if I can’t find whatever opens the next door.” Yu said as Akechi went to the closest Shadow and slashed it across the back, forcing it to transform. The second Shadow transformed and joined the fray, Shiho and Morgana calling their inner selves.

Yu activated his Third Eye and saw something shining in the pool; specifically, the deep end. He dived in and started to swim. It wasn’t the size of a private pool, but a public one, one that had a deep end of about 30 feet. He kept diving, and diving. The pressure was starting to build, he could hear his ears start to pop, his skull feeling tighter and tighter. He knew he couldn’t dare to risk going any deeper, lest the pressure do a number on him, but he had to get whatever was at the bottom of the pool.

Tearing off his mask, he sent Izanagi to retrieve the object, hoping that the Persona would be able to get it before he had to come up for air. Izanagi started to fumble around, and Yu found it harder and harder to both use the Third Eye and materialize Izanagi at the same time. He involuntarily opened his mouth, releasing precious oxygen and filling up his lungs with water. That’s when he felt Izanagi touch something metallic, and he ordered the god to pick it up immediately. With whatever it was secured, Yu began a frantic swim up to the surface, accidentally taking another gulp of water. His vision was starting to become blurry, and his vision started to fade. With his last conscious effort, Izanagi grabbed him and hurled him to the surface of the pool like a torpedo.

Yu let out massive gasps of air right as he finally escaped, and saw his team finish off the last Shadow. He pulled himself out and forced himself onto dry land, dropping the item Izanagi put in his hand. They ran over to him as soon as they saw him.

“Seeker! Are you alright?” Shiho asked, kneeling down to him as he hacked up water.

“I’m fine. Got the thing.” Yu coughed, pointing to what he dropped.

“It’s a gem. Sapphire to be specific.” Akechi pointed out, holding it up.

“Pretty…” Morgana drawled in awe.

“Let’s find what this goes into.” Yu said, pulling himself up with Shiho’s help.

The four walked over to the unopened door and saw the face of Kobayakawa carved in it. One of his eyes was a sapphire, but the other eye was just an empty socket. Inserting the gem into that socket, the door slid up and the group walked through the now revealed passage and found themselves back inside the volcano, with another ramp going up. Just like before, the ramp led to one last passage, the final one, according to the map. But as they neared the end, they heard a
“Troops, you are the best of the best. The elite!”

The group exited the passage and saw Shadow Kobayakawa himself delivering a speech to dozens upon dozens of Shadows. The Tricksters were high above on a balcony, crouching to stay out of sight while Kobayakawa continued.

“I have heard troubling reports that the rebels have managed to spread terror to every corner of our mighty nation! Worse yet, there have been rumors that they have managed to infiltrate this very mansion! Make no mistake men, these are dark times. But I have faith! Faith that the righteous will prevail! That my might will crush these rebels, just like before.”

The group moved along the ledges, not even registering Shadow Kobayakawa’s words. They made their way to the final locked door, made of simple oak, and one lock in the center. Pulling out Morooka’s key, they inserted it and turned, a satisfying clicking was heard as Shadow Kobayakawa finished his speech.

“We will unite! We will stand together! And I will wipe out all who oppose me!”

Yu rolled his eyes as he opened the door to the final passage. But it was different from the others as there was another set of doors inside the wall. One that simmered. Stepping into the Safe Room, Yu looked at his phone and saw that it was bookmarked as “Volcano Peak”. He quickly walked back out and the four continued their infiltration. Once they were back inside the volcano, the ramp didn’t start and stop like the others. It spiralled up and up for what felt like miles. By the time they reached the top, they were all out of breath, each panting heavily.

“We… made… it.” Yu wheezed out.

“Yea… the view’s… very… beautiful.” Shiho admitted.

She wasn’t wrong. The view alone was worth the hike. From the domed shrine, one could see not just all of the mansion, but the entire ocean and the city of Shujin Nation. The setting sun gave a glowing color to the ocean, and the city was illuminated in a way that looked straight out of a travel brochure.

“Look. Is that… the Treasure?” Akechi asked, puzzled.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween all!
It's time for Kobayakawa's calling card, who here is excited?
Standing in front of them was a giant golden gas cloud. Whenever anyone tried to touch it, their hands would pass right through. They then tried summoning their Personas, but not even their inner selves could touch it. Morgana clapped her hands to get their attention as they got more and more frustrated.

“Alright, so... as you guys have seen, we can’t really touch or interact with the Treasure in any way, and there’s a reason for that. See, since the Treasure is just ‘desires’ it can’t take a physical form.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned that before we almost died to a poison mist, cyclops elephant, and hauled our asses up a volcano?!” Yu yelled.

“Hey let me finish!” Morgana snapped back.

Yu crossed his arms, and motioned for Morgana to continue.

“However! Every person has specific desires, but to make those desires manifest, then the person will have to be aware that they can be stolen.”

“You lost me there.” Shiho interrupted.

“Basically, if we tell Kobayakawa that we’re going to steal his heart, then this gas cloud will take the shape of something physical. Something we can steal.”

“But that’ll put Kobayakawa on guard. Palace security would skyrocket.” Akechi pointed out.

“Yes, not to mention, if we told Kobayakawa that we are going to make him confess, he’d probably try to take us down before that.” Shiho added.

“Then we won’t tell him ourselves. We’ll leave him a card, one that tells him that we know what he’s done, and that we’ll take his distorted desires without fail.” Yu responded.

“Oooh, I like that!” Morgana purred.

“A calling card? Yes... yes, I see. Leave writing it to me, Seeker.” Akechi said.

“Alright. But make sure your schedules are cleared. Once the target has seen the card, the effect will only last about 12 hours. And once that time’s up, then that golden cloud? It'll vanish forever, so we’ll have to steal the Treasure within those 12 hours.” Morgana informed.

“Got it. Everyone free for tomorrow afternoon?”

“Well, chances are, once Kobayakawa sees the card, I will be the most likely suspect, so I might not be able to join you.” Akechi pointed out.

“Then we’ll just have to make do.” Shiho stated matter-of-factly.

“Right. If there’s nothing back, let’s get back to the real world, and prepare.” Yu ordered.

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

Yu and the others had made their way back to the real world, and gone their separate ways.
Right now, Yu had wandered into a park. It was lovely, with a pond, trees that had just finished blooming, and singing birds. Best part? No one else was here. He sat on a nearby rock and started to think about what could happen tomorrow. They hadn’t seen Kobayakawa’s Shadow in action, and if he followed the same rules as the other Shadows, then he would transform into something to fight them. What that something was, Yu had no idea. And worse yet, they would most likely be down a man. He let out a sigh as he looked across the serene pond. There were so many ways this could go wrong, and if it did, then it wouldn’t just be him who would pay the price. But moping and thinking wouldn’t help anyone. He got up to leave, but stopped when he heard a voice.

“Excuse me, could you stay in that position please?” A man asked.

Yu looked to the voice’s source, and saw a man standing there. He couldn’t have been older than a highschooler. He wore a plain white button-up shirt, with a Fleur de Lis on it. Attached to his black dress pants was a keychain, and his arms, legs, and body in general all looked way too skinny and small for a teenager. His hair was parted to one side and seemed so black it almost looked blue. Yu noticed that he had a canvas with him, as well as several paints and brushes, and yet, he was using a pencil to work on a sketchbook. Yu had no idea how this guy was able to sneak up on him with all that. Was he that deep in thought?

“Are you an artist?”

“I am.”

“What’s your name?”

“I am Yusuke Kitagawa. And I would appreciate it immensely if you returned to your previous position.” He replied from behind the canvas.

“Ok.” Yu said, returning to sitting on the rock. After some minutes, he heard a groan from Yusuke.

“It’s no use. The magic is gone.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes. There was an intense look in your gaze, one that compelled me to try and immortalize it in art, but sadly, that gaze is gone, like a camp fire in a blizzard.” Yusuke lamented.

“That’s a shame.”

“Do you think you could have that gaze again? Think about whatever it was before.”

Yu decided to try. He tried to think about the coming battle, but he just couldn’t focus. His mind began to wander instead to Yusuke, his mind curious about his new guest. Yu snuck a glance to see what he could determine about Yusuke based on his appearance, before going back to looking at the pond.

“Yes! That’s it! Hold that gaze!” Yusuke shouted as Yu began to think.

What is your hypothesis Narukami?

His Fleur de Lis had the number 2 on it, and it’s on a plain white button-up shirt, so I’m guessing he’s in high school, and the number could signify his year. His skinny body suggests one of three things; he’s poor and trying to scrape money, or he’s so dedicated to his passion that he neglects his personal health for favor of painting/sketching, or both of those. His keychain suggests
that he lives in a house, one that’s in a lower-income community, as he will have to lock many things to keep potential thieves out, which further adds credibility to the idea that he’s very poor. But not poor enough to paint/draw for money. If that was true, he wouldn’t be out in the park drawing whatever caught his eye.

There’s also the fact that he didn’t ask for our permission to be drawn. This means either he thought he’d be done before we moved, or he has poor people skills.

Or both.

“Finished! Would you like to see the fruits of our labor?” Yusuke asked, putting his pencil down. Yu got up and examined the finished product. If you looked at the face sketched, you wouldn’t assume it belonged to a teenager, but to a battle-hardened warrior. The intensity of his grey eyes gave the impression not of a boy trapped on probation, but of a hero who stood against the evils of the world. Yu had to admit, it was a good look on him.

“Wow. I’m impressed.” Yu admitted.

“Thank you. I must ask, do you come here often… um…”

“Narukami. Yu Narukami.”

“Do you come here often Narukami-san? I would love to sketch you again some other time. You are far more agreeable and easier to work with than other people.”

“I’m not sure. This is honestly the first time I’ve come here.”

“Truly? Then it must be fate that I’ve made your acquaintance today Narukami-san.”

“Heh, you could say that. What about you, you come here often?”

“It’s infrequent. Mostly you can find me in the Sibuya subway people watching, should you wish to model for me again.”

“You know, I’m surprised I haven’t heard of you, given your skills.”

“I’m not famous, true. But perhaps you would know my sensei’s name; Ichiryusai Madarame.”

Yu’s eyes widened.

“Sensei? You were his student?”

“And his destroyer.”

Yu crossed his arms, a small smile starting to form on his lips. His curiosity was piqued

“I sense a story behind this.”

“If you have the time and patience.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be.” Yu argued, determined to see how many of his guesses were correct.

Yusuke’s lips grew into a small smile. He gestured for Yu to take a seat.

“Very well. One day, while I was painting in the shack that was our home, I heard him talking
outside the window, then I heard a voice I did not recognize. At first, I ignored it, until I heard the name ‘Sayuri’ escape the stranger’s lips.”

“The Sayuri? Isn’t that a famous painting?”

“Yes. It’s also the source of my inspiration as an artist. When the masked man opened a suitcase full of cash, Sensei then proceeded to hand the painting in exchange for the money. He had sold the artwork of my dreams to a man who couldn’t even show his face. Naturally, I was distraught over what I witnessed. The next morning, I went to Sense-ahem-Madarame to confront him about it. But I was surprised to see that the Sayuri was still hanging in its usual spot. I then thought it was all a dream. Until I saw the same suitcase, now half empty, lying outside Madarame’s room.”

“And you decided to get to the bottom of it.” Yu guessed.

“I thought about confronting Madarame, but decided against it. I had received warnings and heard rumors about how he had treated pupils before me, but I had never received such treatment before. But I decided that it would be best to investigate myself, then confront him with the proof. I knew the shack from top to bottom, save one; a door he kept locked at all times.”

“And you started there.”

“Yes. I snuck into Madarame’s room, stole the key, and went inside. I was expecting unfinished works, scrapped ideas, but I found something far more horrifying; forged copy upon forged copy of the Sayuri. Hundreds of them were cluttered in that room. I took as many photos as possible, and I realized the claims of abuse and plagiarism might have had some merit. I contacted the police. And none other than the Detective Prince himself answered my call.”

“What happened then?”

“Once I told him what I had witnessed, and showed him the evidence, he agreed to investigate Madarame. It was a slow crawl, but thanks to his detective skills, and some help from me, we figured out Madarame wasn’t just forging Sayuri copies and selling them. He was replicating the work of his former pupils and selling the counterfeits to art enthusiasts. I confronted him about this, and he threatened me, told me that if I didn’t keep my mouth shut, he would throw me out, and do to my artworks what he had been doing to his previous pupils’ works. The man who raised me, fed me, clothed me, taught me everything I knew… saw me only as livestock.” Yusuke explained, his hands clenching so hard his knuckles turned white.

“That’s terrible. You must have been devastated.”

“You have no idea. Fortunately, Akechi was able to record the whole thing. That was the last nail in the coffin. With that, and the woman Sae Niijima’s help, they were able to put Madarame behind bars, and deliver justice to his victims.”

“Wow. What happened after that?”

“After that, I inherited the shack, and Akechi-san and I stay on very good terms to this very day.”

“I see.”

Suddenly, there was a boom of thunder, and off in the distance, the two boys could see dark, stormy skies rolling in.
“Well, I for one, say we should get going.” Yu suggested.

“Agreed. If the sketch suffered damage from the rain, or lost because of the winds, I’d never forgive myself.” Yusuke agreed.

“It was nice meeting you Yu-san. And most refreshing to talk to someone on a subject other than being my model.”

“And you too, Yusuke.”

The two exchanged a small bow between each other and went on their way to their respective homes.

_I am thou. Thou art I._

_Thou has acquired a new vow._

_It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth._

_With the birth of the Hanged Man Arcana,_

_Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power._

---

Yu barely managed to make it back to the apartment in time before the rain started to come down hard. A giant thunderstorm was predicted to hit, and Yu also saw some lightning in the distance. When he entered the living room he saw Makoto was busy studying as usual, so he decided to join her. But with what was going down tomorrow, he could barely focus on his homework. He decided to concentrate his efforts on the pieces that were due tomorrow, then grab some food, and see if he could hit the hay.

“Yu-kun?” Makoto asked.

“Yes Makoto?”

“Is everything alright? You seem… disturbed.”

“It’s nothing.”

“If that was true, you would be done with homework by now.”

_Shit. Think Narukami, think._

“I was visiting the park today, and someone just came up and started sketching my face.”

“Really? Was he in the shadows? Did you get a good look at his face? Were you followed?” Makoto asked rapid-fire, her posture starting to tense up.

“He said his name was Yusuke Kitagawa.”

Makoto visibly relaxed and let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“Oh. It was Yusuke. Well, don’t worry about him, he’s harmless. Though, if he does bother you, tell him you personally know Sae Nijima.”
“What’s the history?”

“Well, while Sis and Akechi-kun were in the process of taking down Madarame, Sis asked Yusuke-kun to come over to our house, for his protection and to interview him. Once that was done, he asked Sis if she wanted him to paint her.”

“Oh. That doesn’t sound too ba-”

“Nude.”

Yu’s jaw hit the floor and his eyes widened. Silence filled the air for a good five minutes.

“How the hell is he still alive?”

“Well, I already told you, Sis carries a taser on her person. And with Yusuke… let’s just say she aimed for the lower regions of the body. Several times.”

Yu involuntarily let out a shudder at the comment. He felt a buzz in his pocket and whipped out his phone.

“It’s starting to get late. I’ll cook us something, then I’m heading to bed.” Makoto stated, putting away her books and starting the cooking process. Yu looked at her and gave her a ‘sounds good’ before turning to his friends.

Morgana: Be sure to get extra sleep tonight. We don’t know what’ll be waiting for us.

Shiho: We know Morgana. Let’s meet up as soon as school is over. How’s the Calling Card going?

Morgana: Akechi’s cutting out newspaper kanji to make it. He has a very specific message he wants to send.

Yu: Any idea what we should expect from Kobayakawa’s Shadow?

Morgana: None. No person’s Shadow is the same, because each person is unique, and a Shadow is the repressed true self. And remember: we kill the Shadow, we kill the person.

Shiho: That won’t stop us. We’ve come this far. I won’t let you guys down, no matter what!

Yu: I appreciate the enthusiasm. And don’t worry. We will win.

Morgana: That’s the spirit!

Morgana: Akechi asks ‘Shiho, do you still have Ushimaru’s number?’

Shiho: Oh right! I told him I’d be ready to tell him who hurt me in a few days. When should I call him?

Yu: I have an idea. Why don’t you call Ushimaru near the end of school? That way, Ushimaru will have to talk to Kobayakawa and let Akechi off the hook. Then he can join us in the Palace.

Shiho: Ooooh! That’s a good idea!

Morgana: Akechi approves of the idea, and he’ll be sure to try and meet us at the school gates. He also says that once Kobayakawa gets tattled on, he’s probably gonna try and track down Sae and show her the pics, so we should be as fast as possible.
Yu: Alright, then it’s settled. Tomorrow, Akechi will reveal the calling card to Kobayakawa. Before school ends, Shiho will call Ushimaru and tell him what Kobayakawa did to her. After that, we head to the Palace, steal the Treasure, and do everything in our power to get out alive.

Shiho: Got it.

Morgana: Be sure to go to sleep guys. We’ll need it.

Yu: Do you hound Akechi to go to bed like this?

Akechi: Yes, she does.

“Yu-kun, are you alright? You seem nervous.” Makoto asked.

The two of them are on their way to school, same as usual. Yu’s Personas, Izanagi included, were rolling in his stomach, anticipation for the upcoming battle starting to build. Anticipation that Yu apparently couldn’t hide, since Makoto had to ask about it.

“Are you still worried about Yusuke-kun? I told you, he’s harmless.”

“It’s not him. It’s Shiho.”

“I’ve been visiting her in the hospital. According to the doctors, she’ll be well enough to attend school, starting tomorrow.”

“That’s good to hear. Wonder if she’ll finally say who did that to her.”

Makoto’s brow furrowed.

“If she does tell us who’s responsible, I’ll make sure he regrets it.”

You’ll have to wait in line.

“I believe it. But about Shiho, I’m worried that she’ll be a target again if she talks.” Yu explained.

“Don’t worry. If she talks, Sis can keep her safe. And I can follow her around, if need be.”

“Oh yea? I don’t see you as a stalker.”

“Hey! I can be a great stalker if I wanted!” Makoto yelled, immediately blushing when she realized just how poorly that sounded out of context. Yu simply laughed as the train doors opened and they made their way to school.

“Sorry, but whenever I think of you following someone, all I can see is you holding up a manga, hiding your face and thinking that’s enough.”

“W-well… it might be.” Makoto countered, earning another smirk from Yu.

“No it’s not.”

By now, they had arrived at Shujin Academy, and Yu could tell there was quite a bit of commotion going on, judging by how many voices were heard from the second floor. Both Yu and Makoto were surprised to see a gaggle of students standing around the announcement board, where
people would post flyers meant to inform student of upcoming events. But instead of flyers, or posters, there were red cards tapped on top of them. On each of the cards were the same message and a logo of a top hat with two eyes and a magnification glass on one of the eyes. Yu and Makoto got close enough to read the message they all conveyed.

To Coach Kobayakawa, the glutton of Shujin;

We know of your sins, of the pain you have inflicted upon the students of this place. We know that you blackmail, threaten, and abuse the children of this academy, simply because you are obsessed with giving it the illusion of a prestigious school, with no remorse or pity for the damage it causes. We know you hunger for more power than you deserve, even going so far as to manipulate the faculty and graduates of this school to obtain it, because you see this place as your own private nation, and you desire to see it elevated to global recognition, even if it means tearing families apart or driving some to attempt suicide. For that reason, we have decided to take your distorted desires without fail, and make you confess to your wicked ways with your own mouth.

Signed:
The Phantom Team.

“Who wrote this garbage?” One student asked, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Oh come on. I think it’s pretty cool.” Another countered.

“Think Akechi-senpai did this?”

“Nah man. Akechi’s smart enough to know better than to let the coach know he’s coming for him.”

“Plus, if Akechi-senpai had the ability to make Kobaya-cunt confess, he would’ve used it sooner.”

The murmurs continued until a voice with pure malice boomed.

“Who called me Kobaya-cunt?! And what’s going on here?!”

Kobayakawa’s voice made everyone tremble and back away on instinct. As he looked and read the cards, Akechi walked up the stairs.

“Are you ready?” Akechi whispered, earning a silent nod from Yu.

“Akechi! Where’s that-THERE YOU ARE!!” Kobayakawa roared upon spotting the red-eyed teen.

“What’s wrong Kobayakawa?” Akechi asked in a tone so pleasant it was almost mocking.

“Explain yourself!!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Akechi replied calmly.

Suddenly, there was a flash, and for a moment, Akechi, Yu, and Kobayakawa were standing all alone together, on an endless black plane. But Kobayakawa had transformed into his Shadow, his sickly yellow eyes drilling holes into Akechi and Yu.

“You wish to overthrow me?! Come and try Akechi! This attempt will fail, just like all the others.” It taunted.
Another flash, and this time, they were back in Shujin, and Kobayakawa was back to his original self.

“Akechi, follow me. The two of us are going to have a talk with the principle.” Kobayakawa snarled. Akechi gave a small nod to Yu, who gave one in return.

School was almost out. Akechi had to spend most of the beginning arguing with Kobayakawa and defending himself, much to his annoyance. Kobayakawa tried, and tried hard to pin the blame on Akechi, but the ace detective had thought of everything. Now, with the bell almost about to ring, Akechi felt relief and joy to see the phone ring in the principal’s office, and Ushimaru took on a grim face before turning to Kobayakawa. The bell rang, and the big-boned man told Akechi that he could leave, and he had to restrain himself from knocking over people as he did. He saw Yu, and the two students bolted to the gates. Ushimaru would be able to keep their enemy busy, but he could only do so for so long. Eventually, Kobayakawa’s blackmail would make it to the police if they didn’t steal the Treasure in time. Akechi and Yu ran to the alleyway and saw Morgana and Shiho waiting for them. With the push of a button, the four Tricksters entered the Metaverse.

The race against the clock had begun.
Alright ladies and gentlemen, it's time for Kobayakawa's boss fight! I hope you enjoy

(Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xQZ1zmxyDk)

Wasting no time, Yu immediately teleported his group into the Peak of the Volcano Safe Room, and then proceeded to make a mad dash to the Treasure, ignoring the heat and smog from the furnace within. No one could deny that they all felt something; fear of failure, anxiety at what was waiting for them, exhilaration at the fact that the finish line was in sight, and excitement for idea of beating Kobayakawa for everything he'd done. When they arrived back at the top, they saw that Morgana was correct about the calling card’s effect. Instead of a golden gas cloud, they instead found a golden stamp seal hovering in the air, as if it was dangling from an invisible string.

“Well, on the bright side, this’ll be easy to carry.” Yu said reaching out to touch it.

He soon heard the whistle of a rocket and was immediately pulled back by Shiho. She was able to get him out of the domed shrine just before a rocket slammed into its foundation. The building crumbled, and the team slid down the mountain face, all the way to the courtyard where Shadow Kobayakawa was giving his speech. And that was the very same man who fired on them, only this time, he stood alone. Yu and his group were able to be behind most of the rubble that fell, but the impact kept them from landing gracefully.

“I underestimated you, Narukami.” He growled, throwing the rocket launcher to the ground and picking up the Treasure.

“Kobayakawa! About time you started to fight your own battles!” Akechi yelled as he and the others picked themselves up and readied for battle.

“A fact that you and the scum you call friends shall soon regret. Worthless brats, every last one of you! You scream and cry for change and revolution, but you stubbornly and arrogantly refuse to accept that what I did, I did with everyone’s best interest in mind! All the sacrifices I made, I made for the happiness of the students Shujin! I decide who is worth having, I decide the worth of all who come here!”

“How was leaking my record for everyone’s best interest?!” Yu demanded.

“How was giving me trauma that'll last the rest of my life supposed to make anyone happy?!?” Shiho yelled.

“How are Eiko’s and Mishima’s corpses your sacrifices?!” Akechi roared.

“Who said you got to decide the worth of other human beings?!” Morgana hissed.

“ENOUGH!!! I don’t have to explain myself to worthless rabble like you. I’ll expunge you like the trash you are!” Was all Kobayakawa could retort, a dark, twisted energy beginning to flow all around him.
It swirled and swirled until the Shadow grabbed its skull, almost like it was trying to summon its own Persona. But instead of an inner self, the stomach exploded, and torrents of sickly red pus began to coat the ground. Then, the vile fluid began to reform itself around Kobayakawa, and when it was done, everyone’s eyes widened in fear and shock. They didn’t know what to expect, but they certainly didn’t expect this.

Standing where Kobayakawa once was, was a tank.

But not just any tank. In the center, where the cockpit would be, was a giant metal head of Kobayakawa, and on the left and right sides of the head were long cannons. On the back of the tank were several small holes that miniature missiles could be launched from, just in front of the metal head were three machine gun turrets, all locked and loaded. Finally, planted right beside the cannons, were two Shogun flags, all four bearing the emblem of Shujin on its crimson fabric.

“Uh guys. We need to run!!” Yu declared.

They all turned their backs and made a break for the door. They barely managed to start making it down the ramp in time before Kobayakawa barreled through, the tank going overboard and plunging into the lava below. Or he would, if not for the thrusters propelling him back up, allowing him to hover and keep up with the team.

“Oh come on! He can fly?!” Shiho yelled as Kobayakawa fired a shell, fracturing the volcano wall.

“Keep going!” Yu replied, narrowly avoiding the rocks that were launched from Kobayakawa’s shot impact.

The four barely dodged another tank shell as they followed Yu’s lead, entering the next passage to the pool, and then back into the volcano.

“Seeker, what are we doing?!” Akechi yelled as they ran down the second ramp.

“We can’t fight him here! If we draw him to the airport, Carmen will have enough space to use the Mona-mobile!” Yu explained.

“The what?!?” Shiho questioned.

“A car that has enough firepower to rival that tank!” Yu answered, barely dodging a volley of missiles. Kobayakawa was still on the previous ramp, started firing on them from his vantage point like artillery, this time aiming for the ramp to try and trap them.

“Ace! Distract him!”

“On it! Aim true Robin!!”

Robin Hood materialized, firing arrows back at Kobayakawa. Despite the fact that his body was made of metal, the arrows hit him like he was still flesh and blood. Kobayakawa activated his thrusters and rushed the Persona, which withdrew to Akechi just in time. Kobayakawa crashed through the volcano and went completely through its rocky walls. The team managed to enter the main lobby of the mansion, the chandelier still hanging proudly from above. Yu almost made it to the dual oak doors.

“Alright. Carmen, as soon as we’re outside, summon the Mona-mobile and-”
Yu was cut off by Kobayakawa ramming through the door, reducing it to splinters and knocking the Wild Card down. Yu summoned Izanagi and was able to pull himself away from the caterpillar tracks before they could reduce him to a red smear on the marble. Kobayakawa situated himself in the center, while Yu and his team split up; Akechi and Yu on one side, Morgana and Shiho on the other. Kobayakawa began to rotate, like a turret, his two cannons firing an unending barrage wherever he was pointing at, while his machine gun turrets fired non-stop, preventing anyone from popping their heads out of cover. Right now, he was turned to Morgana and Shiho, the tank shells kicking up a storm. Yu saw a piece of rubble hit Morgana, trapping her arm underneath, then heard a loud hissing from Kobayakawa. Missiles were starting to poke out from their miniature holes, ready to finish Yu’s allies. Whipping out his pistol, he fired at the exposed warheads, setting them off.

An action that did nothing but angering Kobayakawa in the process.

The furious behemoth now had his attention locked on Yu and Akechi, while Shiho tried to free Morgana, and casting a healing spell when she finally did. Kobayakawa began his assault anew, and the two boys took cover behind a pillar.

“We need a plan Seeker! We can’t hope to reach the door without being blown apart!”

“Really Ace?! I had NO idea! And here I was, ready to give us the order to march to certain death! Thank you for your wisdom!”

Another explosion. Akechi was right, they needed to act, and fast. Yu activated his Third Eye and peered through the pillar he was hiding behind. He saw that Kobayakawa was stationed in the center of the room. And centered directly above his metal head…

“Carmen! Try to reach that chandelier and cut it down!”

“On it!”

Morgana sprinted out of cover, and Kobayakawa turned to take her out, falling for the bait hook, line, and sinker.

“Ace!! NOW!!!”

Akechi nodded. The archer Persona revealed himself and let loose a single arrow while Kobayakawa was focused on Morgana. But one arrow was all that was needed to cut down the object directly above Kobayakawa. The chandelier hit him square on the head, creating a sizeable dent in the armor.

“Goddamn brats…can’t think…straight…”

“This is our chance! Everyone! Go for an All-Out Attack!” Yu ordered, coming out of cover.

Everyone charged, summoning their Personas, getting up close and personal with their weapons, or even firing their guns, the team did anything and everything to hurt Kobayakawa. By the time they were done, most of the tank’s armor had been crushed, bent, melted, or some other form of destruction. Kobayakawa let out a pained scream.

“You damn brats! I will see you all burn for this!”

Suddenly, they heard a very distinct sound come from Kobayakawa: TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE. Shortly after, Kobayakawa’s armor began to shift and move around, as if it was transforming into something new.
“Uh oh.” Yu muttered just loudly enough for his team to hear.

“Uh oh? What’s uh oh?” Morgana asked.

“That sound…”

“What about it?”

“Any Transformers fan worth his salt will know that sound. We have to move, NOW!”

Yu and his friends made a break for it, now finding themselves on the road that lead from the mansion to the airport.

“Carmen!” Yu ordered as they didn’t even slow down.

Morgana put her whistle up to her mouth and blew hard. A sudden dust cloud appeared ahead of them, and the Mona-mobile burned rubber to reach them. The group climbed in, Morgana at the helm, when they saw the roof of Kobayakawa’s mansion explode. From the rubble and dust, stood an imposing figure.

“Quick, take us to the airport!” Yu instructed.

As soon as the bus began to move, so did the figure in the house. A sudden boom was heard, and everyone looked back to see that the mansion’s lobby had been reduced to rubble, and standing proudly in the wreckage was a figure that was no doubt Kobayakawa. But instead of a tank, he was now a humanoid robot. His right hand was replaced with the twin tank cannons, on his shoulders were the Shujin flags, and underneath his feet were all of the thrusters, granting him flight. It didn’t take him long to catch up to the group, and when he did, he hovered in front of them, and readied his tank cannons.

“Evasive action!” Yu yelled.

Morgana swerved to avoid getting hit, from a shell, and then another, and another, making Kobayakawa’s ammo seem limitless, and everyone knew it would be a matter of time before Morgana screwed up and they got hit.

“What does this thing have?! Seeker said it could take on Kobayakawa when he was a tank!” Shiho exclaimed.

Morgana pushed a button on the dashboard, bringing up a whole arsenal to choose from.

“Take your pick!” Morgana said, barely dodging another shell.

The group flipped through their options. Side flamethrowers, jammers, spike strips…

“Missiles!” Shiho squealed, smashing her thumb against the green button. Outside of the bus, several cartridges full of missiles extended from the sides. Slamming her fist on the ‘fire’ button, several dozens of missiles fired off, locked right onto Kobayakawa. He activated his machine guns, trying to destroy the missiles before they hit, but there were just too many. The few missiles that survived hit him hard, but not enough to bring him down.

“Alright, what else?” Yu asked as he continued scrolling.

EMP, ejector seats, harpoon…

“Railgun!” He yelled, pushing a button. Suddenly, the bus shook as Kobayakawa finally
managed to hit it.

“Warning! Warning! Mona-mobile armor is down to 67%.” a mechanical voice informed.

“Alright you bastard.” Yu growled, aiming the railgun right at Kobayakawa’s right foot. Another tank shell landed on the bus, reducing the armor to 31%. Yu squeezed the trigger, and a blue energy bolt collided with Kobayakawa, forcing him to flail around to try and stabilize his flight.

“Look! We’re almost at the airport!” Akechi yelled.

Yu then targeted the left leg, firing once again, and with the same result. The four cheered as Kobayakawa’s last thruster exploded and the president began his fall to Earth.

“Carmen! Ram him! Don’t give him a second to recover!”

“On it!”

Morgana activated the turbo boosts as Kobayakawa was starting to get back up.

“Bail! Everyone BAIL!!” Yu yelled, jumping out of the bus, the others following suit. The plan was for the bus for the bus to ram the President, leaving him vulnerable to an All-Out Attack. But the giant mech was able to react just in time, slamming his foot into the bus head on, forcing it back and buying him enough time to get up.

“MY BABY!! YOU’LL PAY FOR THAT!!!” Morgana screeched.

“Everyone split up! Carmen, start up the Mona-mobile and try to use whatever it has left to take him down! Everyone else, try to split his attention!” Yu ordered, calling out a giant sludge puddle, which slammed itself into Kobayakawa, which surprisingly left a dent in his chest.

“You little brats! Hundreds more skilled and talented than you have risen to challenge me!” Kobayakawa yelled as he grabbed the slime and crushed it in his hands.

“Then we’ll finish what they started! Robin Hood: **Masukukaja**!” Akechi ordered, and soon, a green spiral enveloped all four Tricksters. Kobayakawa tried to launch a tank shell at his arch-nemesis, but Akechi dodged with the grace of a professional ballet dancer. Yu, Shiho, and Morgana too felt more limber, flexible, and agile, easily managing to avoid the tank shells and the resulting explosion and debris.

Morgana had finally managed to start back up the engine and squealed “SHE LIVES!!”, before getting a wild look in her eye, and grinned maliciously as she turned the car to Kobayakawa. The president slammed his fist down, sending a shockwave that knocked Shiho off her feet, and was about to finish her off, but Morgana had other plans. Firing a harpoon at Kobayakawa, the sharp object pierced his armor just below his neck. She then put the gears in reverse as Yu summoned what could only be described as a living turnip and cast a healing spell on Shiho. Kobayakawa was forced to lean back, taking small baby steps so that he wouldn’t lose his balance. The others saw what she was trying to do, and joined in, hitting Kobayakawa in the feet and upper chest to force him to go down, but the mech just wouldn’t fall.

“Warning! Warning! Tire blowout imminent!” the Mona-mobile warned, earning a growl from Morgana. The woman then suddenly put the gears in drive position, and the bus sped through and slammed into Kobayakawa’s left foot, but she was able to bail at the last moment. The impact destroyed the Mona-mobile for good, but it did the trick; Kobayakawa was forced down to the ground, weak and vulnerable. The group didn’t even need Yu’s orders for the All-Out Attack.
“BOUDICA!!”

“LADY TRIEU!!”

“ROBIN HOOD!!”

“IZANAGI!!”

Kobayakawa was engulfed in a beautiful maelstrom of fire, lightning, wind, and holy power. Powerless against the onslaught from those he wronged, Kobayakawa could do nothing but wail in agony. Yet even then, the Tricksters didn’t let up, pouring every last ounce of power into their attack, if this didn’t finish the job, nothing would. Finally, the destruction ceased, and there was quiet once more. Kobayakawa lay on the ground, his once seemingly unbreakable armor was broken, his mighty weapons reduced to twisted scrap, and the once proud banners of Shujin were torn and burned.

His behemoth form faded to ash, and all that was left was a sorry excuse of a man at the mercy of his victims. He grabbed the golden seal stamp and hugged it close, like it was an idol that would save him if he prayed hard enough. The group marched towards him, with the same malice in their eyes that he showed all of them, and he put his hands up in some mock-defense.

(Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PbwXOkWUsY)

“M-mercy… please…” he begged.

“Mercy? Mercy?!” Shiho yelled, grabbing Kobayakawa by the throat.

“After everything you’ve done to me?! To Ann?! You have a lot of gall to beg for mercy!”

“Easy Pariah! If we kill the Shadow, we kill the real Kobayakawa!” Morgana yelped.

“No one will miss him.” Shiho countered with burning contempt.

“Maybe so, but if we do this, then we abuse our power for our own personal gain, just like him. We have to be better than that, so let him go.” Yu ordered. Shiho, after a few seconds, numbly obeyed, throwing him to the pavement.

“I-it… it was all for Shujin’s goo-” he choked out.

“Shut up.” Akechi spat.

“You don’t care about Shujin, you care about yourself. After I removed Kamoshida, you were afraid that you’d be next, so you quickly took over the power vacuum left behind, intent on saving yourself from justice. All you needed an excuse. A reason to do so many horrible things. And you found that pitiful excuse in Shujin. And you told the lie so much, you started to believe it yourself.” Akechi explained.

“I… I…”

“You’ve committed so many wrongs on so many innocents. We’ll let you live, if only to see you pay.” Morgana continued.

“Thank you! Thank-”

“We’re not doing it for you.” Yu interrupted.
Yu walked up to the sorry creature that was Shadow Kobayakawa, and extended his hand. The president, slowly but surely, placed the golden seal stamp in Yu’s clawed glove. He looked up at the group, tears in his eyes.

“W-what happens now?”

“Now, you repent.” Yu answered.

“Y-yes… I have done so many awful things. This is what I deserve. Goodbye rebels.” Kobayakawa said sorrowfully, as he began to turn to a bright light, and then… vanished.

“Good riddance.” Akechi sneered.

“Now what?” Shiho asked.

“Oh, now the Palace… uh oh.”


(Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv37wtDy-wk)

That’s when the ground began to shake, like there was a massive earthquake. Then, a bright orange light began to engulf the pavement. The four looked back and saw the volcano starting to erupt. Everyone looked to Morgana with fearful eyes.

“The Palace is collapsing! We have to exit now, WITH the Treasure!”

“To the Safe Room!” Yu suggested.

“Those won’t work! Not with the very essence of the Palace tearing itself apart!”

“Look! The airplane is still around!” Shiho yelled, pointing at the private jet they used to get here.

“Let’s go!” Yu ordered, pocketing the Treasure.

“What if the pilots aren’t there?!” Akechi asked.

“Then we figure out how to be pilots!”

The four entered, and, much to their surprise, the Shadow pilots were still there.

“What the?! It’s the rebels!”

“Take us to the mainland! Now!” Yu ordered, pulling out his gun.

In the panic, the Shadows took off immediately. Before they left, however, Morgana blew into her whistle once again, and the Mona-mobile, or what was left of it, vanished in a puff of smoke. As they barely escaped the lava consuming Kobayakawa’s private island, the team took a break. A break that didn’t last long as the plane began its descent into the ocean as the jets caught fire.

“What did you do?!” Yu demanded.

“If Shujin Nation dies, you die with it!” One Shadow yelled, prompting Yu to kill both of them. Taking the helm, he saw Shujin Nation in the distance, and it didn’t look pretty.
“Everyone! We’re coming in hard! Get ready to bail!” He yelled, setting the plane on a downward flight, then heading back to the passenger area. Everyone stood ready as the plane got closer and closer to the water.

“Ace, pair up with Carmen! Use your Personas to break your fall!” Yu suggested.

“Alright!!” Morgana acknowledged.

“On the count of three! One, two… THREE!!”

Yu and the others jumped out at just the right moment. Taking Yu’s advise, each used their Personas to make the landing actually comfortable, Boudica shooting jets of flame, Izanagi hovering, and Lady Trieu using the wind. They landed on the beach, the private jet exploding on impact. They heard screams of terror, and looked to see what all the commotion was. They could only stare in horror at what they were witnessing.

Shujin Nation was experiencing a massive earthquake, with several massive tornadoes to be seen in the distance, and several flies buzzing about like the whole area was just a giant pile of meat for them to feast on. Buildings were falling apart, students were falling and dying, and Shadows struggled to try and maintain a sense of order, and the propaganda that was being spewed out earlier was now just incoherent gibberish. Eventually, Yu was able to snap out of his shock, and nudged his teammates.

“Come on!! We have to go, now!!”

The four made a sprint for the exit, ignoring all of the chaos. The earthquake got worse, as a giant rift was starting to form in the center of Shujin, and it was gaining on them, fast. The team doubled their speed. Yu looked behind him and saw that the ground was giving way to an empty pit, and he forced his legs to run faster, the protesting muscles doing little to dissuade him. He looked at his phone. It was mostly static now, but the purple circle was there, and he was so close. He and his team almost ran out of ground to run on. They were so close. So close to winning, so close to surviving, so close to freedom…

The ground underneath began to give way. Yu closed his eyes, and took a leap of faith as the nation of gluttony finished its collapse.
Kobayakawa was on his way to the police station. He had almost been fired from his job because of that brat Shiho. Yu told him she wouldn't squeal, but apparently her savior’s life meant less than he thought it. Now, it was time to follow through with his promise. He pulled out his phone, and looked at the photo of Yu examining a machine pistol, with Akechi and a strange woman behind him. Once he showed this to the police, their lives would be beyond repair.

At that instant, he suddenly felt a massive headache at that thought. When it vanished as suddenly as it came, a tear fell from his cheeks. More victims added to the pile. More tears flowed from his eyes. True, Akechi and Yu might have done something illegal, but it was in retaliation for his actions, and he knew it. It was all to deliver justice on him. They were just children, trying to live their lives, and he put his foot on their throats. He forced them to do this. He deserved to be punished, for everything that he had done.

With his new resolution, Kobayakawa looked at the picture, and continued to march to the Police Station.

The group found itself in a predicament. After they had entered the purple circle, they were automatically flung back into the real world. The momentum from their panicked sprint made them collide, rather hard too, into a concrete wall, and also each other, leading to them all sprawled out on the ground in a pile. Picking themselves up off the ground, they took a moment to get their bearings.

“We’re… back in the real world.” Akechi groaned, still out of breath from the sprint.

“Does that mean… we succeeded?” Shiho asked.

“Well, let’s look around for the Treasure.” Morgana suggested.

The looking didn’t take long, as they found a diploma laying on the sidewalk next to them. Yu bent over and picked it up. He saw the words ‘Shujin Academy’ on it and his eyes almost popped out.

“What the? This is Kobayakawa’s high school diploma!” he exclaimed.

“What?!” Akechi pointed out, walking over an examining it.

“Yea, about that…” Morgana began sheepishly.

“Morgana, I swear, if we did all that for nothing…” Yu started.

“The Treasure in the waking world and the Palaces are completely different!” She hastily blurted out.

“What?!” Shiho, Akechi and Yu all asked at the same time.

“See, when someone brings a Treasure into the waking world, whatever was inside the Palace will transform into whatever was the source of the distortion here in the real world.”

“That makes. No sense.” Shiho pointed out.
“Their Treasure in the waking world, is basically the object that led to the formation of the Palace. So, it was whatever started their ambitions here in the real world. Right?” Yu rephrased.

“Yea!”

“Oh, that makes much more sense. But, does that mean Kobayakawa still has his real diploma?”

“Yes. But, since we have this, it meant that we escaped with the Treasure.”

There was a moment of silence before Yu asked the inevitable question.

“So what happens now?”

“I don’t know. We’ve done all we can in the Metaverse. Now all that’s left is to wait.” Was all Morgana could say. The Akechi picked up the diploma and turned to the others.

“If there truly is nothing we can do, then I say we head home.”

“And you’ll take the diploma with you?”

“Yes, simply because the only person who lives with me is Morgana. I imagine having to explain why you have a diploma that isn’t yours to the adults responsible for your well being will be rather difficult.” Akechi answered with a pleasant smile.

With nothing else needing to be said, the heroes returned to their respective homes, to await whatever came next.

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Akechi didn’t have to wait long. No sooner had he dropped the diploma in the trash did his cell phone start ringing.

“Who is it?” Morgana asked.

“My boss.” Akechi answered, picking up.

“Hello Azuma-san. How may I be of service?”

“Hello Akechi. We need you at the station. We have a man come by, claiming he came to turn himself in. Says his name’s Kobayakawa, and that he’ll talk to you specifically, and only you.”

Akechi’s grin exploded onto his face.

“Kobayakawa’s in the station?! Has he confessed to any crimes?!” He asked, not even trying to hold in his glee.

“Well, he said he’s done things ‘unbecoming of a teacher’, whatever that means.”

“I’m on my way! Ensure no one, except maybe Sae-san, speak to him! And get Principle Ushimaru down there please.”

He turned to Morgana, a gleam in his eyes.

“Call the others and tell them to get to the station! Kobayakawa turned himself in!”
The guide from the Velvet Room opened her phone and frantically began to type.

Morgana: Gush, gytd!

Yu: What are you trying to type?

Morgana: Guys! Guys!

Shiho: What is it Morgana? Did something happen?

Morgana: Yea something happened! Akechi says get to the station, Kobayakawa turned himself in!

Yu: WHAT?!

Shiho: That’s great news! Unless he’s turning over Yu's blackmail...

Yu: We’re on our way!

Yu and the others had arrived at the station, where Kaneshiro and Morgana were waiting.

“Glad to see you could make it. Akechi’s already interrogating him.” The cop informed.

“Good. Has he mentioned anything about you-know-what?” Shiho asked. Yu shot a look to Kaneshiro on reaction, to which the cop replied.

“I’m assuming she’s talking about the model gun? Relax kid, I ain’t a snitch.”

“No, and if he did, I’m sure that Akechi will make sure that it’s stricken from the records.”

“You’re correct on that account Morgana.” Akechi said, walking up to the group with the biggest smile any of them had seen on him in a long time, and carrying his suitcase.

“How’s the situation looking?” Yu asked.

“It’s the best case scenario, for now. Kobayakawa confessed, on tape, and deleted all the blackmail material he had on everyone. All that’s needed is for Sae-san to get down here and prosecute the bastard.”

“And when will she be here?”

“Right now Narukami.” Sae said, walking into the station.

“Hello Sae-san. Thanks for coming on such short notice.” Akechi greeted.

“Cut to the chase. Who are we dealing with, and why is he so important? You made him sound like the Prime Minister.”

Akechi opened up his suitcase and handed her the papers within. She began to skim through them as Akechi gave her the rundown.

“Yuuto Kobayakawa. Former boxing coach at Shujin Academy.” Akechi began, everyone noticing how Sae’s eyes widened when Akechi said ‘Shujin’. The detective continued.

“He confessed to a number of deplorable crimes. Rape, abuse, assault and blackmail. I’ve been
trying to take him down for years, and I can confirm that all of these claims are true.”

“Did he try any of those on Makoto?” Sae growled, visibly starting to crumple the papers.

“No. I suspect he knew that if he did try, she would go straight to you.”

Akechi’s words cooled the prosecutor’s ire. Sae then noticed Shiho and Morgana.

“What are you all doing here?”

“Akechi called the three of us in, as potential witnesses. Shiho especially.” Yu lied.

“Oh, that’s right, you were his most recent victim, weren’t you?”

“That’s right.” Shiho answered.

“Alright, in that case, follow me. I’ll gather your testimonies and use them as evidence.”

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Yu sat in the interview room, the last of the four to give their testimonies. Morgana told the story of how she found Shiho busted and bruised, Shiho told about how Ann was forced against her will to date multiple boys to get dirt on them, and how Shiho herself was almost driven to attempting suicide. And finally, Akechi told the whole story of his war with the coach, from the lockup of Kamoshida, to the destruction of his teams, to the calling cards by the Phantom Team. And now, it was Yu’s turn. He took a breath to steady himself, and sat down on a leather seat. He had nothing to fear, right?

“Hello Narukami. To be perfectly honest, I hoped we’d never be in this position.” Sae greeted, albeit solemnly.

“Well, look on the bright side. I could be the criminal, rather than the victim.”

Yu saw Sae allow herself a small smile.

“True enough. But we’re here on business, so let’s get straight to the heart of the matter.”

Sae’s hardened features returned as opened her files, then her notebook and pen, and started asking questions.

“First of all, can you tell me how you got involved in this? Tell me everything.”

“Well, it all began the day I was born.”

“Narukami, I’m trying to do my job. Don’t think you’re afforded special privileges just because you’re in my care.”

“Yes Sae-san. Sorry, Sae-san.” Yu replied before clearing his throat.

“So, it all began shortly after I arrived at Shujin. I found out that my record was leaked, due to all the whispering from other students. That was when Akechi confronted me and told me about his history with Kobayakawa. After that, a few days had passed, and Kobayakawa summoned me to his office. What Akechi said was true: Kobayakawa had the entire student body under his thumb, and he wanted me to join that number.”

“I see, so he obtained blackmail on you. What was it?”
“Sae-san, I’d prefer it stay private, so—”

“Didn’t I say tell me everything?”

Yu turned away from her. He had to think of something, and fast. A flush rose in his cheeks as he gave his most believable lie yet.

“It was a video of me dancing in the panda costume.”

“You in the panda costume? Dancing?” Sae asked flatly.

“Y-yea.”

“Why do you wear that if your so embarrassed of it?” The wine-red eyed woman questioned.

“It’s… comfy.”

Sae let out a loud, exasperated sigh before continuing.

“Moving on, Kobayakawa said that the moment school was out, you and Akechi bolted through the doors like cheetahs. I can understand Akechi, he was under suspicion of delivering the calling card. But why did you run?”

“Akechi said that he would have a better chance at surviving Kobayakawa if he had a ‘potential witness’, and dragged me around until he got the call.”

Sae scribbled down some notes.

“Well, your testimony lines up with the others. Thank you Narukami. This trial will be over in a few days. Come on, let's go.”

The two got up and Yu gave Sae a small bow before the two returned to the others, all of them, especially Akechi, waiting anxiously.

“What’s the news?”

“Honestly, if this keeps up, we might not even need to hold a trial and send him straight to lockup.” Sae reported.

“If only.” Akechi mused.

“Heh. If only.” Sae replied.

Suddenly, the police doors opened and in stepped in Ryuji, Futaba, Ann, and Kawakami.

“Ah, our second batch of witnesses are here.” Akechi pointed out.

“Is there something wrong? Are we in trouble?” Kawakami asked, her eye bags even more prominent without makeup.

“Oh, quite the opposite. Kobayakawa has turned himself in, confessed to his crimes, and destroyed all blackmail evidence.” Akechi informed.

The news was met with a mix of surprise, joy, and relief. Kawakami clasped her hands around her mouth as tears of joy flowed forth. Futaba visibly recoiled, Ryuji’s jaw dropped, while Ann jumped for joy.
“For real?!” Ryuji cried out.

“S-so… that calling card… wasn’t a prank?” Futaba asked.

“It would appear that way.” Yu answered.

“And speaking of the calling card, I would to ask you all… what do you think about this so-called ‘Phantom Team’?” Sae asked.

“Well if those Phantom Team guys are for real, then they got my support.” Ryuji answered enthusiastically.

“Well, they said they’d make Kobayakawa confess, and that’s what he did. So long as he’s gone, I’m happy.” Ann added.

“Everyone’s happy to see that bastard gone, believe me.” Kawakami continued.

“Their calling card could be worded better, but hey, I’ll take what I can get.” Futaba finished.

“So, you’re all in support of them?”

“Hell yea!” Ryuji answered, to which the others simply nodded.

“Alright then. Now, if you could follow me, we’ll get started.”

Sae and the new arrivals went down the hall, leaving Akechi, Yu, Shiho, and Morgana alone. They walked to a secluded corner, where they could talk in private.

“Now what?” Shiho asked.

“Now, we celebrate. We traveled across an ocean, infiltrated a military compound, scaled an active volcano, fought a giant mech/tank hybrid, and won. A little rest and relaxation is the least we deserve.” Yu suggested.

“I agree. Anyone have any ideas as to how?” Morgana asked.

“Well, Sae-san still owes me a celebration party from when we took down Madarame. I could let her off the hook and say it’s for the four of us.” Akechi suggested.

“That sounds perfect. How about an all-you-can eat buffet?” Yu asked.

“Will there be sushi there?!” Morgana asked excitedly.

“Sushi, fried fish, chocolate, deviled eggs, steaks, and even delicious pancakes!” Akechi answered, Morgana’s excitement infecting him.

“When will we do it?” Shiho asked.

“How about Children’s Day? It’s the last day of Golden Week, and that’s just around the corner.” Akechi asked.

“Then it’s settled. Akechi will try to get Sae-san to reserve us a spot at an all-you-can eat buffet, and then we feast to our hearts’ content.” Yu finished.

The three gave a nod to show they understood. With nothing else to discuss, the four split up and headed to their respective homes. As he was on the train, Yu sent a single text to all of them.
Yu: Good job everyone. You should be proud of yourselves.

“We couldn’t have done it without you!” was the reply.

Sae sat in her office alone, finishing the last of the paperwork that would put Kobayakawa behind bars. As she finished up, her mind began to drift. Specifically, to the calling card. Just who, or what, was the ‘Phantom Team’? The most obvious culprit would be Akechi, but she couldn’t rule out the possibility that it was someone who knew that Akechi had issues with Kobayakawa and would exploit that to cover their tracks. Not to mention, he’s been having this feud since his first year of high school. It could be that it wasn’t even a student, but a faculty member that got tired with the Coach. No. If it was, they would have gone to the police, and if it was Akechi, he would have done it sooner. The ‘Team’ could either be a group of people, or one person. A student, one who would have the will to fight Kobayakawa, rather than bow down.

Sae began to think. She may not have Akechi’s astounding luck and deductive skills, but she was still intelligent, and her intuition never failed her before. She mentally put together a profile, and started looking though who would match it. A student who just arrived at Shujin and had an axe to grind against Kobayakawa, and was intelligent enough to avoid attention. The public display of a calling card also showed that the ‘Phantom Team’ believed itself in the right, suggesting that they have a strong sense of personal justice and thus, were willing to be judged by the people. Right then her intuition spoke a single name to her.

**Yu Narukami.**

Her brow furrowed, thinking back to her spar with Narukami. He refused to give up, to let himself stay down, even though it was clear that he couldn’t win, on top of the fact that he tried to help someone getting mugged, despite already being told, numerous times to not get into trouble. And then there’s the fact that, despite his record being leaked, he had no trouble forming friends. Granted, they were from circumstance, but still, it would be enough to form a team.

Sae leaned against her chair and shook her head. She was jumping to conclusions, just like in the car when Narukami first got here, or when he offered to get on her good side. And yet, the nagging feeling that Narukami was the one she was looking for persisted. She sighed and shrugged. Narukami would be working for her this Sunday. She would observe him then, and if she spotted anything suspicious, then, and only then, would she investigate. She did promise to give him a chance, fair and square.

With that thought in mind, the silver-haired prosecutor went back to work.
The Team is Forged

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yusuke Kitagawa sat on the roof of his highschool, Kosei High, a canvas at the ready, his brushes ready to paint whatever his heart desired. Except what his heart desired, he could not paint. In front of him was a girl many in his school swooned over, and a boy sitting opposite of her. In between them was a Shogi board.

“Check.” The girl stated calmly, moving a piece into the proper position. Her opponent sunk his head low, declaring that he conceived.

The girl began to pack up her materials, and as she left to the exit, Yusuke grabbed her arm.

“Wait Hifumi. I would like to talk to you. Please.” He requested.

The girl, Hifumi, nodded and sat down. She had dark black hair going down to her shoulders, dark green eyes, and in her hair was a red ribbon accessory resembling a three-leaf clover and a rope. She wore the standard Kosei uniform, with a dark blue knee-length skirt, a white dress shirt though, unlike Yusuke, she had a navy blue blazer with a star on it on top. Engraved on the star was the number two. She looked Yusuke dead in the eyes.

“What is it Yusuke? Need more time to finish?”

“There’s nothing to finish.” Yusuke said, revealing that his canvas was just as blank as the day it was made. Hifumi’s eyes widened in shock.

“You didn’t paint anything? Why?” She calmly asked, more confused than anything. It wasn’t like Yusuke to not even attempt a drawing.

“Because you gave me nothing to paint with.” Yusuke replied.

“What do you mean?” Hifumi asked.

“In the past, it’s not just your incredible beauty, but your unique playing spirit that I attempt to capture in my art. That spirit wasn’t here today. In fact, it hasn’t been here for the past few weeks. If I tried to put you to canvas now, it would be like painting a doll; no life or substance. At first, I thought maybe you weren’t feeling well, or having a bad day. But this has persisted long enough. I cannot ignore this. Not after Madarame. I beg you; please tell me what’s wrong.” Yusuke explained.

Hifumi turned her gaze to the ground, as if she thought that if she didn’t look at him, Yusuke would give up this line of questioning. But this only prompted him to continue.

“I know I’m most likely prying into personal matters, but I consider you one of my few, if not only, friends in this school. I want to help you, just like you did with me after Madarame.”

Hifumi bit her lip. True, she also considered Yusuke to also be one of her closest friends. He was the only boy who didn’t want to know her because of her looks, and he didn’t get weirded out by her… tendencies while playing shogi. And he did trust her enough to let her help with the Madarame case. And the only reason he was talking to her now was because he really was worried. She took in a deep breath.
“It’s my mother.” She began, Yusuke leaning in to catch every detail.

Yu was in the middle of a lecture by Kawakami, who was looking much better than when he saw her yesterday. In fact, the whole school seemed to be a much brighter place with Kobayakawa removed. The air of oppression was gone, like a winter blizzard finally giving way to a radiant spring.

News had also broken about Kobayakawa’s arrest, with Ushimaru condemning his actions, and applauding the actions of the mysterious ‘Phantom Team’ for bringing him down. In fact, the whole school was abuzz about the Team. Who were they? How did they do it? Will they strike again? A lot of people were saying that the Team was Akechi and Makoto, but other students said that maybe the Team was using that knowledge to cover their identities. And some even went so far as to say that they were a supernatural force. Despite Kawakami’s best efforts, people refused to be quiet about them. Yu smiled, glad that they were finally talking about something other than him. Well, they technically were talking about him, but still. His phone buzzed, and he looked at the newly received text.

Akechi: I have excellent news everyone!

Shiho: You got Sae to give us the reservation?!

Akechi: I did! Now, Sae-san won’t be able to join us on account of the case, and sadly, Makoto-san has rejected my offer to join us.

Morgana: How is that a bad thing? We’ll be able to talk freely among ourselves.

Akechi: True, but I hoped Makoto-san would be there.

Yu: Maybe next time buddy. You got it on Children’s Day, correct?

Akechi: Of course.

Yu: Perfect. Let me know if anyone has to make any last-minute changes, but otherwise, hope to see you all there in a few days.

Shiho: Wouldn’t miss it for anything.

The final bell rang, and Yu realized that, for the first time in a long time, he was free to do however he pleased. But before he left for the station, he couldn’t help but notice a girl struggling with some plant fertilizer. She wore a pink turtleneck cardigan with short puffed sleeves and a long-sleeved white shirt underneath, as per uniform regulations. The cardigan was zipped open up to her navel, and has two large pockets on the front. She also had the standard red and black Shujin skirt, white tights with a black flower pattern and black Mary Jane shoes. Yu decided to offer his assistance, temporarily forgetting about his reputation.

“Excuse me miss, would you like a hand with that?” He asked.

The woman turned around, her chestnut hair was cut in short waves, giving it the appearance of fluffiness. She had hazel eyes, and…

Oh my God, look at the size of that forehead. You could write a paragraph on that thing.

“Oh hello. Aren’t you that criminal everyone was talking about? Yu Narukami?” She asked in
the sweetest voice possible.

“O-oh. Yea, I am, but-”

“I would love some help! These bags are much too heavy to lift alone.” The young woman exclaimed.

“Oh, ok. Where do you… want them?” Yu grunted, hauling three very heavy bags up.

“The roof, if you please.” She also grunted, picking up one bag.

*Of course that’s where they need to be.*

Once they opened the doors, Yu saw a beautiful garden. It wasn’t a flower garden, but one that had fruits and vegetables starting to sprout. Yu set his bags down, and the girl followed suit, placing all the bags in one neat pile. Once they were done, Yu and the girl collapsed on nearby seats, taking in deep gulps of air.

“Thank you so much for your help. I think I can take it from here.” The girl said, getting up.

“No problem. Did you start this all by yourself?”

“Mhm. It’s been my hobby since my first year. No one comes up here, so it’s my little secret.”

“Heh. Bet you regretted it once Kobayakawa found out.”

“Oh, he found out, but he knew better than to try and blackmail me.” She pointed out, a sweet smile on her face.

“Oh yea? And what makes you special?”

“My name is Haru Okumura.” From the way she said it, you'd think she was the second coming of Jesus.

“I… have no idea who you are.”

At that news, Haru’s already sweet smile got even sweeter, now radiating pure joy.

“Oh really?”

“Yea. Should I do my research?”

“NO!! I-I mean, please don’t. Too many people try to mooch off me as is.”

“Ah, so your an heiress then? Or at least very rich?”

“Correct. Okumura Foods, though you may know us as Big Bang Burger.”

“Wow. With that much wealth, I would’ve thought you’d get a private tutor.”

“My father strongly argued for it, but I wanted to go to a regular high school, to try and make friends. But the closest ones are Mako-chan and Akechi-kun, and even they only talk to me to discuss school or legal matters.”

“So your only friends are the plants.”

“Correct. And before you ask, no, I do not talk to the plants.”
“Haha! So why a gardan? Why not pets to keep you company?”

“Oh, I don’t have to pick up a plant’s poop.”

Yu was left speechless both at how nonchalant she said that sentence, and that she said it with a straight face.

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Um…. D-Do you need me to stick around?”

“I would appreciate the assistance, yes. And the company.”

“Alright. I don’t have much of a green thumb, so you’ll have to tell me what to do.”

“That’s fine. I stumbled a few times myself when I started out. First thing you do is—”

The two went at it for a long time, discussing tips and tricks to how to maintain a garden, how deep to bury a seed, histories of different plants, how to cook each one, and so on. The process went on for hours and hours on end, until finally, the sun began to set. Yu got up, dirt and dust caking his pants and hands. Haru stood up as well, dusting herself off. Both looked at the time and exchanged looks.

“Well, we managed to get everything done, and there’s still light out. That’s a first.” Haru said with a small smile.

“Heh. Yea, gardening isn’t for those who lack patience, that’s for damn sure.”

“We should be leaving. With the plants all taken care of, we don’t have a reason to stay here.” Haru said, walking through the door to the school. Once they got past the gates, Haru spoke up again.

“It was nice meeting you Naru-chan. You aren’t nearly as scary as everyone says.”

“It was nice meeting you too Okumura-senpai.”

“Oh, no need for honorifics. Just call me Haru.”

“Ok Haru. This was way more fun than I thought it would be.”

“Me too. I’ve tended to the soil up there at least 2,386 times, and this was easily both the fastest, and the most fun.”

“I’m glad. Have a safe trip back home.”

As Yu started to walk away, he heard Haru call to him.

“Naru-chan! Will I ever see you again? Up there, I mean!”

“Sure! I’ll try to stop by every now and again!” Yu yelled back.

Even from as far as they were, Yu could still see the sweet smile as he walked back to the apartment.
I am thou. Thou art I.

Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth.

With the birth of the Sun Arcana

Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power.

It was finally Children’s Day. The day Yu and his friends received their just rewards for what they did. Yu was dressed in a regular white polo shirt tucked into some jeans as he headed to the address Akechi sent them. He either got there first, or everyone else was inside. He pulled out his phone to ask until he heard his name being called.

“Yu! Yuuuuuuuuuu!” The voice was full of joy and excitement. At first, Yu assumed that it was Morgana, but after turning around, he saw that it was instead none other than Shiho. His jaw dropped at how beautiful she was.

She was dressed in a red, cold shoulder, lace blouse with a giant blue heart on her chest, along with a pair of jeans that fit her like a glove, knee high leather high-heels, and a pair of small, ruby earrings. Her usual ponytail was gone and in its place, her hair was tied up in a Bohemian Bride style braid. She also wore light makeup on her eyes, lips, and cheeks.

“Hey, you look gorgeous.” Yu greeted automatically.

“Aww, thank you! You don’t look too bad yourself, leader. You rock the simple look.” She complimented, making him blush.

“T-thanks.”

“Hey, is everyone inside already? I haven’t eaten anything in preparation for this!”

“Nope, Akechi is on the phone with the grown up evil-eye. He’ll be here soon enough.” Morgana answered, walking up to the two.

“Oh hey Morgana, you look rather nice.” Shiho pointed out, looking at her companion.

“Thanks! When I heard that this was a place where apparently the higher citizens went to mingle, I asked Akechi to help me pick something out.”

Morgana spun around to show off her clothes. It was a black long-sleeved sundress with yellow cat paws decorating it, and held at the waist by her ‘V’ belt. Her raven black hair was done with in long, cascading curls, and unlike Shiho, she didn’t wear any makeup.

“Hello everyone. Glad to see you made it. Shall we head inside?” Akechi asked, dressed in his usual old man clothes.

The team all nodded and went inside. Despite some doubt from the receptionist about how people so young could afford a reservation here, she was eventually forced to let them pass. What they saw when they arrived at the buffet made their hearts dance with delight. Food from breakfast, to lunch, to dinner, to dessert were stretched as far as the eye could see. Morgana took straight off to get themselves a table and the second she left, Yu saw someone spot them and make a beeline
“Alright, while Morgana's getting us a table, everyone grab a plate and dig in! We’re allowed an hour and a half, so let’s make the most of it.” Akechi said.

By now, the man was standing right behind Akechi, and when the detective turned around, he let out a small gasp. Then he gave a look of relief, then annoyance, then confusion. The man gave a devilish smirk, and addressed the red-eyed student.

“Goro Akechi. The Detective Prick.”

The man appeared to be no older than they were, and he exuded an aura of cockyness. He had dark, unkempt hair, to the point of it being considered frizzy. He wore a pair of jeans, a plain white t-shirt and a black unbuttoned vest. He also had a pair of glasses, but behind those glasses were deep grey eyes, not unlike Yu’s. And just like Yu’s, these eyes held a fire behind them, one that would never be put out, and would only come back stronger if someone tried. Akechi smirked when he turned around, seeming to recognize this man.

“Akira Kurusu. Living proof that Jesus’ death was for nothing.” Akechi replied with a lighthearted chuckle.

“It’s good to see you alive and kicking.” Akira stated, holding out a hand for a high-five, which Akechi returned.

“Akira. Please don’t tell me you’ve come back to Shujin.” Shiho replied with a wince.

“Nah Shiho, nothing of the sort. In fact, believe it or not, I’m here on business.”

“What kind of business?” Shiho asked, suspicious.

“Afraid I can’t tell you. Top secret work. But don’t worry, it’s perfectly legal.”

“You always say that when it’s illegal.” Shiho replied.

“If you want Shiho, you could hang out with me to confirm. I promise to make it worth your while.” Akira suggested with a sly wink and cheeky grin.

“Care to introduce us?” Yu asked, jealous anger starting to rise up.

“Ah yes, that’s right. Akira, meet Yu Narukami.” Akechi greeted.

“Narukami? Of course, I should have guessed. At first I thought you were some old man, and Akechi brought you here to discuss a case.”

“What made you think I’m old?”

“Your hair is grey, and it’s in a bowl cut. Only old guys have bowl cuts.”

“Oh that’s a load of BS.”

“No it really isn’t. Go back to school, see how many young people have bowl cuts.”

“Well at least I don’t have a mop for hair.” Yu retorted.

“Ahahaha! I like this guy, Akechi. Oh, and I heard that Kobayakawa is finally locked up. Congrats.”
“Thank you Akira. In fact, that’s why we’re here; to celebrate his removal.”

“Really? Because I heard it was a group called the Phantom Team, not you, that put him away.”

“True, but we were all victims, so we’re all celebrating all the same. How have you been, Akira?”

“I’ve been great. Made a few new friends at Gekkoukan High. There’s the one rich girl who totally has the hots for me. She just doesn’t know it yet.” Akira answered, getting an eye roll from Shiho in response.

“In fact, I’ve joined a club there. Very special, and exclusive. How exclusive? You don’t ask to be a part of it. You get asked.” Akira continued, his devilish smirk returning.

“Well it’s standards must be pretty low if it’s asking you.” Yu replied, but this only made Akira’s smirk grow even bigger.

“And their standards would be even lower if they asked the son of a drunk, washed-up cop to join.”

As soon as those words left Akira’s lips, Yu’s anger spiked.

“You take that back!” Yu demanded, ready to lunge at Akira, but Akechi stepped between the two, stopping a potential fight before it began. Akira’s watch beeped and he took a step back, his grin never faltering.

“Well, it looks like the guy I’m supposed to meet is going to be here soon. You guys have fun. See ya.” Akira said, turning around and walking to the elevators.

“Akechi, who was that guy?” Yu asked, his anger still in his voice.

“That was Akira Kurusu, my rival at school.”

“Your rival?”

“Yes. Akira and Akechi were very alike. Both were popular with the ladies, highly intelligent, highly athletic, and worked with other people in mind” Shiho started.

“The difference is that I like to work within the rules, whereas Akira preferred to bend, if not outright break them. And he was damn good at hiding his tracks, to the point that only I was able to uncover what he was up to. But, he did enjoy helping people, though I think it’s because of the fame that came with it.” Akechi finished.

“Hey guys, what are you standing around for? We have a limited window to eat, don’t we?” Morgana asked, returning with two plates full of sushi and other sea food.

After the group had gotten their fair share of food, they each returned to the table Morgana claimed for them and dug in. Akechi got mountains upon mountains of pancakes, waffles, and bacon and sausage. Morgana stuffed her plates with sushi, fatty tuna, and every other kind of fish that the buffet had to offer. Shiho piled herself with steak, pork ribs, and other kinds of meats, with some chocolate sweets. Yu was feasting on a mix of all those, along with some beans and veggies thrown in.
“Hey guys, I need to use the bathroom.” Shiho said, clutching her stomach.

“Yea, me too.” Morgana added.

“As do I.” Akechi also added.

“Let’s go. Man, eating a ton of food at once is a lot more work than anime makes it out to be.” Yu stated, grabbing his stomach.

Unfortunately, the building had its restrooms down on the bottom floor, most likely to make room for more food at the buffet area. But, the group was able to make it in time before anything too disastrous happened. After relieving themselves, they were now standing by the elevators, ready to head back up.

“We still have approximately 30 more minutes.” Akechi said, looking at his watch.

“Yea. You know, I still have some room for dessert.” Yu said.

“Oh, I can show you where.” Shiho replied.

“We, show me too. I wanna see what a-OUCH!!” Morgana cried out, a man shoving himself past her. And he wasn’t alone. Standing with him were several mean-looking men, presumably his bodyguards. He was completely bald, and had a stubble of a beard, and yellow-tinted, half-rimmed glasses at the bottom.

“I don’t care if it could be an isolated incident. I want this investigated, thoroughly.” He ordered. Yu suddenly felt a sense of deja vu upon hearing this man’s voice.

_His voice… where have I heard it from?_

“Excuse me. We were here first.” Akechi pointed out.

“Yes, what of it?” One of the men asked. The leader turned to Akechi.

“Apparently, this place’s standards have dropped since I last came here. Have they opened a daycare?” He mocked.

“Hey!” Morgana called, walking to the man, only to be shoved back by one of the bodyguards, forcing her to land on her butt. There was a ding, signaling the elevator.

“Don’t bother. We have better things to do than deal with brats.” The leader told them, and they soon followed him into the elevator. Shiho helped Morgana up.

“You ok?”

“Yea, I’m fine. But what jerks! Can’t even let us have a dang elevator.” Morgana answered, rubbing her sore butt.

“Come on. Let’s take the stairs.” Yu suggested.

The celebration was almost over. By now, everyone had almost their fill of cookies, cake, and other sweets. Right now, they were waiting for Akechi to get them some milkshakes so that they
could make a toast, then they would lounge around, waiting for the time to run out. Akechi arrived with some milkshakes, one last thing before they left.

“Here you go everyone. A toast, if you please.”

They all leaned forward, grabbed a milkshake and with a *clink*, Akechi made his toast.

“To end of President Kobayakawa’s reign. May no one ever come to take his place.”

“It was fun while it lasted.” Shiho added, pulling her straw out and blowing the wrapper to hit Yu’s face, to which he responded in kind.

“Wait… that’s it? We’re going to disband?” Morgana asked, confused.

“I’m afraid so. We all gathered to see Kobayakawa removed, correct?” Akechi asked, albeit with a forlorn look.

Yu was ready to agree with Akechi, but then he remembered the words of his contract. If the world was to survive, he would need to find the truth, and according to Igor, that truth was whoever really brought him to Tokyo, and why. And as of right now, Yu had no leads other than the Metaverse. If he wanted to go at this, he knew he couldn’t go alone.

“But why stop at Kobayakawa?” He asked, earning a pause from the others.

“What are you getting at Yu?” Shiho asked, breaking the silence.

“Well, it’s just that…. We have the ability to change people’s hearts, to make criminals confess and put them away, when no one else is able to. Corrupt bankers, assassins, crime bosses, corporate businessmen. There is so much good we can do with the Metaverse. So I say we stick together, that we use this gift we have to remove people like Kobayakawa, and be heroes to people who are being hurt because of them.” Yu explained.

“You don’t have to ask me twice!” Morgana exclaimed.

“I like the sound of being a hero. I’m in.” Akechi said, not even trying to hide his smirk.

“Count me in too. If there’s people out there who are hurting others like Kobayakawa was, then I want to take them down.” Shiho said, slamming her fist into her open palm.

“Alright, but if we’re going to do this, there’s a rule I’d like to have: After we find a potential target, we only go after them once we’ve unanimously agreed to so.” Yu suggested.

“I like that. That way, no one goes behind the others’ backs for their own reasons.” Akechi approved.

“Yea, me too. Makes it seem like we’re in a pact!” Shiho said excitedly.

“Alright then. I say we keep calling ourselves the Phantom Team, unless someone has something better?” Morgana questioned.

“I have something better.” Yu stated.

Everyone leaned in close as he paused for effect.
Dear Diary:

Well, we did it. Kobayakawa’s now locked up, and I hope they threw away the key. To celebrate, we went to an all-you-can-eat buffet. Despite some assholes present, notably this one jackass that looked like Pitbull, and a smug bastard named Akira, we managed to have a fun time. To say Shiho looked stunning would not do her justice. And speaking of justice, we decided to continue our work in the Metaverse. I suggested we change our group name to the Hamburglars, but my friends have no sense of humor, so we’re sticking to the ‘Phantom Team’. This year has only just begun, and I can’t wait to see what awaits us.

Chapter End Notes

And so ends the Kobayakawa arc!
Before we continue, I would like you to know a few things:
Due to how long the story is, I want to keep in any confidants that'll be relevant to the
story. This means I won't be able to fit in every Arcana, so I apologize if I don't put in your favorite Confidant.
Second, I'm going to try my hand at romance, but I'm not exactly the best at it, so I apologize if it comes of as cringe.
But other than that, what do think about the fic so far? Are you enjoying it, what was your favorite part, what do you hope to see in the future?
With the celebration now over, Yu was fast asleep, a smile on his face as he began to dream. He soon awakened to the sound not of chains, but of clapping. He opened his eyes and saw that he was in the Velvet Room, and the clapping was coming from none other than Igor himself, his cheshire grin displayed proudly. Even Caroline and Justine had gentle smiles on their faces. Yu got up and approached the bars of his cell.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room. It appears congratulations are in order.” Igor stated cheerfully.


“Not bad inmate, not bad. Though, it would have been better if you didn’t have a break down at the start.” Caroline added.

“Now now Caroline, this is supposed to be a joyous occasion.” Igor reminded.

“Sorry master.” Caroline apologised.

“Regardless, well done on expelling a glutton of sin from your life. You’ve made great strides in your rehabilitation. And yet…”

Igor snapped his fingers, and the contract Yu signed hovered in front of him

“The contract has not been fulfilled. Ruin still approaches.”

“How do I stop it?” Yu asked, determination in his voice.

“The same way you stopped the glutton; with friends at your side.” Justine answered.

“Don’t underestimate the power of bonds, inmate. Like we said earlier, the power of your bonds will determine the power of your Personas, and vice versa.” Caroline added.

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“You must do as you have up until now; remove distortion from the world. Continue your quest to expunge tyrants from your society, and uncover the truth.” Igor explained.

“Ok, so keep infiltrating Palaces and stealing Treasures. Got it.”

“Wait a moment inmate!” Caroline cried out.

“What is it?”

“Because my sister and I care about your well-being, we’ve come up with a list of challenges to complete.” Caroline explained.

“These challenges range from acquiring Personas with certain skills, to defeating certain enemies, to obtaining unique items. With each challenge complete, a new service of the Velvet Room will be available to you.” Justine continued. Yu read the list. There were ten in all, and the first one was obtain a Jack Frost with a Bufula skill. Whipping it out, the twins regarded it, then each other.

“My my my. It would appear our guest is more resourceful than we gave him credit for.” Igor
mused.

“Wow. I honestly didn’t expect that. Well… uh… good job. But that’s only the beginning! You’re going to have to work hard at the others!” Caroline snapped.

“Let him have this Caroline. Though she is correct, it will only get harder from here on out, but I am most pleased that you’ve gotten a head start.”

Yu could feel the expectations from the twins, and was determined to exceed them.

\[
\text{I am thou. Thou art I.}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast acquired a new vow.}
\]

\[
\text{It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth.}
\]

\[
\text{With the birth of the Strength Arcana}
\]

\[
\text{Thou hast obtained the blessing that will lead thee to new power.}
\]

And with that, the bell rang. Yu walked over to his prison bed, and closed his eyes.

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

A good few days had passed since Children’s Day, and Akechi had gone to work, trying to find suitable people for them to target. Yu was sitting quietly at his desk, doing some homework, when he suddenly felt his phone buzz. Pulling it out, he saw an unrecognizable logo on his screen. A giant black blob with shark teeth, blue eyes, a pair of cat ears, with a tail lit up, like it was a fuse. Beneath the image were two sentences.

“Greetings, Yu Narukami. I am Alibaba.”

“Who are you, and how did you get my number?” Was his hasty reply.

“I already told you, I am Alibaba. As to getting your number… well, let’s just say I have my ways.”

“So you’re a hacker.”

“Guilty as charged, but we have more important matters to discuss. Like your work with the Phantom Team.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. Removing Kobayakawa helped many, but it is not enough.”

“What do you want?”

“It’s not a matter of what I want, but what other people want.”

Yu wanted to know who this person was. He closed his eyes and sent Izanagi out. He knew that the god would be unable to trace the hack, or force the hacker out of his phone, but he had a sneaking suspicion of who this “Alibaba” was in the real world, and Izanagi could confirm that. Unfortunately, the lunch bell rang, forcing Yu to recall his Persona. He took one last look at his phone, and saw the final text from Alibaba.
“Consider this a present. From me, to you.”

“What is this?” He typed, only to get an ‘Error; address does not exist’ message. He wasn’t exactly keen on clicking on random links from strangers, but then he heard Izanagi talk.

**Look at what the link contains. ‘Phansite’.

*We can’t trust a random link. Especially from a complete stranger.*

**Except that complete stranger knew that we’re members of the Phantom Team. They could have blackmailed us outright.**

*Or maybe this link is the blackmail.*

**Only one way to find out.**

Yu pressed the link, and to his surprise it took him to a website dedicated to the Phantom Team. Specifically, it held up requests of people who wanted the Team to steal a certain heart. Most of them were stupid; a friend owing someone money, an ex who cheated on someone, and so forth. Most of them didn’t even provide a name, though Yu figured that it was to be expected, most people probably didn’t even know the Team needed one. He let out a heavy sigh. At the very least, they might be able to determine their next target from this. He got out his lunch and started eating, then texted the others.

Yu: Guys, have any of you heard of something called the ‘Phansite’?

Shiho: No, I haven’t. What is it?

Akechi: It’s apparently a sight where people can post the names of people whose hearts they want changed.

Shiho: Really? Then it should be good practice for us while we’re deciding who our next target is? Maybe we can check to see if one of those names has a Palace?

Akechi: An excellent suggestion.

Yu: There’s more.

Shiho: Really?

Yu: The person who created this goes by the name ‘Alibaba’. And he knows I’m a member of the Team.

Akechi: Has he tried to blackmail you?

Yu: Not yet.

Akechi: We have to look into this.

Yu: I’m already looking into it. I have a pretty good idea as to who it is already. I just need to wait until Alibaba contacts me again. If my hunch is wrong, then we can start investigating. I don’t want another Kobayakawa so soon.

Akechi: Agreed. And it’s even worse since we don’t know Alibaba’s real name, so we can’t steal his heart if he has a Palace.
Shiho: Guys, maybe you’re overreacting. Maybe Alibaba is a fan and just wants to help?

Yu: Then why didn’t he use his real name to contact us?

Shiho: …. Good point.

Akechi: In any event, we should look into this ‘Phansite’ and what it can do for us. Let us meet up at the Shibuya station entrance.

Yu sat around with Shiho at the subway, waiting for Akechi to arrive with Morgana. He noticed Shiho pacing herself back and forth, and decided to speak up.

“Nervous?”

“Oh? U-um… no.”

“Shiho, your acting is as bad as Ann’s.”

“Oh come on, no one is as bad as Ann.”

“Well, your coming pretty close.”

Shiho let out a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes.

“You know we’re friends now, right? If there’s something bothering you, then I want to help.”

Yu stated.

“I know, it’s just, I don’t want to burden you with my problems.”

Yu placed a hand on Shiho’s shoulder and smiled tenderly.

“You’re not a burden. Not to me.” He said, earning a small smile from Shiho in response.

“It’s my parents.” She finally said, her smile vanishing.

“Are they still mistreating you?”

“Yes… and no. See, they want me to still do the best I can, but they’re more passive aggressive about it.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well… they told me that if I wanted to continue hanging out with you, Ann and the others, I had to score top marks on the midterm.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

“They said ‘if you care about hanging out with that filthy criminal, we’ll accept nothing less than the best scores.’”

“Ouch. That doesn’t sound like passive-aggressive.”

“Yea. I like to believe that they’ve changed, but…”

“You’d think they’d be more gentle on you after the…um…”
“Suicide attempt?”

“I was going to say incident.”

“Yea. Hey, just so you know, in the future, I don’t want you to dumb things down or feel like you have to say certain things because of what happened to me. I want you to see me as Shiho Suzui, not That-Girl-Who-Almost-Killed-Herself.”

“Alright. And, if you want, I can help you study for midterms.”

“That sounds awesome! I’d love to spend more time with you!” As soon as she registered what she said, Shiho’s eyes widened, and a blush started to form on her cheeks.

“F-for study purposes, of course! B-But, that’s not to say that I won’t mind spending time with you outside of school. As friends, of course!” She stuttered, making Yu chuckle.

“You’re adorable.”

This only caused her cheeks to turn an even deeper shade of red. Luckily for her, Akechi and Morgana had arrived, and Morgana was shaking her head.

“You know, since this is going to become a regular thing, it would be best if we didn’t have to wait for me to catch up.” Morgana said.

“Well, if you want, you can wait outside of school for us.” Yu suggested.

“I have a much better idea! I want to go to your school with you!” Morgana replied.

“What? Morgana, I don’t think we can do that. There’s a ton of paperwork involved, and you simply don’t meet the requirements. We’ve talked about this.” Akechi replied, shaking his head.

“True, BUT! As luck would have it, we have someone Ushimaru owes a favor to for saving Shiho.” Morgana replied, staring hard at Yu.

“Oh that’s right. But do you think that Ushimaru will consider it reasonable?”

“Only one way to find out. But let’s focus on what we came here to do.” Yu answered.

“Ah yes, this Phansite. Let’s take a look.” Morgana said as the others huddled around Yu, looking through the requests.

“Bah, most of these are lame. We need something serious, something that we actually should do.” Morgana complained.

“Oh here’s one.” Yu said, pointing at one request.

“Dear Phantom Team. I work as a part time model, and I’ve had this rivalry with a girl named Mika Aina, a healthy rivalry that pushed both of us to get better. But I’ve recently been hearing rumors that she’s been messing with company resources, misdirecting other models so that she can take their place and start rising to the top. I don’t have any proof, but if she really is doing this, could you give her a change of heart? -Lovers 06” Shiho read out loud.

“Well, better than nothing. Let’s give it a try.” Yu said, activating the Meta-Nav to put in her name.

But the second he touched the app, the world began to swirl around around them, their eyesight
becoming distorted, and throbbing headaches hammered at their skulls. They were all forced to close their eyes, and when they opened them, the world had changed. First, all of the people were gone, and the four immediately looked around to see if they accidentally dragged someone in, soon releasing a collective sigh of relief was released upon finding that they were the only ones here. Then they noticed something else: The sky was blood red, there were black and red cracks emerging from the Shibuya Railway entrance that criss-crossed the whole city like lightning, and they were in their Metaverse outfit.

“What happened? We didn’t input any keywords into the Nav. How come we’re in the Metaverse?” Yu asked, turning to Morgana.

“Well, as I said before, Palaces are extremely distorted pockets of the Metaverse, exclusive to those whose twisted desires are cranked up to 11. But, those are the special cases. For everyone else, they still have distorted desires, but it’s not nearly enough to warrant a Palace. As such, there’s a special Palace, one that belongs to everyone in Tokyo. That Palace is called… Mementos. And that’s its entrance.” The guide explained, pointing to the entrance of the subway.

“So, if we enter the name of someone who doesn’t have a Palace into the app…” Yu started, putting in Mika Aina.

“Candidate found in Mementos.” Came the Meta-Nav’s response. It then pulled up a map, but instead of a map in the traditional sense, it showed the subway entrance, and underneath it, an “!” in bright red in the otherwise blank space that took up the rest of the screen.

“Hey Morgana, how else is Mementos different from other Palaces?”

“Well, for starters, it is much much larger, and as such, its divided into blocks. Each block shifts around constantly, as people always view the same thing differently. Also, each block is swarming with Shadows, but being spotted won’t raise Memento’s security levels, since the only way to do that is to do something that makes the entire population of the city to see you as a threat.”

“How deep does it go?”

“Deep. I don’t know how much, but according to master Igor, if we were to dedicate all of our time to clearing Mementos and reaching the bottom, it would take about three weeks.”

“Wow. But since this Palace is so massive, then that means we can battle Shadows for hours and hours on end. We’d be juiced up for Palaces in no time!” Shiho pointed out.

“Actually, that’s the final thing. Mementos is also home to a very powerful Shadow, one whose power exceeds both a Champion of Ruin, and a Wild Card.”

Morgana’s voice suddenly dropped, and she turned around to look at the subway entrance, almost as if she was afraid speaking its name would summon it.

“It’s called… the Reaper. And believe me, that name has been earned many times over. If we’re on a floor and hear chains, we need to leave, immediately.” she whispered.

“Got it. Is there anything else?” Yu asked.

“No. Let’s get going, but try not to linger on one floor too long.”

And with that, the four of them went down the non-moving escalators. The subway had far more sinister and malicious feel as they entered. For starters, there was blood red light everywhere,
there were black cracks on all the surfaces, and they were twisted and crooked, like they were
gnarled roots. The team made their way to the subway itself, and saw several people waiting for
trains. When one pulled up, they shuffled on board, emotionless grunts the only thing that indicated
that they were even alive to begin with. Once the train was full, it would speed off to parts
unknown, leaving only whispers of pained groans in its wake.

“This place is really creepy.” Shiho pointed out.

“Alright, so do we just keep walking until we reach the target?” Akechi asked.

“What?! Heck no. In fact, the whole reason why I constructed the Mona-mobile in the first
place was so that we could traverse Mementos efficiently.” Morgana answered, pulling out her
whistle and blowing hard. The Mona-mobile roared as it emerged, fully repaired, from a cloud of
smoke and dust. As they climbed in, Shiho took a moment to admire the bus.

“Wow, this is really nice Morgana! How’d you repair this?”

“Actually, I made multiple Mona-mobiles, and this is a completely separate bus. Master Igor
provided me with the materials to make anything I wanted, from a tank to a mobile weapons
platform the size of a city. In the end, I decided to make a bus, and make it the best bus possible,
and named it the Mona-mobile! But keeping it intact was the hard part, since Elizabeth loved to
take it for a spin without any consideration for the love and care that went into making it.
Eventually, it got so bad that I had to build spares just for whenever that madwoman wrecked it.”
Morgana grumbled as she started up the engine.

“Elizabeth? Who’s that?” Yu asked.

“One of master Igor’s assistants. Like Caroline and Justine!”

“I see. Well, let’s get to finding this ‘Mika’ shall we?” Yu suggested.

“Yes, let’s. Morgana, if you would.” Akechi replied.

“And away we gooooooo!!” Morgana cheered as they began their descent into Tokyo’s
Palace.
“So, Carmen.” Yu started.

“Yea Seeker?”

“If I were to talk to Ushimaru about you getting enrolled, which class would you like to be in?”

“Definitely with Ace. The two of us live together, after all. It makes sense that we share a class too.”

“Can we focus on the task at hand please? This place seems to be far more dangerous than Shujin Nation.” Akechi pointed out.

And he was right. Mementos only got more disturbing the further they descended. Once they went past the subway part, the Palace turned from a subway to a giant catacomb system. The walls went from concrete to chiseled blue rock, the black and red cracks featuring more prominently now, almost to the point that they looked less like roots and more like veins. The railroad tracks could still be seen, but the wood was red, as if it was forged by blood. There were Shadows here, like Morgana said, but instead of taking the form of any security guards, they took the shape of a shapeless mass of black ink, and they were much bigger than the Mona-mobile. Thankfully, when they were hit, they would also dissolve into other Shadows just the same. After a good few battles, and descending a few levels, Morgana suddenly let out a gasp as they arrived at the new level.

“What is it Morgana?”

“I can sense our target! She’s on this level!”

“Perfect. Get ready everyone.” Yu ordered.

It wasn’t long before they arrived at their destination; a swirling vortex right in front of them, the colors black and crimson clashing against each other in a destructive dance. The railway tracks were ripped off and entered the vortex, violently twisted in a way similar to the vortex. The Mona-mobile sped through, and they found themselves at a dead end. On their left and right were cells with red tendrils escaping between the bars and heading down into a bottomless pit. But standing in front of them was a lone girl, dressed in a teal blue business skirt and a sleeveless turtleneck of the same color. But when she turned around, her eyes were a sickly yellow, making it unmistakable that this was a Shadow. The Team got out of the vehicle.

“Are you Miki, the part-time model?” Yu asked, approaching her.

“Yea. What do you want?”

“We’ve heard that you’ve been misusing your company resources to destroy your rivals and give yourself a leg up in the business.”

“Yea, what of it? I’m not allowed to succeed?” She asked venomously.

“We never said that. But your success can’t come at the expense of others.”

“Oh yea? Says who?”

“There are people out there getting in trouble because of you! Can’t you see you’re hurting
them with your actions?” Shiho asked.

“So what? It’s a dog eat dog world out there. I’m just doing what I have to in order to survive. In this world, you have to reach the top, no matter what it takes.”

“Or you could get to the top based on talent and hard work.” Akechi countered.

“Yea, I thought that too, until an airheaded bimbo named Ann Takamaki came along. She treats modeling like it’s some kind of hobby. I work my ass off for what I do, and yet she shows up once, and you’d think she was the second coming of Christ by how everyone treats that slut like she’s something special. I wouldn't be surprised if she was screwing the execs behind everyone's back.”

“You take that back.” Shiho growled through her teeth.

“Or what? Who the hell are you brats anyway?”

“We’re the Phantom Team, and we’ve come to take your heart.” Yu answered, drawing his katana, the others following suit.

“Oh yea, you little brats?! Come and try!!” Mika screeched, her body morphing into a woman with violet skin, dressed with black fabric barely covering her figure and an oversized hat and cape. She crossed her legs and proceeded to float effortlessly above the ground, and snapped her fingers. Two geyzers of black ink erupted next to her, reforming into a man dressed in an orange jumpsuit with metal claws and wings, and next to that, a star with a single eye on it.

“You brats have no idea how tough the real world is. Let me teach you a lesson you won’t forget!” Mika roared in her new form, holding out her hand and unleashing several fiery explosions, forcing the Team to split up.

(Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1nP6dn7qw)

“Alright, let’s do this! Izanagi!” Yu called. The god came and brought down the fury of the heavens in the form of lightning, bringing the man with wings to Earth, and eliciting a cry of pain from the other two.

“Pariah! You're up!” Yu yelled as the eye-star prepared its spell.

“I won’t let you down!” Shiho replied as Yu gave her a high-five, transferring his power to her. The star unleashed a sudden blast of atomic energy, injuring Yu and Morgana, but missing Shiho as she sprinted to close the distance between her and her target. The eye, upon seeing her get so close, tried to hit her with another nuclear blast, but she was too fast, and she used the momentum of her dodge to strike three times with her morning star before doing a backflip and unloading an entire clip into it, stunning it onto the floor.

“Well done! Allow me to follow through!” Akechi said.

“Do some damage!” Shiho ordered as she high-fived Akechi, transferring both her and Yu’s power into Akechi. By now, Miki had powered up for another attack, unleashing it in the form of several pink orbs assaulting Akechi. The detective grunted, but stood strong, and summoned Robin Hood for a counter attack.

“My skills exceed yours!” Akechi cried out, the Persona letting loose an arrow that tore through and destroyed the man with metal wings.
“Damn you! Can’t let get any good help these days.” Miki cursed as she assaulted Akechi with powerful curse magic. Akechi saw the attack coming, and passed the power to Morgana before being launched into the wall.

“Alright! My time to shine! Lady Trieu, show them what you got!” Morgana called, the kimono wearing woman materializing shortly after. The Persona raised her blade, and green vortexes assaulted both Miki and her lacky, tearing the star to shreds and leaving Miki on the floor.

“She’s wide open! Seeker, the killing blow is all yours!” Morgana proclaimed, passing the whole Team’s power into their leader.

“Izanagi! Let’s end this!” Yu ordered.

The god of Japan revealed himself, and moved one hand to his blade, electricity cackling across his fingertips. He moved them back and forth a few times, like he was holding an imaginary cloth, and soon, held his weapon like a javelin, the electricity from his hand now transferred over to the sharp metal. With a mighty toss, the naginata pierced Miki, and a tormented cry echoed all across Mementos. Izanagi vanished, and the blade vanished with him, as Miki returned to her original form, lying on the ground in defeat. The Team approached her, and she began to sob.

“Leave me alone. Let me do what I have to do to succeed.” She pleaded.

“No. You want success? You’ll have to get it fair and square.” Shiho informed, putting a hand on her hip.

“What about you? You use this power, a power that no one else has, to your own ends. You’re no different than me!”

“We’re plenty different. We don’t abuse what we have, and we don’t use it to hurt others for ourselves.” Akechi retorted.

“We also risk our lives by doing this, and we do it with other people in mind.” Yu added.

“What… what should I do?” Miki asked.

“Repent, and work to atone.” Shiho answered. Miki looked at them and smiled, before vanishing into thin air, leaving only a blue-white orb in her place. Yu looked at it.

“Is this a Treasure?” He asked.

“It’s the beginnings of one. Since it’s not a Treasure proper, we’re able to take it without sending her a calling card. Let’s grab it and get out.” Morgana answered. Yu took the orb, and it quickly transformed into a business card for a model company. With their work complete, the group turned and left Mementos.

Yusuke sat in his shack, thinking to himself. The news Hifumi told him in regards to her mother were… disturbing. He had never suffered abuse at the hands of Madarame, and he certainly didn’t suffer from a lack of freedom. He sighed as he leaned back. On one hand, he wanted to help Hifumi break her mother’s grip, but at the same time, what could he do? Beg that she let her daughter do as she pleased? Have her arrested for being a mother? No. If Yusuke wanted to help his friend, he would have to get some kind of dirt on Hifumi’s mom. Something to at least make her think twice about deciding how Hifumi lives her life. He got up and decided that, starting tomorrow, he would start looking for a way to help Hifumi.
The Team had re-emerged into the real world, making sure to do so in a place that wouldn’t be too crowded. Once they regrouped, they noticed how much time had passed.

“We should get going. Assuming what we did worked, we might get another target that’s big enough to warrant our full attention.” Akechi suggested.

“Yea, but I like the idea behind the Phansite. Makes us care about the little guy, as well as the big picture.” Shiho said.

“It’s getting rather late. I need to be back with the Niijimas soon, but good work all around. If there’s another target, then we’ll hit it tomorrow, yea?”

“Agreed. Oh, and don’t forget, you have to work for Sae-san on Sunday.” Akechi reminded

“Oh… Right.” Yu grumbled as he and the others started to head home, ominous thunder bellowing in the distance.

Yu woke up the sound of banging on his door. Outside, the storm had not let up at all. In fact, it had gotten even worse. Cracks of thunder, flashes of lightning, and rain pouring so hard Yu was amazed he slept at all. He was about to go back to sleep, assuming that it was just a particularly loud thunder clap that woke him, until there was another assault on the door.

“Y-Yu-kun? Are you awake?” Makoto asked, fear in her voice.

“Makoto? What is it?” Yu asked groggily.

“May I come in? Please?” Makoto begged with a little of a whimper.

“Uh, sure, what’s wrong?”

Makoto burst through the door, and seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“Makoto? What’s wrong?” Yu asked, now fully awake.

Another crack of thunder, and Makoto borderline screamed at it. She then turned to Yu, and he could see a cold sweat on her face.

“I-I tried to go to sleep before the storm got too loud, but I couldn’t fall asleep, and now-”

Another crack, and this time, Makoto did scream, and tears started to well up in her eyes.

“C-can I stay with you? Please?” She pleaded.

“Awww. Is the sister of the big, bad prosecutor scwared of a wittle thunder?” Yu teased, a small smile on his face.

“This isn’t funny!” Makoto half-yelled, half-whimpered.

Another boom of thunder, and now Makoto grabbed her head and began to full on cry. Yu’s face contorted from glee into one of nervousness.

“M-Makoto?”
Makoto started to heave, and clutched her chest, and Yu saw beads of sweat starting to roll down her face as she grabbed the nearby dresser for support. Yu then realized exactly what was happening; Makoto was having a panic attack.

“Makoto! Makoto, can you hear me?!” Yu cried out. In response, Makoto grabbed onto him and pulled him close to her, her grip like iron. Yu didn’t struggle, though her extremely tight hold made breathing a labor. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest and her eyes were bulging open, her irises and pupils had shrunk down to the bare minimum. She took in deep gulps of air, like she had just gone diving for too long and just come up to the surface, and she did this for what felt like hours, until finally, she calmed down enough to loosen her grip, but not enough to let go.

“Makoto? Are you alright?”

“I… I am now. Sorry about that. I-I tend to have panic attacks during thunderstorms.”

“Really? That’s awful.”

“Yes. Normally, I just have to grab Buchi-kun and hold him tight, if I’m not already asleep. But it always works better whenever Sis, or someone else I know is around. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you beforehand.” Makoto said, still not letting go.

Another flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder, and Makoto once again gripped Yu tight, a small whimper escaping her mouth. Yu gave her a reassuring pat on the back. That’s when he saw his phone light up, accompanied by his jazz ringtone. Maneuvering the best he could with Makoto clinging to him like a koala, he picked it up, and was stunned to see Sae’s number on it, before vanishing, signaling he missed the call. Almost immediately, the phone rung again, and he picked up.

“Sae-san?”

“Thank God you picked up this time. Listen, I’m sorry for calling this late, but I need you to check up on Makoto, right now.” Sae ordered, and Yu detected something in her voice. Fear.

“I’m here Sis. Don’t worry, I’m alright.” Mokoto told the phone. Yu heard a sigh of relief from the other end.

“Thank God. Are you alright?”

“I am. Yu-kun helped me calm down.”

“Alright. I’m on my way back now. Stay together until then.” Sae ordered.

Yu hung up, and turned to Makoto, who had finally calmed down enough to let go of him, and put a few feet between the two. Yu turned on the light and looked at her with an eyebrow raised, silently asking for an explanation. Her eyes were red and swollen from the recent fountain of tears, and her knees were shaking a little, but other than that, she was alright.

“Are you sure you’re ok?”

“I am now. Thanks again. That must have seemed very… bizzare for me to barge into your room and start squeezing the life out of you.”
“Hey, I didn’t mind how close we were.” Yu replied coyly.

“W-Well… um, you see… that’s… r-really?” Makoto fumbled, her face starting to flush.

“Absolutely. In fact, I think I’ll hope for more storms like this in the future, just so we have an excuse.”

“An excuse? An excuse to wha-NARUKAMI!!” Makoto yelled as she pieced the puzzle together, her face became the color of a ripe tomato, the blush engulfing her entire face. Yu laughed at the sight.

“That’s not funny!” She yelled, only prompting Yu to laugh harder, even more so when she stomped her foot and crossed her arms in a huff. Just then, they heard the door fling open and Sae rush in.

“Makoto?! MAKOTO?!” She screamed, terror prevalent in her words.

“I’m here Sis. I’m alright.”

Sae ran up to the younger Niijima and embraced her.

“Thank God. When Narukami didn’t pick up the phone at first, I was so worried.” Sae whispered, stroking Makoto’s hair gently. Her ruby eyes met Yu’s grey and she smiled sweetly.

“It appears the worst of the storm has past. Why don’t you try getting some sleep alright? And if it picks up again, I’ll be here, ok?” Sae whispered gently and lovingly to her sister. Makoto simply nodded and returned to her room. Sae turned to Yu and gave a warm smile.

“Thank you Narukami.”

“You’re welcome. How serious are her panic attacks?”

“Very. First few times, she had to be rushed to the emergency room and kept on life support.” Sae answered grimly.

“Oh shit.”

“Language Narukami.”

“Shi-um… shoot.”

“Better.”

“Is she going to be ok now?”

“She should be, assuming there’s no further thunder, but if there is, I’ll handle it. I’m sorry I didn’t warn you beforehand.”

“Does she always get like this during a thunderstorm?”

Sae simply nodded.

“Why? Was she always so scared of storms?”

“No. Our father’s death occurred on a stormy night, just as bad as this. I didn’t see any of the fighting, only the aftermath. Makoto, however, at the ripe age of six, witnessed not just dad getting
murdered, but Dojima killing the Yakuza hitmen, and Dojima himself falling to the floor in a pool of blood. That memory always comes back on a night like this. I’m just grateful it’s only at night, or she might’ve had problems with storms at school.”

“So we don’t have to worry about panic attacks during the day?”

“Correct.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Yu said, letting out a yawn.

“You should go back to sleep. I’ll stay with Makoto until she does as well. Goodnight Narukami. And thanks again.”

“Anytime Sae-san. Anytime.” Yu replied lazily as he took Sae’s advice and went back to sleep.
Yu was once again in his homeroom, Kawakami reminding them about their trip to a place called Togo News Station. By now, Shiho had returned to Shujin, and all kind of people were offering their condolences and teachers saying how if she needed someone to talk to, they were always available. Somehow, Yu thought that only Kawakami and Ushimaru meant any of it. The silver-haired teen was busy thinking about his Team’s battle with Mika when his phone went off. Again. Yu took it out and saw the familiar sign of Alibaba.

Alibaba: I’m glad you’re already making good use of my gift.

Yu: Why are you doing this?

Yu closed his eyes and sent out Izanagi, looking for a certain red-haired girl. And once he found her, he smiled. She was on her phone, typing away, showing him all he needed to see. She sent send, and Yu felt his phone buzz.

Alibaba: Because the world needs people like the Phantom Team.

Yu: Do you really expect me to believe you have no ulterior motive?

The lunch bell rang, and Yu borderline raced down to Futaba’s class, hoping to find the orange-haired gremlin before she could leave. As luck would have it, she was currently walking with her back to the silver-haired teen, allowing him to get behind her and pluck her phone right out of her hands.

“HEY!! Give that…back…” Futaba began, only to have all the color drained from her face when she saw who it was that grabbed her device. She immediately turned to run, but Yu put his hand on her shoulder before she could begin.

“Nuh-uh. You don’t get off the hook that easily. Follow me.” He whispered in her ear, in a tone that made her blood run cold. The two made their way to the student council room, where Yu pushed her inside. She let out a small eep! as Yu closed the door and locked it. Slamming her phone on the table, he turned to his classmate with a malicious look in his silver eyes, one that made Futaba ready to faint.

“You have five minutes to explain yourself.”

“U-um…. Ok, s-so, I found out you guys were the you-know-what because Kobayakawa o-ordered me to watch you guys. So when you started talking about this ‘M-Metaverse’ and Palaces, I thought you guys had l-lost your minds. But when you guys said that you’d make a calling card, and that K-Kobayakawa would confess what he did, and then it actually happened, I thought that… well… there might be other people who could use your help.”

“Then why didn’t you talk to us directly?”

“Well… I thought you would still be mad about me… you know… leaking your record. And the others might’ve been mad about me helping Kobayakawa.”

“So you decided to hack my phone and give the impression that you were some unknown factor that could turn on me or use me for their own ends?”

“W-well… that wasn’t the intention. I wanted to help, honest!”
Yu crossed his arms and gave a long, hard stare and sighed. Akechi said that Futaba was just as much a victim of Kobayakawa as the rest of them, and the nerdy-looking young woman seemed honest enough. That’s when an idea popped into his head. If he and the others were going to keep stealing hearts, then they would need more money.

“If you really want to help, then I need you to do something for me.”

“Wait really? You’re letting me off the hook that quickly?” She asked, surprised.

“Do you want me to grill you further?”

“N-no! Whaddya need?”

“A job.”

“Seriously? A job? I thought you would need me to do something more… extreme. But if it’s a job you need, it’s a job you’ll get! Just leave it to me!” She stated, her fear turning into excitement instantly. The bell sounded, signaling the end of lunch.

“Alright. Send me a way for me to contact me, and let me know when you find a place. The sooner the better.” Yu ordered, opening the door.

“You got it chief! I won’t let you down, promise!” Futaba promised, leaving the room.

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After school was let out, most people made their way to either clubs, arcades, or straight home. Yu, however, went straight to the principal’s office. After a gentle knock, Ushimaru ushered for the student to come in and take a seat.

“Narukami. What brings you here?” The stocky man asked.

“That favor you promised me.”

“Cashing in already? I would have thought you would’ve asked to be exempt from midterms or finals. Maybe even get an automatic ‘A’ on a project.”

“All of those things I can earn on my own merit. No, what I want you to enroll someone.”

“Judging by how you’re cashing in the favor for this person, I can assume that this person’s circumstances are… extraordinary.”

“She’s not a criminal, if that’s what you’re wondering. It’s just that… most of her paperwork has been lost, and it’ll be a huge hassle to get it all back.”

“So you want me to enroll her, no questions asked, right?”

“That’s correct.”

Ushimaru let out a deep sigh, before pulling out a pen and paper.

“Alright, fine. Name?”

“Morgana Velvet.”

“Age?”
“17”

“What class?”

“The same as Akechi’s.”

“How can I contact her?”

“This number can put you in contact with her.” Yu informed, writing a series of numbers on a post-it note before giving it to Ushimaru.

“Alright Narukami. You sure this is what you want to spend your favor on?”

“I am.”

“Alright then. I’ll get in contact with her. You can head out now.”

Yu got out and shot a text to Morgana, who expressed total joy at the news, even more when Yu told her that she was going to be in the same class as Akechi. He was waiting at the subway, awaiting the train that would take him home when he got a text from Futaba.

Futaba: So, I got good news and bad news.

Yu: What’s the bad news?

Futaba: Almost no one in a 100 mile radius is going to hire a person with a criminal record. I can try to expunge and erase it, but it’ll take months to do it without anyone noticing.

Yu: And the good news?

Futaba: I said ‘almost no one’. There’s one person who might hire you.

Yu: Who is it?

Futaba: It’s my dad. Sojiro Sakura.

Yu internally winced at the name. That man was supposed to be his original guardian, and Yu could only imagine at his reaction would be once he found out who Yu was.

Yu: I don’t think he’ll hire me.

Futaba: He will if I’m there to persuade him. Besides, he’s been trying to get some help for years, but no one’s been up to snuff so far. It could very well be only job in Tokyo that you could get.

Yu: Fine. Where should I go to?

Futaba: It’s called Cafe Leblanc.

Yu: I’ve been there. Damn good coffee.

Futaba: Dad’ll be happy to hear that. Here, since you know where it is, I’ll wait for you outside the cafe. Trust me, the interview will go a lot smoother if I’m there.

Yu: I’ll see you there.

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Once he was off the train, Yu found himself wandering the streets of Yong Yen, scanning the cramped streets for a bob of orange hair. He found her, crouched down, as if observing a bug. Once he approached her, she stood up and beamed at him.

“Alright. Just let me do the talking. With any luck, mom will still be there. Then he’ll definitely hire you!”

“I’m still not sure about this.” Yu said, tugging on his collar.

“Oh it’ll be fine. Allons y!” Futaba said cheerfully, entering the cafe, with Yu following close behind. Unlike last time Yu came here, the place was almost completely cleared out, minus a woman in a wheelchair on a computer sitting in one of the back booths.

“Ah welcome back Futaba. You’re home later than usual. Who’s that with you?” the woman asked with a smile.

“Mom, this is Yu Narukami. He heard about dad’s job offering. And wants in.”

“Really? It’s about time. Poor Soji was going to work himself to death at this rate.”

“If death comes for me, he’d better come while I’m asleep, because there’s no way he’ll take me while a customer needs to be served.” A man said, stepping out of the kitchen. It took a moment, but Yu recognized him as the man who served him coffee after Shoichi’s ‘test run’. He turned to Yu and nodded at him.

“Oh I remember you. Why are you so interested in taking this job? It’s the coffee, right? You wanna know how to make it.” Sojiro guessed with a smirk.

“Actually, it’s because no one else will hire me. They always say that I ‘need work experience’, then won’t give me any work to get experience from.”

“I know the struggle. What’s your name again? Didn’t quite hear it from back there.”

“I-It’s… Yu Narukami, sir.”

Immediately, the friendly look and tone just melted from Sojiro, replaced by a scowl and low growl.

“Oh, now I know the real reason all those employers said no. And mine is just the same. Get out of my store! I don’t want to see you here again!” He growled.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on dad! He’s the only person that’s shown any interest in working here!” Futaba argued.

“I don’t care Futaba! I’m not letting a criminal work so close to our home!”

By this point, the woman in the wheelchair closed her laptop and gave a heavy sigh before turning to Yu.

“Narukami, was it? Is it true you’re a criminal?”

“No. The crime I’ve been accused of is false.”

“Yea, sure it was.” Sojiro spat sarcastically.

“You seem honest enough. And you’re a kid of Dojima’s. Don’t you owe him for helping us
out during that nasty insurance fraud business?”

“W-Well, yes, but-”

“And where are you living Narukami?”

“In an apartment complex. With Sae Niijima.”

“The Sae Niijima? Well, it would appear to me that you have a rather tight leash around your neck. One that Soji could loosen by giving you this job.”

“Wakaba, he-”

“Can help. I’m not going to let your stubbornness get rid of perhaps the only help we could get in this back-end of Tokyo.”

“Plus, I promised him that he’d get hired. Please?” Futaba begged, giving Sojiro puppy eyes.

“What if you’re wrong Soji?” The woman, Wakaba asked. Sojiro was silent.

“Exactly. What if this kid is telling the truth about being set up? At least give him a chance, then decide if he’s worth keeping around. Ok?”

“Fine.” Sojiro relented. He then turned to his newly hired help.

“Alright kid, I’ll pay you 1,200 Yen an hour. When can you start working?”

“Whenever you need me. Except sundays.”

“Alright. You’ll be here every day after school-” Sojiro started

“Every Friday and Saturday.” Wakaba interrupted.

“From after school to nine on Fridays and Saturdays. That sound good?” Sojiro finished.

“It does sir, I’ll start this Friday. Thank you.” Yu thanked with a small bow.

“Don’t thank me just yet. The second something goes missing, I’m reporting you to the police.” The coffee house owner warned.

Despite the obvious animosity, Yu left with a smile on his face. Once he was out, Futaba skipped to his side and tugged on his arm.

“Sorry about Sojiro. But he isn’t as bad he might seem back there. Just give him a chance, and I’m sure he’ll warm up to you.” the girl explained.

“I’m just glad he actually hired me. Thanks for that.”

“No problem. And my support won’t stop there. I’ll keep monitoring the Phansite for anything, and let you know if there’s anything that you should take care of.”

“You don’t have to, your debt has been cleared.”

“Yea, but I want to. If feels good to know that you’re making a difference. Like with that Mika lady. Lovers 06 reported that she came clean, and now the other models have a chance to make it big because of it. I want to be a part of that.”
“Alright. You can act as our ‘guy in the chair’, you know, the-”

“Tech support, master hacker and info gatherer. Heck yea!” She cheered.

I am thou. Thou art I.

Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of rebellion that will lead thee to the truth.

With the birth of the Moon Arcana

Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power.

“Alright, if there’s nothing else, I need to start heading out. See you tomorrow Futaba.” Yu said, leaving the small cafe.

It was all quiet at the Togo residence, which Hifumi took as a blessing. Right now, she was in her parent’s bedroom, by the side of the man she called father. For the past few years, her dad had been gravely ill. Once, he was the light and love of the Togo household, but the gloom of death hung ever since he got sick. Once, he was the one of the greatest, if not the greatest, shogi player in all of Japan, and now he was reduced to a coughing shell. Hifumi used to wage war against him countless times on the playing board, but even that was a luxury on certain days. Thankfully, today was one of those days, and she was being thoroughly destroyed by his master tactics. Her father was feeling better today, and the doctors predicted a full recovery in a few months. Maybe then, he might be able to talk to his wife about how she was treating their daughter. But Hifumi didn’t hold out much hope, she knew that by that point the damage would be done. With another clack, Hifumi saw that she had been defeated by her father and teacher yet again.

“Check. You’re improving.” The man rasped.

“Good match.” Hifumi declared, albeit with little to no emotion.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“Nothing. Just a little tired.”

“Hifumi…” He strained.

Hifumi bit her lip. She couldn’t give her father any news that might deteriorate his health, especially if that news involved his wife. He was on the road to recovery, and she refused to jeopardize it for her own selfish desires.

“I said I’m just a little tired. And worried about you dad. The doctors have said you were getting better before, but then some bad news hit, and you’d go right back to the way you were before.”

“And you’re afraid that if you tell me the truth, it’ll set back my recovery.” He guessed.

“As observant as always.”

“Hifumi, you’re the light of my life, I always worry about you, and your mother. And if you don’t tell me what’s wrong, then it will only cause me to get even more worried, and then we’re back to square one. Now, tell me what’s bothering you so.”
Hifumi bit her lip and looked away. Perhaps spending time with her father wasn’t such a good idea after all. She wanted to get up and leave, but she knew what would happen if she tried.

“There’s… a boy I’m interested in.” She lied.

“Oh?”

“Yes, but… I’m not sure if he’s interested in me.”

“What’s he like?”

“Well… he’s honest, doesn’t let what others think about him decide what he does. And he’s a stupid romantic, the kind that will read poems they made to confess their love. He also has similar tendencies that I have when I’m playing Shogi.”

“Really?”

In truth, all Hifumi did was describe her ideal boyfriend, but her father seemed to buy it, so it was good enough. She simply nodded her answer, and her father smiled.

“Well, if he ever does notice you, I would like to meet him.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind. I’m going to go study before heading off to bed. Goodnight dad.”

“Good night Hifumi. I enjoyed playing with you.”

With their farewells said, Hifumi started up her computer so that she could do some research, and found that her social media site had blown up in popularity. Though if the comments were anything to go by, it was for the wrong reasons.

‘Where are the pics? Isn’t this supposed to be Hifumi’s account?’

‘I came here for Hifumi’s sexy ass, but all there is is stupid shogi.’

‘Who the fuck cares about this game? I thought Hifumi was supposed to be a model.’

There were several other comments similar to those, and Hifumi let out a groan and exited out. It was going to get worse from here on out, and she knew it.
It was a regular Wednesday for Yu, or as regular as it could get with fighting Mankind’s demons within the hearts and minds of despicable human beings as a pastime. There weren’t any good requests on the Phansite, and Akechi hadn’t had any luck finding another potential target. Yu decided to head to the library to try and study, but the rather loud whispers made it clear he wasn’t wanted, so he made his way to the subway to head home, but was cut off by someone at the school gate.

“Yo dude, I got a favor to ask.” A familiar voice asked, running up behind Yu.

“Ryuji? Um, sure, what is it?”

“Yea, so um… sorry to spring this on ya all of a sudden, but, do ya think you could go on a run with me?”

“That… is very sudden. What brought this on?”

“Well, with that asshole gone, I figured I’d try to get back into the track team. And that means I gotta get back in shape. Figured I would get a non-runner to see how bad I’ve gotten.”

“Why didn’t you go to Akechi, or Ann for this?”

“Ann won’t be able to jog three feet, let alone three miles, and Akechi… nah, I don’t think he could make it either. Besides, there’s something about you man. Something about you just seems, like… I dunno man, like I can trust you with anything, and you won’t let me down.”

“I’ve been told I have one of those faces.”

“So you in?”

“You know what? Let me get changed into something, and I’ll meet you back here.”

“All right!”

With her rising fame, Hifumi found that she couldn’t practice at school in peace anymore, so she had to seek… alternatives. Which was why she now found herself in the middle of a quiet little church in the middle of Kanda. There was no one here, which made practice a little difficult, but the Togo Queen was nothing if not resourceful. Right now, the shogi board had already been set and played on, and right now, it was time for the game to end.

“And now, you will witness the futility of your-”

“Excuse me miss, what are you doing?”

“GAAAAAH!!!!”

Hifumi screamed from the sudden voice so loudly, anyone right next to her would probably have their ears bleed. She also jostled out of the pew she sat in, completely tossing the board over
and scattering pieces everywhere. The voice belonged to none other than the priest, who had his hands up in defense.

“H-h-hi…” Hifumi greeted, a blush starting to form because of what she did.

“Hello there.” He said calmly after Hifumi had calmed down.

“Sorry for intruding, Father. I just needed… um…”

“A place of peace to gather your thoughts?”

“Something like that. I’m sorry, it’s just that-”

“There’s no need to apologize young lady. The house of God welcomes all. Stay here as long as you wish. All I ask is that you remain quiet for the sermon.”

“Oh. I will, Father…” She trailed off.

“Simon. My name is Simon Solace.”

“Thank you again Father Simon.” Hifumi thanked, before beginning to pick up the scattered shogi pieces.

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Yu was quite proud of himself for making it this far. Considering that Ryuji was a track member, Yu expected him to leave the Wild Card in the dust, but much to both their surprise, they were evenly matched. By now, the jog had taken them well outside of Shujin’s area, and by now they found themselves really, really far from the city. The last sign they saw told them that they had entered the Kanda region, and now they were both just jogging blind. Finally, Ryuji stopped, and Yu stopped next to him, and both boys coughed and hacked their lungs out.

“Holy shit. I’m not in as bad shape as I thought. And you were way better than I thought you’d be. You sure you didn’t do track back where you were from?” Ryuji asked between coughs.

“I did kendo. Lots of stamina training.” Yu wheezed in response.

“Here. Let’s go inside the church and rest a bit. Then we can walk back.” Ryuji suggested.

“Excellent idea.”

The two went to the building, passing a priest and an elderly couple on the way in, and were greeted by a refreshing cool breeze. And some obnoxious voices. Up in the front, a girl was sitting alone, and surrounded by a few jocks, and judging by the tone of their voices, trouble was brewing.

“Oh come on, you look just like her.” One of them, wearing a backward baseball cap pointed out.

“Look, I already told you, you got me confused for someone else.”

“You got the braid, the looks, and a shogi board. You’re definitely her.” Another guy, one wearing a chain around his neck leered.

“Look, we’re your fans, and we just wanna show you a good time. It’s gotta be better than being cooped up in this rickety shack.” The final one, wearing a neon tank top offered.
“No thank you.” Yu could tell that she was straining to be polite.

“Come on, don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.” the baseball guy replied, moving to grab the girl’s arm, causing her to jerk back in response.

“Hey, the lady said no.” Ryuji said, finally stepping in, with a tone of seriousness Yu hadn’t heard from him before.

“Oh? And who the hell are you?” Baseball asked.

“Yea, we were here first, fuckface.” Chain neck suggested.

“Heh. Probably thinks that he’ll get laid if he gets us to back off.”

The three laughed amongst themselves, while Ryuji simply smirked and walked towards the trio.

“Oh, you guys think you’re super funny. Well, I got a joke for ya. What’s man’s worst enemy?”

Baseball cap took a step closer and asked.

“What?”

“The nutcracker.” Was Ryuji’s answer as he delivered a swift kick to the testicles.

The ring leader clutched his groin and fell backwards, his two buddies failing to catch him in time. The one with the neck chains stepped forward and clenched his fists, and Ryuji put up his guard in kind, with Yu standing by his side, ready to brawl. Before any fists could fly, a voice stepped in.

“Enough! This is a holy site, and any who disturb it will answer to the police.” The priest threatened, holding up a phone. The thugs looked amongst each other, and with a grunt, each left one by one, making sure to glare daggers at Ryuji, who simply shrugged at the hostile stares. Once they were gone, Ryuji turned to the girl, who had finished packing up her Shogi board.

“Yo. You alright?”

“I am, thank you.”

“Those assholes come by often?”

“No. And sadly, those were one of the more… polite groups.”

“That bad?” Yu asked.

“I had to come to this church because I thought it was the only place that I could practice in peace. But, I thought wrong, as you clearly saw.”

“Why were they after you?”

“I’m rather popular at my school. They were just admirers.” It wasn’t technically a lie.

“Oh, that… makes sense. Do you think that those guys will come back again?”

“Most likely. And others worse than them.”
“Oh. Well, in that case… um… this church, it’s on my usual run routine. You don’t mind if I come by every now and then to make sure that you’re doing ok?”

“Why? I don’t even know who you are” The girl asked, suspicion dripping from her voice.

“Well… if I’m gonna stop by figured I might as well check up on ya.”

“Oh really? And you’re doing this all out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Well yea.”

Hifumi narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Yu decided to intervene.

“If you’re worried about him trying something like those guys, you always have the priest guy.”

“Well… it’s not like I can’t stop you from coming in and talking to me. Fine.”

“Cool. Oh, I’m Ryuji Sakamoto by the way.”

“Hifumi Togo. I’ll see you around.” She stated, picking up her bag and heading out of the church. Once the two were alone, Yu turned to Ryuji.

“Hey, just so you know, I won’t be able to come and jog with you every time, so if you run into those guys, you might have to deal with it alone.”

“Oh, it’s no biggie. Dad told me I have a killer right hook. But man, Hifumi… she was pretty cute, right?” Ryuji asked with a toothy grin.

“That’s exactly why she was super cautious about your offer Ryuji.”

“Oh come on man!”

“But yea, she was pretty cute. Just some advice; when you first start out, just keep your distance. You two are complete strangers, so make sure she knows you’re there, then get back to your jog.”

“Relax man, I’m pretty sure she’s a total nerd. Not my cup of pee.”

“Tea. It’s my cup of tea.”

“Wait really? Huh. That makes way more sense that ‘pee’.”

“How long did you think that was how the saying went?”

“Um… let’s head back yea? Who knows how long we’ve been gone.”

“Race you there?”

“Loser has to buy ramen!” Ryuji dared.

“You’re on!” Yu accepted, and the two boys, sprinted for about two seconds before their muscles started to cramp.

“How about… we walk, and split the bill?” Yu suggested.

“Yea. Yea, that sounds good.” Ryuji agreed, wincing from the pain.
After they had gotten changed, the boys went to the ramen shop as before. Unfortunately, the line was much too long, so they instead headed to a beef bowl shop, and feasted there. After they had their fill, the two began to go their separate ways at the subway, but Ryuji tapped Yu on the shoulder.

“Hey dude…” Ryuji started.

“Yea?” Yu asked as the train pulled in.

“Thanks for coming. Shit’s always more fun with a buddy.”

“Anytime. And good luck with getting a date out of Hifumi.” Yu teased.

“Thank- Hey! I ain’t gonna-” Was all Ryuji could sputter before the train doors closed and Yu speed away with a smirk.

Yusuke was hiding in a bush.

Why is Yusuke hiding in a bush, you may ask? Well, originally, he came to learn the routine of Hifumi’s mother, then confront her about what she had been doing to Hifumi and try to get her to stop. The problem was that she never came out of her house, forcing him to wait and wander the premises like a stalker.

Not the best plan, he would admit, but as he had been loitering for a good few hours outside the Togo residence, he had to hide to avoid the attention of anyone who might call the cops on him or tell him to go away. And so, he was hiding in a bush. For three hours. And his muscles were starting to cramp, on top of the fact that bugs were beginning to come out. He was about to get up from the bush to head back, but he then saw the door open and out stepped none other than Hifumi’s mother: Mitsuyo Togo.

Ducking back into the bush to observe her, he then saw a car pull up in the driveway, and a man stepped out. He approached the house, and Mitsuyo’s features contorted in frustration. Yusuke pulled out his phone and began to record.

“I thought I told you, if you need to meet, we have to do it at a private location.”

“I’m sorry madame, but this is important. It appears Suki wants to back out.”

“Oh really? Has she gone to the police yet?”

“Not yet. She wants to get her family out first.”

“I see. Well, this needs correcting. Call up our special contact and give him instructions to her house. I’ll handle the snitch.”

The man bowed and pulled out his phone, walking to the car and driving off as he dialed a number. Mitsuyo pulled out her own phone, and a sinister sneer appeared on her face.

“Hello Suki. A little birdie told me that you’ve decided to… terminate your employment with us. Tell me, do you need a reminder of what happens to those who try to run?”

There was some noise from the phone, but Yusuke couldn’t make out what they said.
“So what? You think because you did my dirty work for me you’d be exempt from what you dealt out?”

Yusuke’s eyes widened. Whatever this woman was talking about with Mitsuyo was far more serious than forcing her daughter to be a model.

“And on top of that, you decided to try to run to the police. Such a shame. Your daughter had just moved out too.”

Mitsuyo’s smirk grew as the noise from the phone increased.

“There we go! I knew you’d see reason eventually! Now, I’ll be in touch with you, but remember;”

Her grin suddenly faded, and her voice lowered to a growl.

“You signed a contract for me. You don’t get to bail because you suddenly grow a conscience. Got it? Good.”

And with that, the woman turned and went back into her house. Yusuke waited awhile before getting out of his bush and heading straight home in a mad panic. Once he was back in the safety of his shack, he pulled out his phone. It was still recording. Making sure to delete the part of him screaming like a madman, he then scrolled through his contact lists. This was much bigger than him and Hifumi. Once he found it, he dialed the number, hoping his friend wasn’t already asleep. But they picked up the phone, Yusuke breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hello Akechi-san. I need your help.”

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

It was Thursday, but after Yu arrived at Shujin, he found out that it wasn’t going to be an ordinary Thursday, if the rumors were any indication.

“Did you hear we’re getting a new transfer student?”

“Oh really? I hope he’s not another criminal.”

“Apparently, it’s a she, and she’s going to be in class 3-A.”

“Wonder why the sudden transfer?”

“I heard she’s a foreigner, so maybe that’s why?”

“Hopefully she isn’t a slut like Takamaki.”

Yu knew full well who the new student was, though he was surprised that Ushimaru was able to get Morgana in so quickly. As he took his seat, he sent Izanagi to Akechi’s class, just to see if Morgana’s introduction to the school would be as bad as her introduction to sushi. The young woman in the Shujin school uniform stepped up in front of the class, the name ‘Morgana Velvet’ written on the chalkboard clearly for all to see.

“Everyone this is Morgana Velvet, our new transfer student. Now, in case you couldn’t tell by the name, she isn’t from around here, so please, be patient with her since she isn’t used to our customs. Now, Morgana-san. Say something about yourself.” The teacher instructed.

“Well… um… I really like sushi! And I’m a huge fan of the Phantom Team! I’m really
looking forward to staying here!” She said with a smile that was a bit too wide to be genuine.

*Akechi probably told her to say that so she wouldn’t raise suspicions.*

“Thank you Morgana. You’re seat will be… right over there!” The teacher said, pointing at a seat right behind Akechi. Morgana practically skipped to it and Yu had to pull Izanagi back as he felt his phone buzz.

Akechi: Everyone, I do believe I have found our next target.

Shiho: Awesome! Who is it?

Akechi: Her name is Mitsuyo Togo. I don’t have anything concrete yet, but I got a tip about her threatening a co-worker with threats. My contact even showed me evidence.

Yu: We need more to go on Akechi. What exactly did this Mitsuyo do?

Akechi: According to the recording he took with his phone, she had a minion named ‘Suki’ whom Mitsuyo used to do her dirty work, which is most likely illegal, as the whole reason Mitsuyo called Suki in the first place was to warn her about the consequences of going to the police.

Morgana: I also made sure to put her name into the Nav last night. She has a Palace.

Yu: What else do we know about her?

Shiho: Togo… hey, aren’t we going on a field trip tomorrow to Togo News Station?

Yu: Sounds like the perfect opportunity to go and find out more about how she thinks. Once we do discover her keywords, we should concentrate our efforts on Mondays-Thursdays.

Morgana: Why those specific days?

Yu: I just found a new job. One I have to work on Fridays and Saturdays.

Akechi: And on Sunday, you’ll have to work with me and Sae-san.

Yu: I know. I’m sorry I can’t dedicate myself completely to this.

Shiho: Maybe it’s for the best. If we focus non-stop on our job as the Phantom Team, the rest of our lives; grades, family, and so on, will just fall apart.

Yu: Good point. I’ll see you guys at the field trip.

Akechi: Morgana and I won’t be able to accompany you two. It’s only second years.

Yu: Really? So we’ll have to be the ones who obtain any info on Mitsuyo.

Morgana: Are we sure about this? Yu is still on probation, and if he gets caught…

Shiho: I’ll do it. What should I do?

Akechi: Well, I highly doubt Mitsuyo will carry her personal computer on her person. It’ll most likely be in her office.

Shiho: And where will that be?

Akechi: I don’t know. I’ll have to pull up the files on the building. And then there’s the matter
of getting past her security on her computer…

Yu: Actually, I know someone who can help with that.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New years everyone!
It was Thursday, and Yu sat in a bus making its way to the TV station. Akechi made it clear that they were to do their best to find out any useful information about Mitsuyo Togo. A task the two were trying to focus on, but all around them were people talking about how sleepy they were. Yu himself was a bit lost in thought, his eyes slowly becoming heavier and heavier until Shiho tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey. Don’t tell me you’re falling asleep too?” She asked, stifling a yawn.

“I’m trying not to. But all of these yawns are getting to me.”

“Well, if even you can’t get through this, then it looks like our mission is over before it even began.”

“We won’t know until we try.”

“Yea. You sure this will work?” Shiho whispered, pulling out a flash drive.

“It was designed by Futaba herself. According to her, it should be able to bypass any security and extract whatever data’s on the computer.”

“Alright, if you trust her…”

“We fight against mankind’s demons and beat up a transformer. How scary can walking into an office be?”

“If we had our Personas, I wouldn’t be nearly as scared. Besides-”

“What are you two whispering about?” A voice asked, making both Tricksters jump.

“Oh, Ann. We were… um…” Shiho tried to think of something, but her friend had caught her off guard.

“We were talking about where we would go after the trip was over, since we get to go straight home afterwards.” Yu stepped in.

“Oh yea? And where were you planning on going?” Ann asked, a devious smile starting to form.

“Dome Town. That’s close enough to walk to.” Yu answered.

“If that’s all you were talking about, then why were you whispering?”

“Well… we were hoping it would just be the two of us.” Yu replied, rubbing the back of his neck.

“YOU TWO ARE GOING ON A DATE?!” Ann yelled, the whole bus following silent shortly after.

Goddamnit Ann.

Both Yu and Shiho looked at the blonde with absolute horror as Ryuji slid over next to Ann.
“For real?! Since when did you two start dating? And dude, why didn’t ya tell me?!”

Shiho blushed and turned to Yu, who also looked at her, and the two quickly looked away from each other, prompting a giggle from Ann.

“Shiho and Yu, sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” She sang, with Yu too stunned from how spectacularly his plan had backfired.

“W-we aren’t dating!” Yu finally got out, getting a blush on his cheeks as well.

“You two wanted to go to Dome Town alone, didn’t ya?” Ryuji asked.

“W-well, yes, but-”

“Hey buddy, news flash; that’s called a date.”

“Look, all I did was ask her if she wanted to come with me to Dome Town. She was going to give her answer before we were so rudely interrupted.”

“Sorry. So Shiho, what’s your answer?”

“Well, I was going to say yes… if you and Ryuji tag along.”

“Ooooooh, sorry dude. Looks like you’re not getting action tonight.” He said with a toothy grin and a wink, which earned a punch from Ann in response.

“We’d love to come along! Where would we hit first?” She asked.

“I don’t know, we’ll have to wait until the trip is over.” Yu answered as the bus came to a stop. As he got up to leave, he could hear all the rumors going around thanks to Ann’s outburst.

“Why is Shiho going out with that criminal?”

“She’s probably only going on pity dates with him.”

“Or he’s manipulating her gratitude. Knew he didn’t save her out of the kindness of his heart.”

“He should just crawl up in a hole and die. At least then he won’t stain Dojima’s name.”

The last part made Yu turn and glare daggers at the student responsible, causing his classmates to whisper a little quieter. By now, the bus had arrived, and the group was soon standing at the lobby of the studio, awaiting their guide. Once she arrived, she took the students up the stairs and to the main room, the place where all the recording and reporting was done. As the guide began her explanations, Shiho tapped him on the shoulder and began to whisper in his ear.

“You, do you have any idea as to where the office is?”

“Didn’t Akech send you a map of the place?”

“He did, but… I couldn’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Then just send out your Persona.”

“Send out? What do you mean?”

“If you call your Persona in the real world, it can act as an extension of your eyes and ears.”
Yu explained.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve done it before, dozens of times. Just mentally ask for your Persona, then use her to find the office.”

“What are you two talking about over there?” Kawakami asked.

“Nothing!” Was Yu’s hasty reply, earning a snicker from Ann, who no doubt had the wrong impression. As the guide continued, Yu could notice some of the students were fighting desperately to stay awake. Shiho tapped him on the shoulder again, and her face was wrought with worry.

“I can’t do it Yu. No matter how hard I try, I can’t summon her.”

“Shit. Alright, give me the flash drive.” Yu ordered.

“Please be careful.” She said in a worried whisper.

“I’ll be fine.” He replied, leaving on the excuse of having to use the bathroom. Once he was in a stall, he sent out Izanagi.

We must be cautious Narukami. I cannot affect the real world. Remember that.

I know. I’ll get creative.

With that brief exchange over, Izanagi began his search, and it didn’t take long for him to find what they were looking for. With the office located, Yu began to walk, making sure to have Izanagi scout the area in advance. At this point, he could say he got lost if he was caught, but once he got near the office, that excuse wouldn’t work so well. He entered the stairwell and began to climb two staircases. But once he was almost outside the door, he sent Izanagi to see if anyone was behind it. The warning was almost instant.

A guard approaches. Quick, hide.

Yu grabbed onto the railing and flung himself over the edge, holding onto the railing so as to swing under the balcony. The momentum carried him to the underside of the balcony, and the teenager grabbed hold of anything he could. He heard the door open, and he began to secure himself. If someone looked up and saw him, he would’ve looked something like Spiderman holding onto a ceiling. Yu held on for dear life, worried of what might happen if the guard went down. Sending out Izanagi again, he breathed a sigh of relief when the security instead went up. After a few excruciating minutes of waiting for him to be completely gone, Yu let himself fall and land gracefully. Rushing back up, he found the office with the name ‘Togo’ on it. He pulled the knob, but it was locked.

Of course it is. Izanagi, keep an eye out.

The god stood watch while Yu pulled out one of his makeshift lock picks and got to work.

Breaking and entering. Great, now I actually am a criminal.

He silently thanked God for the chests in Mementos that kept him in practice, and soon, there was a satisfying click, and Yu smiled as he opened the door. Yu entered the room and didn’t dare turn on the lights. Decorating the office were standard books, chairs, lamps. But he also couldn’t
help but notice the traditional samurai warrior armor stands and weapons proudly on display, along with traditional Japanese water paintings. There was even on Oni mask in a display case. Yu turned on the computer and plugged in the hard drive. While the progress bar began to fill up, Yu couldn’t help but be intrigued by the Oni mask. It was a bright red with golden fangs, horns, and eyeballs. Like most Oni masks, there were two fangs porturding upwards, but there was something else that caught his curiosity in the mask, but he couldn’t figure out what. He began to examine it closely, but suddenly, the computer beeped, and Yu unplugged the hard drive and exiting out of the now full progress bar.

**Narukami, someone’s coming!**

Yu immediately looked for somewhere to hide, and saw a silhouette appear on the door. He ducked under the desk and turned off his phone in case someone tried to call or text him. The door opened and closed gently, but to Yu, it sounded as loud as an artillery shell going off. The person walked around the room, and took a seat at the desk.

*Oh dear God, please don’t be Togo.*

Yu looked through Izanagi and saw that it wasn’t Togo, but the girl from the church, Hifumi. Except she was dressed rather formally, in a bright orange dress with red flowers dotting it, and her hair was tied up in a semi-bun, both of which looked a little too tight for her. She was humming a soft melody as she turned on the computer and accessed it easily. Yu made sure to stay away from her feet as she found what she was looking for. She pulled out her phone.

“Mother? Yes, I just checked it. Nothing’s missing, and it shows no sign of being tampered with… No, not that I see… Alright.”

Hifumi got up and walked out, and Yu let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. Once Izanagi confirmed that she was good and gone, Yu followed shortly, and was able to make it back to the group without incident. Kawakami noticed him and gave a small scowl.

“Narukami, you sure took your sweet time on the toilet.”

“You can’t rush art.” Was his quick reply, earning some small laughs and an eye roll from his teacher. The class then turned their attention back to the guide.

“Did you get it?” Shiho whispered.

Yu simply nodded, and tapped his pocket to confirm that it was still there. Now all he had to do was get through the trip without getting caught.

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Mitsuyo Togo was making way to her office. She got an alert on her phone that unauthorized access had been detected, and the timing couldn’t have been worse. She was on the cusp of securing an exclusive interview with the legendary teen idol Risette, and she couldn’t afford a scandal, a threat, or anything that could muck it up. As she was about to open the doors, she got a call.

“What?” She growled as she answered.

“It’s the tour. They’re just about done, and they need a speech from you.”

“I’m sure they don’t give two shits about me.”
“Perhaps, but remember, you need good PR.”

Mitsuyo grinded her teeth as she went down to the group. Waiting for her was Hifumi, all dressed up and ready to greet the audience. Mitsuyo inspected her daughter and gave her a nod of approval.

“You remember what to say, yes?”

“I do mother.”

“Good, good. Now go.” She ordered.

“Good evening.” Hifumi greeted with a small bow. Once the class caught wind of her, there were several wolf whistles from the boys, but they were swiftly stopped by Kawakami’s intense stare.

“We were very happy to have you here for your trip. We hope you enjoyed the tour. If you have any questions, please, feel free to ask.”

“Are you single?!” One boy shouted, and Yu saw a twitch in her eye at the question.

“Any questions related to the tour.” She rephrased, annoyance detectable in her voice.

“None? Very well, you are all free to leave. Again, we are glad that you could visit us, and we hope that you tune in to our channels.” Hifumi replied, giving a hasty bow and turning to leave all too quickly before any of the boys could ask for her number next. Yu turned to Ryuji, who had a scowl on his face. A scowl that got even worse as the boys kept talking about how Hifumi looked, or rather, how tight her dress fit. Shiho grabbed Yu’s arm and motioned for him to leave. The two made their way out of the TV studio, and Yu shot a text to his friends back at school.

Yu: I got the data.

Akechi: Excellent. We’ll be able to look through it tonight.

Morgana: Hey, if we plan on giving her a change of heart, then why are we bothering to gather evidence on her evil deeds?

Akechi: We’re not. We’re going to be shifting through her emails, calls, and the like to get a better idea of her personality.

Morgana: But what if she has evidence of her evil deeds on there?

Akechi: One, no one writes down that they’re going to commit a crime Morgana, they always say something like ‘Do what you have to’, or ‘take care of him’. Two, if she did, then we’d have to find someone else to target. But we’ll cross that bridge if we reach it. Where are you two now?

Yu: On our way to Dome Town.

Akechi: Really? Perfect, we can get to work over a plate of delicious pancakes.

Shiho: School gets out that soon?

Akechi: It’ll get out in a few hours. Plenty of time to kill at an amusement park, and you two deserve a reward for pulling this off.

Yu put his phone away and looked at Shiho.
“Well, looks like we’d better get going.”

“Yea. You know the way?”

“Yea. Follow me.”

Yu didn't know the way to Dome Town, but he'd be damned if he passed up a chance to impress her.

“Come on Yu, why won’t you ask him?”

“Because I know where we’re going!”

“No you don’t!”

“Yes I do!”

“Then how come we aren’t there despite walking around for a good hour?” Shiho asked, irritated.

“Because it’s farther than I remember it’d be!”

“Then explain how we passed the same airsoft shop three times.”

You really should have thought this through before trying to impress her.

Shut up Izanagi.

“Fine. Let’s ask him.” Yu said, walking up to a police officer.

“Excuse me officer.” He greeted

“Yea? Can I help you?”

“I was wondering where we had to go in order to get to Dome Town.”

“Dome Town? Just take the train right there, and it’s the first stop.”

“Thank you officer!” Shiho chirped.

“I knew that.” Yu said as they made their way to the train station.

“Sure you did.” Shiho replied with a playful smirk as the train pulled up. The two entered and Shiho turned to her companion.

“Hey, Yu… I want to ask you something.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“If… if Ann hadn’t butt in… would you have really asked me out on a date to Dome Town?”

“O-oh. Well, you see… um…maybe??” Yu started.

Very smooth.
Shiho looked at him for a moment before deflating. The girl turned away, and she looked both sad and disappointed at his choice of words. The train doors then opened up, and the two teens went to into the park, the conversation still fresh in both their minds, making the whole thing very awkward.

“So… what do you want to do?” Yu asked as they looked around, only to be answered by someone else entirely.

“SHIHO!! YU!!” Came the peppy voice of Ann, followed by Ryuji.

“Oh hey guys. What’re you two up to?” Yu greeted.

“Oh nothing. Thanks to you guys, pretty much everyone got it in their heads to come here. We were starting to think that you went somewhere else for your date when we couldn’t find ya.” Ryuji explained with a smug look that made Yu want to smack him.

“We’re not dating.” Yu pointed out.

“Oh yea? Then where you guys?” Ann asked coyly.

“Stopping at… detours.” Shiho answered, refusing to look at Ann.

“YOU WENT TO A LOVE HOTEL?!”

How the hell did you come to that conclusion?!

And of course, there just had to be other Shujin students nearby when those particular words came out. Yu couldn’t make out their faces, but he didn’t have to in order to know that they were shooting him looks that could kill, and would no doubt spread the news to the whole student body.

“NO!!” Shiho screamed out, a furious blush rising on her cheeks, while Yu pinched his eyes and let out a heavy sigh.

“For God’s sake Ann, we only met a few weeks ago. Do you really think that we’d go that far, that soon?” Yu questioned, getting a nervous chuckle in response.

“Hehe. Yea, that does make sense.” Ann pointed out, twirling one of her pigtails with a forced smile.

The four stood there, in total silence, and no one knew what to do about it.

Well, on the bright side, it’s no longer awkward, amiright?

Shut up Izanagi!
Akechi and Morgana had finally arrived at Dome Town, the amusement park that was second only to Destinyland in terms of popularity. But since that place was rather pricey, many teenagers found Dome Town to be an adequate substitute. Morgana was absolutely in awe of the massive steel behemoths that were the rollercoasters, the playgrounds that were the carnival games, and was incredibly disappointed at the lack of sushi to be found. Akechi, however, was focused solely on finding his other Team members, a briefcase handcuffed to his hand.

“Are we sure they’re still here? You think they might have left already?” Morgana asked as they took a stroll down to the haunted house ride.

“They have to be. I told them we’d be coming here.” Akechi stated, scanning the area for a pink hair band and silver hair.

“Oh look! There they are!”

Akechi looked to where she was pointing to, and sure enough, he saw Yu, Shiho, Ann, and Ryuji leaving the haunted house ride, with Yu at Shiho with a worried look, as the girl had both of her hands cupped on her mouth, as if she was ready to vomit. Ann, however, was clinging to Yu and Ryuji for dear life, a fact that annoyed the blonde punk. Akechi approached the two.

“Oh, there you are Akechi. We were waiting for you.” Yu greeted as Shiho let out a very audible gulp.

“I apologize for the wait. It was very difficult for me to keep Morgana focused with all the attractions.”

“Oh hey Akechi, what are you doing with the new girl?” Ann asked before letting out a gasp.

“ARE YOU TWO ON-”

Yu was ready this time, and clasped his hands over Ann’s mouth before any other students could get whiff of whatever inaccurate statement she was about to make. He then turned to Akechi with a small grin.

“So, now that you’re here, we can get down to schoolwork, yes?”

“Dude, for real? We’re in the middle of a big-ass amusement park, and you wanna work on school stuff? Even though we’ve only been on one ride?” Ryuji asked, disappointment evident in both his face and voice.

“It’s important for me, sorry. Thanks for going with us on the ride, it was fun.” Yu said as he and Shiho walked away, leaving their two other friends behind.

“Was he serious back there? You’ve been here for hours on end, and you only rode one ride?” Morgana asked.

“Yup. Because *someone* didn’t know where they were going.” Shiho answered, glaring at Yu, who turned away sheepishly.

“Well, in any event, do you still have the flash drive?”
Yu fished into his pockets and handed it to the crimson-eyed detective, who smiled.

“Perfect. Now, we just need to sit down and get straight to work. And maybe even sample some pancakes while we’re at it. I heard this diner is remarkably fast at making them.” Akechi informed as they entered a sit-down restaurant. Shortly after placing their orders, Akechi opened up his briefcase and pulled out his computer. Inserting the flash drive, everyone else watched over his shoulder to see what exactly Yu got from the field trip. After a short while, the screen went black, then walls of red text flying through, and Akechi smiled.

“Now all we need to do is wait and- wait, hold on. Something’s not right.” the detective pointed out, his smile vanishing as soon as it appeared. On his screen, instead of red text, there was now a red exclamation mark inside a red triangle. The sign soon vanished, and in its place were the sentences; “Unauthorized access detected! Activating emergency protocols!”

“What does it mean by-” Morgana began, only to be cut off by an explosion.

Mitsuyo Togo sat in her office, clicking a single finger on her desk in annoyance as she typed away at . Someone had managed to not only infiltrate her fortress, but also steal priceless information under her nose, and escape. And no one would have been the wiser, had it not been for a hidden program she installed to alert her of a security breach and then trace it back to the source. Her computer itself was mostly untampered with, and it appeared the thief had copied files and then transferred them to a flash drive, but that was a small comfort to the head of Japan’s greatest TV conglomerate. After confirming that they also managed to transfer her failsafe virus, the woman visibly relaxed. Her empire was safe, for now.

“Alright thief. Let’s see what mistakes you made.” Mitsuyo said to herself as she walked over to a nearby display case holding a crimson oni mask. The previous cameras had been hacked and put on a loop, shielding the intruder’s identity. But, there was another camera, one only she knew about, and wasn’t hooked to any network. Pulling the oni mask out of its case, she held it up to the light and saw that the two cameras were still in its eye sockets, obscured by the case itself. She flipped it over, revealing a chord tied up neatly with a USB plug. Untying it, she plugged in the USB and let the footage roll. Fast forwarding to the time of the break-in, she saw a boy enter and plug in a flash drive. He had his back to the camera, and the woman grumbled, until he turned around. Mitsuyo was prepared to zoom and enhance, but stopped when the thief started to walk around the room, and got close to the mask. Very close. Mitsuyo smiled, glaring at the crystal clear face in front of her. Pausing the video, she called up one of her many agents.

“Hello Emiko. I have a face I need you to sniff out. Start with the students attending Shujin Academy. I expect results by next week.” The woman ordered, sending the picture to an email address.

Whoever this kid was, he made just signed his death warrant.

Smoke was pouring from the wreckage that used to be Akechi’s computer, the three teenagers and one timeless entity coughing up a storm as they tried to clear the smoke with their hands. Thankfully, the sudden explosion wasn’t enough to hurt anyone, but it was bad enough to activate the sprinklers and set off the fire alarm, causing a panic. After the situation was under control, the four were subsequently kicked out and told they would never be allowed in Dome Town again. At first, Yu thought they were exaggerating, until they took the highschoolers’ photos and fingerprints. Now, they were standing in the parking lot, wondering what to do next.
Well… that really blew up in our faces.

Not funny.

“That certainly didn’t go the way I hoped.” Akechi stated between coughing fits.

“What happened?” Shiho asked.

“I’d say we tripped some kind of boobytrap. Sorry about the computer.” Yu explained.

“I have others, don’t worry. Plus, all the data is backed up in the Cloud, so nothing all that valuable was lost. If anything, I should be saying sorry to you, since you risked your life for nothing.” Akech replied.

“Now what do we do?” Morgana asked

“We still need a better idea of her personality, or we aren’t getting into the Palace anytime soon.” Akechi replied.

“Well, how about we go to the guy who gave you this tip to begin with?”

Akechi looked outside. The sun was going down, but it couldn’t quite be called a sunset just yet.

“If we’re lucky, he might still be at the school painting. Follow me, we might be able to catch him.” Akechi ordered, making his way to the train station, discarding the ruined computer in a trash can. It only took them a few hours to arrive at their destination; a highschool that Yu was unfamiliar with.

“This is Kosei High. My informant is likely at the roof.” Akechi informed, making his way through the school gates, his friends following closely behind. By now, most of the students had already gone home, giving the school halls barren. Once they reached the roof, they saw two people on the roof. One was a girl with a red braid in her hair that was in the shape of a three-leaf clover. The other was a boy with dark blue hair, and was playing against the girl in a game of shogi. Yu recognized them both as Yusuke and Hifumi, respectively. And they recognized him.

“Hey, aren’t you that blonde boy’s friend?”

“Yu Narukami, yes. Surprised you remember me.”

“I’ve seen you a surprisingly often number of times in a few days.” Hifumi replied, narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

“Must be a coincidence.”

“If you don’t mind Hifumi-san, we have business with Kitagawa-san.” Akechi interrupted.

“That’s perfectly fine. I was just leaving.” Hifumi said, packing up the board and heading out, glaring at Yu the whole way. Akechi took her spot and sat across from Yusuke.

“How may I be of assistance Akechi-san?” The young artist asked.

“We need some information, if you would be so kind.”

“I’m afraid I’ve told you everything I know that’s related to the case.”
“You didn’t tell me why exactly you started. Why exactly did you decide to go after Mitsuyo Togo?”

“That’s rather confidential information Akechi-san.”

“We’ve hit a bit of a roadblock. We can’t keep going without your help.”

Yusuke placed both of his hands under his chin and looked down to the ground.

“Yusuke, people’s lives could be in danger.” Akechi pressed, earning a sigh from the student.

“Very well. The girl you saw leave, Hifumi, is Mitsuyo’s daughter.” Yusuke started, and the group leaned forward, earning a nasty stare from the artist.

“They’re with me. Continue.”

“It started a few weeks ago. Often times, Hifumi comes up here to practice her shogi skills, and declared that anyone who bested her would take her out on a date. Thanks to her natural beauty, she had no shortage of challengers. But, everytime she played, she had a fire that would light itself and never vanish until the match was over. I have captured that flame many times when I was starting out.”

“I’m sensing an important ‘but’ in there.” Morgana interrupted.

“But starting a few weeks ago, that flame has failed to show itself whenever she plays. Not only that, but she had been confronted by many men outside of our school. That’s when I confronted her about it.”

“And what did she say?” Yu asked.

“She said that her mother had recently begun forcing her to start modeling in place of shogi. At first, Hifumi was fine with it, but slowly but surely, the modeling consumed more and more of Hifumi’s life, replacing her time for the sport.”

“Why is Hifumi so obsessed with this game?”

“Her father was once renowned across the nation as one of the greatest shogi players in history, but has sadly been ill for a few years. Hifumi admires her father to the point of worship, and wishes to not only make him proud, but also to be like him.”

_I know how that feels_.

“And because Hifumi can’t pursue her dreams, she’s starting to feel like a prisoner.” Akechi finished.

“Hifumi herself was also well-known in the shogi world, but now, she’s starting to become shunned there, being seen as a sellout by fellow shogi players. Worse, the modeling is starting to make her more and more popular, thanks to her mother’s connections.”

“So if this keeps up, her reputation as a player will be beyond repair. Then she’ll never be able to do what she wants in life.” Shiho stated.

“Yes, and her flame would be forever snuffed out. I could not allow that.” Yusuke finished.

“What exactly did you think you could do. I mean, it’s not like you could sue her for forcing her daughter to do something she didn’t want to do.” Yu replied.
“Perhaps, but I knew Hifumi’s mother was a prominent media mogul. I figured that someone that powerful would have to have some dirt. And my demands wouldn’t be completely unreasonable, just stop forcing Hifumi to be model. But I certainly wasn’t expecting what I found.”

“The recording.” Yu guessed.

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you think could help?”

“I once asked Hifumi why she didn’t ask her mother to stop, she simply replied that her mother had rarely listened to her daughter in any circumstance, and always did something if she could gain something from it. And she’s gained much from Hifumi’s misfortune.”

“I see. Thank you for your help.” Akechi said as he got up, followed shortly by his friends. The four left the school and Yu pulled out his phone as they started walking.

“All right, since that was rather fruitless, I’ll give you what I’ve learned through official channels.” Akechi stated, reaching into his coat and pulling out a portfolio. Opening it, he skimmed the papers.

“From what I’ve been able to learn about her, she started the Togo Information Network from scratch using the money she obtained from her marriage from one Kaito Togo, a well-known and wealthy philanthropist, and quickly developed a reputation for uncovering corruption in the upper echelons of society, often at great personal risk, or so the story goes. With each person she exposed, she grew in fame, and her popularity made her an inspiration to many journalist. And now, word has it that she’s grooming her daughter to follow in her footsteps. That’s about all I have.”

“Well, we’ve tried everything to get info. Now, we just have to figure out the codewords.” Morgana said, a little disappointed.

“Let’s see… Togo residence.” Akechi guessed.

“Candidate not found.”

“Are there any places she goes to a lot?” Shiho asked.

“Let’s try… Togo News Station.” Yu guessed.

“Candidate found.”

“All right! Now for the distortion.”

“Let’s see. What would a controlling mother see as her workplace?” Akechi pondered.

“A bunker?” Shiho guessed.

“Candidate not found.”

“A warship?” Akechi asked.

“Candidate not found.”

“A battleground?” Morgana pleaded.

“Candidate not found.” Shiho let out a groan.
“Got anything Yu?” Akechi asked, defeated.

Yu thought back to what they knew about Hifumi’s mother. She was stubborn, selfish, and very powerful. But there was something else, something he felt he should be remembering. He thought long and hard until Izanagi provided an answer.

**You think it has something to do with that room?**

Yu’s mind raced back to Mitsuyo’s office. He remembered the room was dotted by artifacts from the feudal era, from armor to masks. She held some admiration and love of that time period. Perhaps…

“Fortress?”

“Candidate found. Please approach destination to begin navigation.”

The group let out mighty cheers that got several weird looks from pedestrians. But Shiho looked up at the golden sun starting to dip and a worried look arrived on her face.

“It’s starting to get late. You guys think we should begin infiltration now?” Shiho asked.

“I doubt Sae’s going to be home, so unless you’re worried about your folks Shiho, I don’t see a reason to not go tonight.”

“Well?” Akechi asked.

“Fine. But let’s not stay too long.” Shiho agreed.

“Agreed. Best to get the lay of the land first. We’ll see what it’s like, explore a bit, then leave. Besides, I don’t want Sae-san getting suspicious.” Yu replied.

The group got on a train and speed their way back to the TV station.

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Mitsuyo had finished up her management for the day, and had to go to a dinner with a potential investor. She also finally managed to secure Rise Kujikawa for an appearance on the studio, and she couldn’t afford to let some brat ruin it all. Her mind was still swimming with questions. Who was he? What did he want? Why did he try to steal information from her? The last two she could answer by herself. He wanted something from her, or to bring her down, and he intended to use the information he stole to do it. She started to walk down the stairs when she heard her phone ring.

“Emiko? I didn’t expect this so soon.”

“I got good news.”

“I expected nothing less. Now, who’s the brat that’s about to have his life ruined?”

“You’re not gonna believe this; it’s Yu Narukami. As in, Dojima Narukami’s kid.”

Mitsuyo’s eyes widened and a sadistic grin formed on her thin lips.

“You’re sure?”

“Yup, but that’s not the best part. Apparently, he’s got a criminal record, and he’s in Tokyo on probation *and* has gotten real close with Goro Akechi. I can’t make this up.”
The woman’s smile grew wider.

“Oh, that’s just perfect. I’ll handle this personally. Thank you.”

“No problem. I almost feel bad for the guy. Almost.”

Mitsuyo stepped out of her office and was about to call another one of her contacts so that she could arrange a private meeting with the boy, but found it unnecessary, as she spotted a teenager with silver hair in the crowd. She started to make her way to him, but she saw that he wasn’t alone. Akechi was there too, as were two other women, and they were all huddled around his phone.

Mitsuyo froze.

There’s no way they found out how to break her failsafe. Right?

The businesswoman scowled. Her watch beeped, signaling that she would be late for her business dinner if she didn’t move it. She took one last glare at Yu before she left, silently vowing to make him dearly regret crossing her. If she had kept looking at the group, she would have seen them vanish right before her eyes.
Chapter Notes

Fortress of Envy

It's my Birthday peeps!
Here's my gift to you!

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbgqVdoX_U4

As the familiar sensation of entering the Metaverse passed, the Phantom Team suddenly felt a biting cold and wind that howled like a hungry wolf. They looked around, trying to make sense of what they were feeling, and their eyes widened at the sight. They were currently standing on the edge of a mountain, and directly in front of them was a feudal-style Japanese castle built on a separate mountainside. There was a narrow bridge that stretched the gaping chasm, far too thin for the Mona-mobile. Walking single-file, everyone clung to the rope rails whenever a minor breeze rattled the structure, but in spite of the non-stop creaking wood, the freezing gale, and the narrow space they had to walk on, they were able to make it across without much difficulty. They stood in front of massive twin iron doors wedged between the rocks.

“Alright, now what? We go barging in?” Shiho asked.

“We can’t go through the front entrance, that’ll alert everyone that we’re here.” Morgana pointed out.

“Let’s look around. There’s got to be another entrance here somewhere.” Yu said. While his team split up, he decided to step back in order to look at the castle in full.

In front of him were the iron doors, behind those were stairs that led to the fortress itself. There was a colossal tower that the farthest from the doors, while the rest of the complex was made up of a huge barracks, an armory, the castle itself, and a building that was the size of a warehouse. But furthest from the gates, there was one massive tower looming above them all. He looked around for some way to scale the gates, and saw a cave entrance.

“Guys! Over here!” Yu called to his teammates, who all came running.

“Are we sure we want to go down there? We don’t know where it could go.” Morgana pointed out.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I’ll follow Seeker’s lead.” Shiho responded.

Yu began to walk down, and as they started to lose light, he summoned Pyro Jack, a Persona that was a Jack-O-Lantern with a lantern in one of its mittens. As Yu began walking, he soon heard a very loud crunch. Yu focused Pyro Jack’s light and saw what he stepped on; a skeleton bone. After they got over the initial shock, the Team continued, careful not to step on any more human remains.

It didn’t long before they saw sunlight coming at the end of the tunnel. They rushed in, but as soon as they got close, they tripped and fell, and the sunlight showed what they fell on. The entire floor was covered in hundreds of skeletons, some in samurai armor, some in fine robes, and some
in peasant clothes. As the four started to move, they found it difficult to step anywhere without any bones poking them.

“My God… there’s so many.” Akechi said in horror.

“Do… do you think these are her victims?” Morgana asked.

“Let’s not jump the gun. These are probably her enemies. She might only see them as dead. If we’re lucky, then they’re probably still alive.” Yu pointed out.

“And if they are dead in the real world?” Shiho asked.

“Then we make her pay. We need to focus on getting into the fortress.” Yu replied, looking straight ahead and seeing a wooden crane ready to pull up a platform.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” Yu ordered, forcing his way through the knee-high piles of dead, using his sword to clear the way for the others. After they were on the platform, he pulled a nearby lever, raising the platform above the untold number of bodies.

When it reached the top, the Tricksters saw the exit to the cave, which was right next to the warehouse-like building Yu saw earlier. Pulling out his katana, the Wild Card tore through the paper-thin material and walked through, revealing that the building wasn’t really a warehouse, but more like a museum. Dotted all around the walls were various paintings that looked suspiciously like pictures one would find on the front page of newspapers. Yu decided to examine the titles of one of them.

“Pedophile in the Cabinet! Minister of Fair Trade Commission found having sexual relations with seven year old boy!”

“I remember this. Mitsuyo was having one of her people investigate the Minister, and that person caught him sleeping with a child. The Minister claimed innocence, of course, but the evidence was conclusive.”

“Hey, there’s a scroll here.” Shiho pointed out, grabbing it off of a small stone podium under the painting.

“Alright, let’s see what we got here.” She started, reading it out loud.

“Behold, a man who’s laziness led to his downfall. Minister Akihiro was a man of immense power, so powerful that some considered him a threat to our Shogun. Our Shogun believed him unworthy of his power, and thus, desired it for herself. Using her her loyal agents, she managed to successfully drug him, and once the fool was placated, she then had a boy strip naked and then took a picture. After that, the man was accused of sexual deviance, and confined to prison, no matter how many times he pleaded innocent. Now, his power belongs to the Shogun. All hail the Shogun.”

“So, he was telling the truth after all.” Akechi muttered in disgust.

“Did you work on it?” Yu asked.

“No, the higher ups thought it would be a waste of my talents on a case. And Sae also refused to prosecute him, saying that her intuition told her something was off.”

“Do you think… all of these people are people she framed?” Morgana asked, looking through the museum.
Yu couldn’t help but clench his fist in fury, and could also feel Izanagi start to stir with rage for the same reason; this was personal. He promised himself right then and there that he’d steal Mitsuyo’s heart, if only for this one person, and he would only try harder for every person in this room that was framed. He then felt a gentle tap on his shoulder and saw Shiho looking at him with concern.

“You alright Seeker? You look ready to kill someone.”

“This… is personal for me Pariah.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Not here. Let’s keep moving.” Yu said abruptly, turning his attention to the rest of the building’s interior. Hundreds of paintings littered the walls below, each with their own title and scroll on a small podium. As they began their descent, Yu found another painting, this time with a picture of a man being shoved into a police car, and the title being “Sex trafficking ring busted! Police officer confesses all!” and Shiho picked up the scroll.

“Behold a fool who didn’t know his place. Police officer Toshinori was once a loyal subject of our Shogun, and he led a happy life. But his ambition soon outstripped his loyalty. Attempting to blackmail our Shogun, he soon brought down the wrath of our leader. Buying out prostitutes, she then planted evidence to make it look like the officer was a human trafficker. After he was expelled from the empire, he attempted to bring it down by conspiring with its enemies. Thankfully, our Shogun silenced him before his plans bore fruit, and as a result, an even more loyal subject was put in his place, and fear was struck in her enemies’, and subjects’, hearts as he was stripped of life that only our Shogun deserves. Take heed of this fool’s story, and remember that what our Shogun wants, our Shogun will get, especially if it belongs to you. All hail the Shogun.”

The three turned to Akechi, who shook his head and grabbed his forehead.

“Officer Toshinori. Right from the start, certain parts of the evidence lined up far too well. When he was brought in, Toshinori said that he’d only speak to me, so I tried, hard, to get to see him, but he died in custody before I could. I later tried to investigate the incident, but red tape and upper management swiftly put an end to my efforts.”

“Not even Kobayakawa had the law in his pocket. This woman is on another level.” Shiho pointed out, nervousness starting to seep in her words. Yu thought back to that night, to what that man said when he was threatened with the law.

“The police are my bitches.”

“Let’s keep going.” He said, not noticing that he dug his claws so deep into his hands that he drew blood.

They continued moving down the levels of the museum, passing countless more paintings, each one no doubt another tale of an innocent person falling to ruin because they crossed Togo. By the time they reached the bottom, there was only one painting; it was of Mitsuyo’s wedding. It was titled “The start of the empire.” Just like before, Shiho picked up the scroll, but this time, the podium was made of gold rather than marble. Shiho took it and read it aloud.

“Behold, the event that started our empire. Kaito Togo was a man who came from a wealthy family, and held all the values of a great person; loyalty, tenacity, and honesty, so is it any wonder he married our Shogun? But it wasn’t always this way. Once, Mitsuyo called herself the best friend of a wench named Ami Ito, whom was supposed to marry Kaito. Our shogun saw the happiness
their union would bring, and wanted it for herself. All that wealth, prestige, and happiness Ami would have did not belong to her, it belonged to our Shogun. To prevent Kaito from making a terrible mistake, our Shogun gave her a drink far stronger than she could handle, found a desperate man in the building, and made sure Kaito saw her being unfaithful. After the wedding was called off, and Kaito made available, our Shogun went to work filling the void Ami had torn in him, and eventually took the place she was supposed to have from the start; by his side. From this union, heir was born but sadly, that was all Kaito did right, and the novelty of having a noble person for a husband quickly wore off. As for his wealth, our Shogun put it to better use than either he, or Ami, ever could, and built the glorious empire you see today. ALL HAIL THE SHOGUN!! LONG MAY SHE REIGN!!”

The Team looked at each other, and Shiho was so furious she tore the scroll in half.

“That piece of paper can sugarcoat it all it wants, but the fact is plain as day; Mitsuyo Togo is a cruel, envious woman that steals what other people have simply because she doesn’t have it.” Yu spat.

“I think the contents of this warehouse prove that Mitsuyo needs to have her heart stolen.” Akechi pointed out.

“I agree. Forcing her daughter into a life she doesn’t want seems to be the least of her crimes.” Morgana said, cracking her knuckles.

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Shiho growled, glaring at the wedding picture.

“Then we’re all in agreement?” Yu asked, and got a nod from everyone in response.

“Then let’s keep moving. We’re bound to come across a Safe Room soon.” Yu ordered, taking them through the front door.

“We should be careful. We haven’t seen any Shadows so far. They might be waiting to ambush us.” Morgana pointed out as they exited the building. In front of them were pathways to the different buildings.

“Which way’s the Treasure?” Yu asked.

“There! It’s in that tower, no doubt.” Morgana said, pointing straight ahead. The Team bolted to it, knowing that the courtyard would be the perfect ambush point. Once they were inside, they expected to see a horde of Shadows, but all that stood before them was one man dressed in general clothes, and in front of him was a shogi board. The four approached him and he gave a warm smile.

“Greetings young ones. I am Kaito Togo, Mitsuyo Togo’s husband and greatest general. Welcome to Togo Castle.” He greeted with a small bow.

“Umm… hi?” Yu greeted cautiously, approaching the seemingly harmless man.

“How may I help you?”

“We’d… like to get to the Treasure?” Yu responded, unsure if the cognitive person would know what he was talking about.

“I take it you mean you want access to the most secure and private room in this tower?”

“Yes.”
“Ah. To do that, you must best me in a game of Shogi.”

Yu looked down at the board and saw that his side was completely empty, while Kaito’s side was complete.

“Where are my pieces?”

“Scattered. If you wish to play against me, you must prove that you are worthy of my full might. The pieces are secured with each lesser general, one in each area of the fortress. You must earn these pieces, either by wit or by force.” He informed before adding.

“Best of luck to you! Please be safe!” With a gentle smile and a small wave. Yu turned back to his friends and noticed that there was a nearby pair of doors that shimmered. After he entered the Safe Room, he turned to his friends to discuss their next move.

“Alright, for now, I say we head back. When can we resume infiltration?” Morgana asked.

“I have Volleyball practice on Saturday.” Shiho answered.

“I have work tomorrow, Saturday, and Sunday.” Yu informed.

“I have to help out Yu on Sunday.”

“Alright, so we won’t be able to infiltrate until Monday. Be sure you stock up on supplies leader!” Morgana reminded.

“Yea I know. Let’s head back, I don’t want to be late for curfew.” Yu answered as he teleported them back to the entrance.

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By the time he made it back, it was 9:10 in the afternoon. It wasn’t too bad, he thought, after all, he could just warm up some leftovers, eat, then head to bed. He opened the door and walked in with a little joy over the fact he and his Team got into the Palace, and could begin changing society for the better, among other things. Only to have that joy replaced with fear when he saw who was waiting for him.

“Hello Narukami. I trust you have a good explanation as to why you’re back after 9.” Sae borderline warned as she typed away at her computer.

“I got a job.” Yu answered quickly.

“And you didn’t inform me because?” Sae asked, not satisfied.

“It was so sudden. A lot of other employers said that they wouldn’t hire me, so when I got an offer and they told me to come over right away, I couldn’t afford to wait.”

“You could’ve at least sent a text that told me you’d be home late.” Sae countered.

“Well, you’re rarely here, so-”

Sae closed her computer and gave Yu her signature glare, making the teen want to eat his words.

“Rarely doesn’t mean never, Narukami.” She hissed.
“S-sorry.”

“When do you have to work?”

“Friday and Saturday after school.”

“And did you forget that you have to work on Sunday as well? You don’t think you’re over extending yourself?” She asked.

*I once had to work three part time jobs and take care of a baby all by myself. Just saying.*

“No Sae-san. But I want to make myself useful.”

“Or you want to get rid of your curfew.”

*Shit.*

“What are you planning Narukami? Tell me honestly, and I won’t kick you out.” Sae said, her glare drilling holes into his very being. Sweat began to pour down his skin, and he gave a lie, and silently prayed to God she’d buy it.

“There’s… a girl I like.”

That answer caught Sae off guard. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

“Oh… ooooooooh !!” the prosecutor exclaimed as a blush formed on her cheeks.

“That… explains a lot. Does this girl have a name?” Sae asked

“Um… I haven’t asked her out.” Yu admitted, prompting Sae to stomp over to him and corner him against the wall.

“Are you stalking her?” She asked, bearing down on him like a hawk.

“No.” He squeaked like a mouse.

“Good. Why haven’t you asked her out yet?” Sae asked, walking back to her desk with a slight swing to her hips.

“I’m not all that confident in myself. I’m not sure how she’ll react.”

“Narukami, you shouldn’t be afraid to ask her out. Girls like confidence. Besides, what kind of girl wouldn’t want you? You’re good looking, well-built, mature-“

“And have a criminal record.” Yu reminded, making Sae pause, albeit for a few seconds.

“Right. But that didn’t stop you from making friends. Don’t see why it should stop you from getting a girlfriend.” She pointed out, putting her computer in a bag.

“That’s… a good point. Didn’t know you of all people would give good romantic advice.”

“I’ve dabbled in romance before. But no one’s ever lived up to my standards.” She replied, placing a hand on her hip and smirking.

“I pity the poor soul that tries to woo you.”

“Careful Narukami. I can still kick you out for coming back past 9.”
“Go ahead. I’m sure being homeless will really impress the girl I’m after.”

The two shared a brief chuckle at the sarcasm.

“All right Narukami, you can stay. But in the future, I expect to be notified of the possibility that you might be late.” Sae stated as she started to walk to her room.

“Hey hold on.” Yu started.

“Yes?”

“Since I have a job, is it alright if I have my curfew removed?”

Sae stared at him long and hard, not quite going into her signature glare before she finally let up.

“Fine. But if you start getting into trouble-”

“I won’t cause trouble for anyone Sae-san. And if I do, then it’ll be unintentional. Promise.”

“I’ll hold you to it Narukami. I’m going to bed now. There are some leftovers in the fridge, be sure to get plenty of rest. You’ll want to impress your employer tomorrow.” Sae suggested, starting to close the door.

“Thank you Sae-san.” Yu said, but before Sae finished closing the door, she added:

“Oh, and Narukami? When you and that girl become an item, I want you to introduce me. I want to make sure she won’t be a bad influence on you.”

“Sure thing.” Yu replied halfheartedly as he stepped in his room to prepare for the next day.
Ryuji was on his regular afternoon jog. School had just gotten out, and now that he had decided to take trying to get back on the track team seriously, he had gone on jogs every afternoon after school let out. And every afternoon, he’d check in on Hifumi, who, at first simply glared at him when he did, but eventually just settled for waving at him to show that she saw him. But this time, it was raining, and he forgot his umbrella. This didn’t stop him before, so he’d be damned if he let it stop him now. He had entered the church, and, minus the fact that he was completely drenched, everything was fine. But when Hifumi saw him turn to leave, she got up out of her pew and went after him.

“Hey, wait up!” The shogi player called, much to Ryuji’s surprise.

“Huh? What is it? Were some assholes giving you trouble again?”

“No, but have you seen how hard it’s coming down out there?”

“Yea, what about it?”

Hifumi physically recoiled at this response before grabbing his arm.

“You could catch a cold out there. You should stay in here, at least until the storm passes.”

This got a cheeky grin from Ryuji, and the response.

“Oh, you want me to stay with ya eh? I’m cool with that.”

Hifumi simply crossed her arms and scowled at him.

“I’m merely concerned for your well-being. Also…”

“Also what?” Ryuji asked, wiggling an eyebrow.

“My Shogi skills are getting rusty. If it isn’t too much, I’d appreciate you playing with me. Even if you won’t provide much for a challenge.” Hifumi challenged, adding the last sentence with a smug grin.

“Oh yea? Bring up the board lady. I’ll crush whatever you’ve got.” Ryuji accepted, thrusting a fist into an open palm.

“Hehehe. Hahaha. MUWAHAHAHA!!! If you face the Togo Queen with such a haughty attitude, defeat is all but guaranteed!” Hifumi cackled. Most people looked at her like she was a mad scientist, but Ryuji not only grinned wider, but joined in.

“The Togo Queen? More like the Togo Tyrant! You’re peasants have revolted, and now, it is time for your reign to end!” Ryuji retorted as Hifumi set up the board.

“A revolt?! Against their queen?! Well, let us see if their tactics match their passion!”

“The age of Togo is over! The Sakamoto Dynasty will come soon enough!” Ryuji promised as the board was set up.

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The Sakamoto Dynasty never came to pass. For starters, it wasn’t until the game started that it dawned on Ryuji that he didn’t even know how to play. Once Hifumi finished teaching him, pretty much all of the bravado had drained from both of them, and they had returned to normal human beings. Though, it was probably for the best, since two played several games, and Ryuji lost all of them. The poor peasants never stood a chance.

“It looks like the storm’s gone. You should probably head back.” Hifumi suggested, looking at one of the windows.

“Yea yea.” Ryuji agreed glumly.

“What’s wrong? I thought the age of Sakamoto was coming.” Hifumi taunted.

“I’ll be back Hifumi. Your reign will end by my hand!” Ryuji declared with a dramatic pose, making Hifumi giggle.

“I’ll hold you to it. I misjudged you Ryuji. We should do this more often.”

“Sure, I’m down for it. Though, I’m gonna kick your ass one day, your majesty.”

“Uh huh, yea sure.” Hifumi retorted half-heartedly as Ryuji left the church.

Some Time Earlier…

Yu had just gotten out of school, and made his way to Cafe Leblanc with an umbrella sheltering him from the relentless shower. This would be his first day on the job, and he had a great deal to be nervous about, so much so that made an offering to the shrine along with a prayer to not screw it up. Arriving at the little coffee shop, he saw Sojiro waiting for him, and surprisingly few customers, most likely because of the rain. The man grumbled at seeing Yu, who noticed that Wakaba was missing, meaning that he had to really step up his game if he wanted to keep this job.

“So, you actually came?” The coffee house owner grumbled.

“Yes sir.”

“Great, now I have to work with you. How much do you know about making coffee?”

“There are beans grown and imported around the world, the elevation and climate allowing them to alter the flavor, sweetness, and overall taste of the drink. As for actually making it, there’s roasting, then grounding, then brewed, and finally, separation from the beans.”

Sojiro widened his eyes in amazement.

Good thing I looked all that up before coming here.

“You looked all that up before coming here, didn’t you?” Sojiro asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I wanted to impress you.”

“Well, consider me impressed. Now, put on an apron and get behind the counter. It’s time you learned a thing or two.”

Yu did as he was told, and waited for further orders from the man.

“Now, this cafe has been around for twenty years now. We serve curry, cake, some cinnamon rolls on Christmas, but what everyone comes here for is a good cup of joe. If you serve a single bad
cup, you’re fired. So, since Wakaba doesn’t want that, I’m going to teach you some of our more popular drinks so that you can at least hold your own.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Let me explain.”

Sojiro explained the ins and outs of experienced coffee making, the different temperatures of different beans, and the background of each bean. He also said, very clearly, that Yu was not to touch any of the expensive beans, and if he did, he was fired, but should a customer come by and want a cup with those beans, Sojiro would handle it. The second Sojiro finished his explanation, the doorbell rang, signaling a new customer had entered.

“Alright kid. Show me what you’ve learned. Take this customer’s order.” Sojiro ordered, turning to the new arrival.

“Welcome.” Yu greeted, only for his face to lose all of its color once he saw who it was.

“Hello, I would… Narukami? What are you doing here?” Sae Niijima asked.

“Oh, that’s right, you live with her.” Sojiro mused to himself.

“This is the job I told you about.” Yu informed.

“I see. Sakura-san’s standards are high, so I hope I’m not going to be disappointed.” Sae replied with a genuine smile.

“I hope you aren’t disappointed either.” Yu replied, now more relaxed.

“But remember, you’re supposed to write in your diary, even if your curfew is gone.”

“Understood Sae-san. Now, what can I get you?”

“I’ll take the house blend, please.”

“House blend coming up.”

Yu went to work, while Sojiro hooovered over his shoulder like a hawk. Roast, then ground, then brew just like Sojiro taught him, Yu also noticed that Sae was watching just as closely, though for some reason, Yu had the feeling it wasn’t so that she could keep an eye on her drink. Once he was done, he humbly presented the cup, and Sae took a sip, sampling it. She then let out a soft moan of approval.

“It’s not as good as Sakura-san’s, but I still find it satisfactory. Nicely done, Narukami. Keep practicing.” She complimented, drinking the rest of the cup. Sojiro turned to the teenager, a gentle smile on his lips.

“Well, well kid. You actually managed to pull it off.”

“I take it that means I’m not fired?”

“No, not yet. But maybe I was wrong about you.”

“I’m glad I surprised you. Twice.”

“Yea yea. Tomorrow, I’m gonna teach you how to make curry, but for now, let’s focus on
getting you some practice with any customers that come in.”

I am thou. Thou art I.

Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of rebellion that will lead thee to the truth.

With the birth of the Hierophant Arcana,

Thou hast obtained the blessings that will grant thee new power.

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It was 9:30 at night when Yu was told to leave the coffee shop. Though “told” was a bit of a stretch. It was more like “forcibly removed”. But Yu was able to earn 7,200 Yen, so he left satisfied and began to make his way down the street, when a thought popped into his head. He would have to write in his probation diary soon, and that thought made him stop in his tracks. If he was going to continue leading the Phantom Team, then they were going to garner attention, and Sae would no doubt read his diary. If he tried to get rid of what he had and then re-write what he had in the diary, Sae would notice and get suspicious. If he tried to not let her read it, she’d get suspicious. If he stopped writing, she’d throw him out. Yu had to think of something, and think of it before they went after their next target in force.

“Thank you! Please come again!” A store owner shouted to an exiting customer. Yu turned his head to the second-hand store, and thought of an idea. He made his way to Shibuya Main Street, and hoped a certain store was still open before heading home.

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After making his way out of the store he had in mind, he suddenly felt his phone buzz, and he pulled it out, seeing the name he gave Shoichi; ‘Mad scientist’. He had sent a single text

Mad Scientist: Young one, I require your assistance. See me at the clinic at once.

Yu: It’s way too late. I need to head home.

Mad Scientist: Irrelevant. Remember the terms of our bargain.

Yu let out a groan. They did have a Palace to infiltrate, and they would need meds. He got out his phone and shot another text to someone else

Yu: I’m going to be back late tonight.

Sae: Understood. Don’t do anything you shouldn’t.

Wow. That was easy.

Yu made his way to the secluded clinic, and barely made a single knock before the door flung open, Shoichi’s face akin to a teenager’s when someone walked in on them masturbating. He then looked at Yu with a crooked smile before grabbing the boy and forcing him inside, slamming the door behind him.

“At long last, you arrived.” Shoichi declared, feeling Yu up and down.

“Y-yes… I’m here.” He stammered, his mood going from annoyed to very very afraid.
“And not a moment to soon. To the exam room!” Shoichi ordered, dragging Yu to the place where they tested the mystery medicine. And Yu could only imagine how the next batch would taste this time.

“You’re in a much better mood than last I saw you.” Yu pointed out.

“That is irrelevant. I have finally made strides in my research. And your bland health profile has been most invaluable. Now, we are ready to take the next step.”

Shoichi grabbed a vial containing a blue liquid and handed it to Yu.

“Drink this, young one.”

Yu, with shaking hands, grabbed the vial and forced it down his throat in one go. It tasted far too sweet, and it burned, like he was drinking alcohol, but at least the taste was tolerable. He felt the fluid sizzle as it traveled down his throat, but much to his surprise, it didn’t leave an aftertaste, nor did it damage his throat like it did last time. Shoichi grabbed his noteboard and pen, then stared at Yu, who was starting to feel… funny, his eyes starting to glaze over.

“How do you feel?”

“Bruh, if I punch myself and it hurts, am I weak, or strong?” Yu asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Bruh, Halloween is just a global cosplay event.”

“What are you talk-?”

“Bruh, children are legal slave labor.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“Bruh, ‘that’s great dear’ is grandma’s version of ‘cool story bro.’”

“What have I done?”

“Bruh, cereal is a soup.”

“This was supposed to be for the betterment of mankind.”

“Bruh, if you call a dude a dog, you’re calling them a son of a bitch.”

“I regret everything.”

“Bruh, whoever said ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ has clearly never heard of comas.”

“Kill me now.”

A good 30 minutes had passed of Yu spouting utter nonsense, deep philosophical questions, and everything in between before he suddenly passed out. After that whole ordeal was finished, Yu woke up and rubbed his head. Shoichi was scribbling like mad on his noteboard. The teen leaned forward and grabbed his skull, which was pounding like a jackhammer. The doctor saw Yu finally
getting up and set his noteboard down.

“Ah, you’ve come to. How do you feel?”

“Like I just went to a frat party. What happened?”

“You drank the liquid as instructed, and then you started… talking.”

“About what?” Yu asked, worried he might’ve accidentally spilled the beans about the Metaverse.

“Things…”

“That’s incredibly vague.”

“You want to hear it for yourself?” the doctor offered.

“Yes please.” Yu agreed.

Shoichi hit play, and Yu immediately regretted it.

“Bruh, pants aren’t an issue when you’re quantum shitting through the nth dimension.”

“Oh god.” Yu cringed.

“I know. And I had to endure that, and worse for 30 minutes.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I would have endured 30 hours for these test results. The medicine will be perfected yet.”

“That’s good to hear. And speaking of meds, I need some more.”

Shoichi extended his arm and beckoned, silently telling Yu to hand over the cash. The teen complied, forking over the money he had earned today. The doctor opened up a cabinet to reveal several vials full of pills. He grabbed two and tossed them to his patient, who nodded in appreciation. As Yu left, he heard Shoichi call to him.

“Oh, young one?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for coming on such short notice. I greatly appreciate it.”

“Sure. Just… call me a bit earlier, alright?”

“I make no promises young one.”
Yu had made his way to Cafe Leblanc. It was a far nicer day, and that meant more customers. When he entered, he saw Sojiro glare at the teenager, but handed him his apron so that he could get to work. Yu noticed out the corner of his eye that Wakaba was here this time as he put his apron on, and got to work. It took a few hours, but one by one, the customers left as the rush died down, each one offering thanks for the coffee, congratulating Sojiro for finally finding decent help, and complementing how well Yu was able to brew their respective drinks. When only about one or two were remaining, Sojiro turned to his worker, and Yu noticed Wakaba divert her attention to the pair.

“Allright. I said I’d teach you how to make curry last time, so listen closely and let me explain.” Sojiro started.

The gruff coffee shop owner went on to explain the various intricacies of curry making, from how to sweeten it with honey, to the various spices used to enrich the flavor, to how long the pot is supposed to cook. Once he was done, he looked into the kitchen and turned to Yu.

“Allright kid, I gotta go to the store to pick up ingredients. You stay here and take care of any customers. Wakaba, please make sure he doesn’t burn the place down, or steal any cash.”

“Sure thing Soji. I’ll watch this felon like a hawk! If he tries anything, he’ll know the wrath of my killer wheels.” Wakaba said in a lighthearted tone. Sojiro simply nodded as he left, and Wakaba rolled up to him, grinning. Now that he was with her, Yu decided to give her an evaluation. She had straight, jet-black hair, was wearing a leather business skirt, a black, sleeveless turtleneck and half-rimmed glasses. She smirked.

“Allright youngin’, yer in my house now! Yer either gonna learn to play by my rules, or yer gonna learn to play dead.” She said, putting up an obnoxious southern accent. Yu chuckled at her act.

“What’s so funny scum? Yer in the Sakura Dog House! We’re known fer our coffee an’ curry across the country and real high standards. We have a reputation of firing help if they so much as make one bad cup ‘o joe.”

Wakaba coughed up a storm after finishing that last sentence. After clearing her throat, she turned back to Yu.

“Allright, that’s enough of the accent. Really hurts the throat after awhile.” She explained.

“What was that all about?”

“I can imagine Soji gave you a really hard time yesterday, so I took it upon myself to make you feel more welcome. We were never properly introduced, were we? I’m Wakaba Sakura.” Wakaba introduced, holding out her hand, which, Yu noted, had a ring on it.

“You said you were innocent, right?”

“Yea, but I didn’t expect you to believe it. Hardly anyone does.”

“Well, even if you were guilty, I’d still put on a show.”
“Why?”

“Because you’re trying to change. Most felons, once they’re out, will either try to go back to what they were doing before, or try to reform. Sadly, because most people treat them like Soji treats you; with distrust and contempt, they’ll eventually go back to their old life, simply because they don’t want to put up with people’s crap, and because they have no other option.”

“And then they get put back in jail, and the cycle starts all over again.” Yu finished.

“Exactly. Whether or not you’re guilty doesn’t matter. What does matter is how people treat you. Soji may think that it’s only a matter of time before hiring you bites him in the ass, but you’ve got me in your corner.”

“I appreciate it but… would you mind telling me why?”

“Honestly? If Futaba vouched for you, then you must be pretty close to her.”

“So, you’re doing it for her?”

“That, and well… let’s just say that we’ve all done something in the past that we’re paying for today.” She added, patting her immobile legs with her hand.

Now she had Yu’s curiosity.

“If you’re comfortable about it, I’d like to hear it.” He said.

Wakaba looked around and noticed that the last customer had left, she leaned in and gave a hushed whisper.

“Serve me a plate of curry that’ll blow my mind, and I’ll tell you the secrets of the universe.”

Yu smiled, and turned his attention to the bubbling cauldron that was the curry cooking pot. He dipped a tasting spoon into the stew and tasted it, giving a grimace as he did. It was far too sweet, he would need to spice it up. He smiled as he looked into the fridge, finding more than enough ways to do just that.

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A few customers had come and gone, and Yu managed to satisfy them all, using them as guinea pigs for his curry preparation. Some of them complained that it was too mild, some too spicy. By the time Sojiro returned, Yu believed that he had it nailed down. As Sojiro went in the back to put the fresh supplies away, Yu made one last plate of curry and handed it to Wakaba, to tasted it, making loud, obnoxious chewing noises as she did so. She swallowed, then looked up at the ceiling, then looked back at Yu.

“This is pretty good. Almost exactly like Soji’s. The kind I’ve had a thousand times.”

“So… I failed?”

“To blow my mind? Yup. But look on the bright side, at least you know how to make the best curry this side of Shibuya.”

“Yea, that would help keep me in the job.”

“Well, regardless, I believe that no good deed should go unrewarded. Let me tell you something.” Wakaba started.
“Hey kid. Your shift’s over.” Sojiro informed, placing a small pile of cash on the counter.

“Now take your money and get out.”

“Yes sir.” Yu replied numbly, taking his apron off, then leaving with his money in hand. Wakaba shot a glare at Sojiro before wheeling after Yu. Catching up to him, she grabbed his arm, and spoke softly when he turned around.

“I’m so sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault. He said the same thing yesterday.” Yu replied, sounding distant with every word.

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“Nowadays, I’m used to being judged prematurely by people around me.”

“It’s a terrible thing when a person becomes used to abuse.”

“It happens.”

Wakaba simply sighed. It broke her heart seeing someone being mistreated because of circumstance beyond their control, especially for someone so young. It hit way too close to home for her.

“If that’s everything, I should start going home.” Yu pointed out, turning away.

“Wait. I still didn’t give you your reward.”

“You mean what you were planning on telling me?”

“Yes. What I wanted to say was… thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Sojiro-san would fire me if he found out I served his wife a terrible plate of curry.”

“No, it’s not for the curry. It’s for being nice to Futaba, even after what she did to you.”

Yu opened his mouth, but Wakaba silenced any argument by simply holding up a hand.

“Futaba told me about what she did. Leaking your record, helping Kobayakawa blackmail fellow students. Most people would be justified in trying to find revenge and beat her to a pulp, but you decided to forgive her. Not only that, but you gave her a chance to redeem herself. Most people would treat her like trash if they were in your position, but you showed her kindness and forgave her. That’s what I’m thanking you for.”

“It was nothing.”

“Not to me. Now-”

Wakaba cleared her throat.

“-Go on an’ scram youngin’!” She ordered with the obnoxious southern accent.

Yu smiled, and obeyed, walking to the train station, feeling his phone buzz, and upon seeing who it was from, his mood darkened again.
I am thou. Thou art I

Thou hast acquired a new vow

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth

With the birth of the **Hermit** Arcana,

Thou hast obtained the blessing that will grant thee new power

Underneath a railway track bridge, Kaneshiro was waiting outside for a special someone. Someone who could help him with his problem. But it was getting late, and it was well past the meeting time. He turned to leave, but then he heard someone call his name. Turning around, he saw a certain silver-haired teenager. Who was none too happy to see the cop.

“I got your text Kaneshiro. This had better not be something illegal.” Yu stated, crossing his arms.

“Oh relax kid. If I wanted something illegal done, I wouldn’t ask the son of the great Dojima to do it.”

“And what do you want done?”

“Follow me. With luck, we can still arrive ahead of them.”

The two boarded a train that made way to Shibuya. Kaneshiro turned to Yu to explain what he was doing.

“Alright, here’s the deal. There’s a woman who’s currently in that diner, and she’s waiting to meet a man with a scar across his nose. You’re going to eavesdrop on that woman, and makes sure your phone’s on so I-”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on.” Yu interrupted, putting up his hands.

“What?”

“I’m not doing this without some more info. Who are these people?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. Because if they’re criminals, and catch me eavesdropping, things will get ugly.”

“Better make sure you don’t get caught then.”

The train ride didn’t really take that long. Shortly afterwards, the train came to a halt, and the duo made their way out of the station and onto the street in a matter of minutes. Once they were outside, Kaneshiro noticed the man with the scar walking into the diner. He turned to Yu.

“Listen here Narukami. This is the best shot I’ve got at closing a long, complicated, and frankly unhappy chapter of my life. You do as I say, and I promise I’ll tell you everything your little heart desires. Got it?”

“Fine. But you’d better-”
“Yea yea, just get in there. And remember, keep the phone on speaker.” Kaneshiro said, waving his hand.

With that, Yu walked into the diner. Thankfully, there weren’t all that many people there, so he didn’t have to wait long to get seated. Making sure the waitress led him over to a table near the man he saw enter, he put his phone on speaker and made it look like he was texting. He was sitting across from a woman who had her eyes obscured by sunglasses and was wearing a bandana that covered her hair. Yu wished that Kaneshiro didn’t ask for his phone to be on, otherwise he could’ve just sent Izanagi to eavesdrop on them. After he ordered some fruit tea, he heard the woman begin to talk.

“So, what made you want to come back?” The man asked.

“It took a lot of work to get the old gangs back under control. Even more to make them follow me.”

“So that means we’re back in business?”

“Not quite. In fact, there are a few… stubborn individuals that don’t see me the same way after… you know.”

“How could I forget. What about Kaneshiro? You can bet he’s keeping an eye out and an ear to the ground for anything related to you.”

“Let me handle him. I’ve heard that he’s stuck at a desk job in some nowhere station. It’ll take awhile to convince him, but I got him once. I can get him again.”

“You sure about that boss? You burned him real good last time.”

“Trust me. You just worry about what I told you to do. Speaking of which. How’s it looking?”

“Looking pretty good. Some of the tips and tricks you got from your ex are really helping us out. The only trouble we’ve had is with Iwai’s clan.”

“Good to know. Thanks Mac.”

“Sure thing. You need something else, let me know.”

With that, the two of them finished their drinks and left a few yen to cover the bill. Yu put his phone off speaker and put his phone up to his ear as his drink arrived.

“Please tell me you got that.”

“Every last syllable. So, that bitch thinks she can make a fool out of me twice. Thanks for the help kid.”

Yu took a sip of his drink.

“And you remember what you need to do, right?”

“Yea yea. Meet me at the station kid.”

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Yu had arrived, where he saw Kaneshiro looking through some papers. Most likely reports on whoever it was they eavesdropped on. Once he saw the teenager, Kaneshiro put the papers down
and took a seat.

“Alright kid, you wanted my life story, so it’s my life story you’re gonna get. You may want to sit down.”

“I can stand. And I don’t want your life story. Just the relevant bits.”

“You sure kid? It might get a little… heavy for someone your age.”

“Considering what I’ve been through, yea, I’m sure I can.”

“Alright tough guy. Once upon a time, I was an undercover agent, infiltrating the Mafia, which had been on the rise since a man by the name of Ozi Arisa had taken over. Now, the Mafia had gotten real good at sniffing out rats, with some of our best agents winding up dead, and our normal informants were either too spooked or just not willing to talk. This wound up leaving the department desperate, so they went to me. The reason they didn’t before was because I had a personal connection with the boss’ daughter, and now, that would probably be the only thing that could keep me alive. Once the two of us ‘reconnected’, I gave her a few complaints about my fake life as a ramen chef, and she took pity on me.”

“And offered you a much better job.”

“Correctamundo. I had to prove myself, had to let a few of them beat on me so that they would think I was just a harmless chef. After that, they ‘trained’ me and set me loose so I could show them what I could do. I dealt drugs, murdered some street vendors, even did some human trafficking. I was so good at it, I got a promotion in the force.”

As Kaneshiro explained his story, he smiled widely with crooked teeth, like a wolf that found a juicy piece of meat. It disgusted Yu how much pride the cop had in his exploits undercover.

“After that, the boss’ daughter and I got a little cozy, if you catch my drift, and eventually, I was able to make it to the inner circle of the big man himself. After that, I discovered that there was a traitor on our end, one who had been feeding the Mob info on who our undercover guys were. His name was Mac Maul, he was the dude with the scar on his nose. He also has one across his chest.”

“How do you know that?”

“I gave him both.” Kaneshiro answered, smiling proudly at the memory before continuing.

“Anyway, the only person who knew I was undercover was the Superintendent, so not even Mac knew I was a rat. So any, lots of stuff happened, and eventually, it all came to a head when I finally gave the police what they needed to put Ozi away for good. But it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows.” Kaneshiro continued, his once toothy grin starting to be replaced with a fierce snarl.

“Once the cops were done taking down the big guns and removing Mac, I told them I was undercover, so imagine my surprise when they snapped cuffs on me. I found out the Superintendent had been murdered, and the evidence pointed to me.”

“And yet, here you are. Something must have happened, because there’s no way that someone with your physique could’ve survived a prison with a bunch of other people you betrayed.”

“I’ll have you know, that there was a time when I was super ripped kid. Anyway, before they could throw me in the slammer, we found out the Superintendent and Ozi’s girl had worked out a deal. Apparently, she wanted to take over her daddy’s operation, and the Superintendent sent me to
help her do that, since he knew that I would do my damndest to not take her down with her old man. He also knew that Mac was a traitor but didn’t do anything about it so that the higher-ups would have no choice but to send in me. Once I did my job, the Superintendent got a promotion, and his partner got her empire. Unfortunately, she didn’t like loose ends, so she killed the Superintendent, and tried to pin the blame on me. I would most likely be dead in prison if it wasn’t for the actions of a mutual acquaintance of ours.”

“Mutual acquaintance?”

“Goro Akechi is the one and only reason I’m still alive. He found evidence that I was set up, and was on the police’s side the whole time. But, thanks to the whole fiasco, the higher ups didn’t trust me, so I was stuck working the desk job.”

“…. I see.”

“I see? That’s all you got kid?”

“What’d you expect?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a little sympathy for someone who put his life on the line for society, only to be almost damned by that same society for a crime he didn’t commit.”

Yu opened his mouth to retort, but quickly shut it. He was expecting an excuse, maybe Kaneshiro stroking his ego. He certainly didn’t expect that. He looked at the cop and gave nod of understanding.

“So what happens now?”

“Now? You get to go home kid. I’ll tell you when, or if I need you. But you’ve been a big help. You get a five percent discount on all guns from here on out.”

“Thanks Kaneshiro.”

“Don’t mention it.”

With that, Yu went home, mentally preparing himself for working for his guardian for the first time. Coincidentally, he felt a shiver up his spine.
Yu once again found himself standing outside the SIU Headquarters. But this time, he had nervousness in his bones. He had felt first-hand the fury of the woman he had come to work for, and he dreaded what would happen if he screwed up. He took a deep breath and made his way to the floor that he knew Sae worked on. It was a lot calmer now than it was before, so Yu surmised that Sae was here already.

“Ah, Narukami. There you are.” Sae said, walking up behind him.

Almost immediately, Yu could feel that something was… different. Sae’s eyes didn’t have the look of a warden making sure their prisoner was still in his cell. It was more like a stalker trying to memorize their target’s schedule and habits. It was the same look she had when she entered Cafe Leblanc.

“Hello Sae-san. Where do you need me? With Akechi?”

“Actually no. I have a new case. Here, take these.”

Sae handed him a notebook and a ballpoint pen and walked back into the elevator Yu came out of. He got in just before the doors closed. She opened a suitcase she had with her and pulled out some papers, but he could have sworn she had something else in there.

“Alright. The defendant’s name is Kira Yoshikage. He’s been accused of rape of schoolgirls and then murdering them after he’s done with them.”

“But he’s a famous and wealthy person?”

“He has ties with the Yakuza. Witnesses disappear without a trace, evidence goes missing, officers working the case stop all of a sudden. It’s not so much that he has money, but so much power that no one’s willing to try taking him down.”

“Except for you.”

“Yes. Except for me. I’m bringing you along to take notes about the interrogation. Hopefully, we can get him to talk before his lawyer gets here.”

“And if his lawyer is there?”

“Then we’ll have to find another way to get him to talk. But let me worry about that.” Sae said with a wink. The elevator door opened up, revealing nothing but a long hallway, and the only door was at the end of it. As they approached, Sae stopped and turned to her newest assistant.

“Remember, note down anything you find useful. Also, be sure to write down certain tics he does, like eye twitches, and what triggered them.”

“Got it.”

“In that case, are you ready?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.”
Sae opened the door, revealing a man with blonde hair with two loose and curly strands framing his face. He was wearing a green button-up shirt with a white coat and purple tie with yellow cats on it. His eyes were violet in color, and seemed to hold a cold, calculating, and piercing gaze to them, not unlike Sae’s own eyes. The difference was that his eyes held complete boredom, while Sae’s held determination.

“Hello Yoshikage. I trust you know who I am?”

The man simply nodded.

“Alright then. This young man is my assistant Yu Narukami.”

“Hello.” Yu greeted.

“That’s a very nice suit. Could you tell me where you got it?” Sae questioned.

“I want my lawyer.”

“Well, that’s very suspicious.”

“You heard me. I’m not saying anything until my lawyer gets here.”

“Are you sure that’s very wise? I’m here to help you.”

“No you’re not. I know your reputation. Though I’m a little surprised a woman has more balls than everyone else here.”

Yu scanned Sae’s face. If she had any anger at the remark, she certainly didn’t show it. Still holding the neutral stance she had at the start of the interrogation, she continued questioning him.

“There’s a reason for that. I’ve heard of your reputation. You’re well-known and feared throughout the criminal underworld and the police force. Your crimes read like a novel.”

“That ain’t true. There’s only one crime I’ve been accused of.”

“And your victims are just as many. Almost like you had difficulty controlling yourself.” She continued, ignoring his remark.

“Well I can’t help it. The girls dress like sluts, they’re pretty much asking for me to show them what a real man is like. And I’m more than happy to oblige.”

“I don’t believe that anyone has ever asked to be murdered. And I doubly doubt a real man would do just that, let alone with pride.” Yu pointed out.

“Fuck off old man. Go back to the nursing home you came from.”

“I see. Thank you for the confession Yoshikage.”

“Confession? I didn’t.”

“They’re pretty much asking for me to show them what a real man is like. And I’m more than happy to oblige.” Yu quoted, which made the accused widen his eyes.

The two silver-haired individuals left the room, the confession recorded and on tape. As they rode up in the elevator, Sae turned to her ward.
“So, what did you get down?”

“First, what he was accused of. Second, he unwittingly confessed. Third, his eye twitched when I countered his talk of being a ‘real man’, which suggests that he has some degree of pride in his definition of being a ‘real man’. Fourth, his middle and index fingers almost kept clicking non-stop when you brought up the yakuza, suggesting that he holds some semblance of fear for them. Perhaps his connections aren’t as strong as we’ve been led to believe. And that’s about it. How’d I do?”

“Impressive. Very impressive. Though that was a surprisingly easy interrogation. I wish they all went down so quickly and effortlessly.”

Sae turned to him and smiled. In her eyes were acknowledgement, and... something else. Something that almost seemed to be a mix between sending a warning and accepting a challenge. Yu knew that his guardian’s smile was genuine, but it wasn’t because of joy, but rather... excitement, like she had something to look forward to.

This was a test Yu. And we passed. Now, she’s silently telling us that we have her full attention. From here on out, we’ll have to proceed with caution.

Agreed. We don’t know the lengths she’ll go to to find... whatever she wants to find.

Do you think she knows that we’re the leader of the Team?

If she did, she’d confront us. As it stands, I think she’s just testing us, like you said.

Doing crime while living with the person who punishes criminals. This should prove very exciting. Just don’t get caught, alright?

I won’t.

“Think it was because he let his guard down and thought that because you’re a woman, you couldn’t do it?” Yu asked.

“That’s exactly it. You’re catching on quickly.” Sae replied.

“Doesn’t it get annoying? Being constantly underestimated?”

“At first, I hated it. But now, I realize I could make a cure for cancer, colonize Mars, and discover Atlantis, and it still wouldn’t earn the respect of my peers. After I accepted that, I learned to appreciate the advantage of being underestimated. The looks of surprise never get old.”

“That explains why you didn’t have any reaction to his comment on you having more balls than everyone else.”

“I actually took it as a compliment. Besides, I’ve heard so much worse from my coworkers.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Let me think... She’s only here because she flashed her tits. The only way she gets cases done is by screwing the jury. I’m pretty sure she whores her sister out for extra pay.” the prosecutor listed off.

“That sounds awful.”
“I got used to it. In fact, when I heard that your record was leaked, all I could think was how I was treated when I first started here.”

“How’d you get over it?”

“I became the close-quarters combat instructor. And I got to decide who needs extra practice.”

The doors opened, and the two of them shared a small chuckle at Sae’s remark. Once their laughter had died down, they made their way over to Akechi’s desk. The teen gave a small wave as they approached.

“Good evening Sae-san. How goes the case with Yoshikage?”

“A lot better than I thought Akechi. We got him to confess.”


“We’re not done yet. I need you to deal with the paperwork for prosecution while I try to get a judge that’ll take the case. Yoshikage’s reputation won’t change just because I talked to him.”

“Unfortunately. But I’ll get right to work. May Narukami assist me? I could use the extra pair of hands.”

Sae looked reluctant. Very reluctant. She pressed her index finger and thumb to her chin and stared at Yu long and hard, like a hunter debating whether or not to take a shot that wasn’t all that clear. Finally, she let out a sigh.

“Fine. But I want him back before lunch break is over.” Sae said.

“Thank you Sae-san.”

The red-eyed prosecutor nodded and walked away, leaving Yu and his teammate alone.

“So where do we begin?” Yu asked, looking over the desk.

“Oh, I already did the paperwork. I could tell that you just wanted to get away from her.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“No. I’m just that good.”

“Well, if you did your work, what are we going to do?”

“Well… remember that diner I took you to?”

“Yea.”

“They’re serving pancakes now.”

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Now that it was getting close to noon, the diner was getting extremely crowded. Fortunately, since Akechi was one of the more frequent customers, they were able to find a spot for the Detective Prince and his friend. After they had ordered; Akechi with pancakes, and Yu with three corn dogs, the two high schoolers began to talk.
“How often do you come here in order to have the whole staff know your name?” Yu started.

“Yu, everyone knows my name. Famous detective, remember?”

“Yea, but you also know everyone else’s.”

“They have name tags.”

“Akechi…” Yu pressed, refusing to let his curiosity go unfulfilled.

“I try to make it about twice a day. Three if I can.”

“Wow. And you eat pancakes every time?”

“Of course not.” Akechi said with a small chuckle before sitting.

“If I did, they’d stop being special.”

“I sense a story behind this.”

“It’ll be a long one. And extremely personal.”

“You just have to tell me the relevant bits.”

“How about this; you tell me what you did to get a criminal record, and I’ll tell you why pancakes are so near and dear to my heart.”

Akechi knew why Yu had a record. He knew that his partner was innocent. And he had a good idea as to the identity of the man Yu met. But he wanted to see if Yu trusted him as much as he trusted Yu. The silver-eyed teen nodded.

“Fair enough. Though, I’m pretty sure you’ve already figured it out. Basically, I’ve been falsely accused of assault, and the reason for that is because the quote ‘victim’ was harassing a woman, and I stepped in. Because he was also a rich person with connections, he was able to create a rigged trail that would’ve landed me in juvie if it wasn’t for my dad. And that’s about it.”

“You told that tale with relative ease.”

“That’s because I’ve told it before to Sae-san.”

“True enough. In that case, get ready. My story… is going to be a heavy one.”

Akechi looked outside, watching people come and go, looking at their phones, idly chatting with friends, pushing past strangers, and generally going about their day without any concern for anything else around them. Oh how he wished he could be like that.

“It all begins with my mother. She had gotten wrapped up with a good-for-nothing man, and after having me, was abandoned by him. But she didn’t hold it against me. Instead, she loved me as much as she could, but since we were poor on account of my father taking everything she had, she felt that wasn’t enough. She would force herself to work several odd jobs a day, earning mere scraps for her back-breaking work. What money she earned went to giving me as good an education as possible. For her sake, I excelled in the classroom, mastered every subject I was given, completed every test flawlessly. But because of her work hours, she couldn’t be around to celebrate my victories with me.”

“That sounds awful.”
“It was awful. Whenever she could come home, it was when I was gone. Finally, one night, I stayed up until one in the morning to see her. When she arrived and saw me half awake and waiting to see her, she went with what little spare money she had left over and bought a bell. A little, cracked copper bell. She told me that whenever I heard the bell ring, it meant that she was home, that the two of us were together at last. As I got older, she finally managed to land a stable job that didn’t require her to puke her guts out in order to earn decent pay.”

Akechi started to smile.

“Those were easily the best times of my life. She was there to congratulate me in victory, and patch me up in defeat.”

“Is that where the pancakes come in?”

“Yes. Whenever I came home with news that I had scored the top of my class, mom would always go out, buy pancake mix, and make delicious pancakes for the two of us, and she would put in chocolate chips on special occasions like Christmas or my birthday.”

Akechi’s bright smile faded to a forlorn frown.

“But nothing good lasts forever. One day, while I was in seventh grade, a man came by to talk to my mom. After the two met, mom told me to go to my room, and then I heard loud arguing, and it ended with mom begging the man to ‘spare him’. After the man left, mom got into my room, and hugged me tight. She told me she loved me more than anything in the world, that she was so proud of me, and that, despite the circumstances that led to my birth, she was happy she had me. She then made my favorite meal; pancakes, and after I was done eating and went to bed, she went out the door. For the next two days, the bell didn’t ring. For the next two days, I had to eat instant ramen for dinner. For the next two days, I wondered when, if ever, my mother was coming back. On the third day, I got my answer. The door opened and three cops came in and told me the news; my mother died in a tragic accident. Since I was technically still young, I was thrown out of the house and into an orphanage. Since then, I worked odd jobs until I had enough money to get the apartment I live in now. And the rest is history.”

“Wow. You’re right. That story was heavy.”

“Here you are boys. Sorry it took so long.” The waitress said, dropping off their food.

“You know, I had something similar while dad was still coming to terms with mom’s death.” Yu said as the two started to eat.

“Really?”

“Yea. I was about in the second year of junior high. I had to find three part-time jobs; one was as a private tutor to a boy, another was as a daycare assistant, and the third was as a janitor in a hospital. All the money I earned went to us keeping our house and feeding me and my sister, who was entering kindergarten. This went on for about a year and a half, and for every day, I was forced to cook nothing but salmon.”

“Ouch.”

“Yea. Worse yet, there were times when I had extra cash, and dad would steal it to buy booze. Eventually, his superior came into the house. I overheard them arguing from my room, and I heard that if dad didn’t pull himself together, he’d be fired. After that, I decided to intervene. It took a few months, and our talks would often devolved into brawls, but I was eventually able to get him
to visit mom’s grave. For the remaining year and the next, dad, Nanako and I were a family again. Everyone was talking about how brave, and strong I was for bring my father back from the brink. I also kept my jobs, and I was able to build such a good reputation that people would often come visit just to talk with the great Yu Narukami, expert teacher, babysitter, and janitor. In fact, Shu Nakajima, the kid I was teaching, often bragged that I was his tutor.”

Yu looked out the window, smiling.

“In fact, when the Rise Kujikawa came to town to take a break from show biz, she came to the hospital to hide from paparazzi, and I shoved her into a broom closet. That’s how we met.”

“Haha. A story to tell future children.”

“Yea. The only real stain I had was the fact that I was the only friend of a guy called Yosuke Hanamura, the son of the manager of Junes, a convenience store that was running local, family owned stores out of business.”

“Sounds like you had everything; a loving family, good friends, a beautiful woman, stable jobs.” Akechi listed.

“I did…”

Yu’s smile faded.

“But then… that night happened.”

“It must have been devastating.”

“More than you know my friend. All of a sudden, I had lost all the stuff you had listed. I was fired from all my jobs, the beautiful woman was terrified of me, and my friends didn’t even try to defend me. Nanako was too young to understand what was happening, and dad had to put up with the shame of being the father of a criminal. So much happened so fast that…”

Yu put down what remained of his food.

“That I started to tie a noose in my room. Dad happened to walk in just as I started to hang, and managed to stop me, and told me that he had managed to get Shujin to accept me. That there was hope. The rest, is history.”

Akechi simply stared at his almost finished pancakes, as both of them lost their appetites.

“In other, more recent news; do you have to work tomorrow?” Yu asked, changing the subject.

“No. You?”

“Nope. And Shiho doesn’t have volleyball practice.”

“Truly? Then that means we can infiltrate the Palace tomorrow.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Perfect. In that case, let’s eat and head back. Sae-san did say she wanted you back before lunch break was over.”

Yu smiled. Thanks to Akechi opening up to him, and vice versa, he felt their bond had grown deeper.
Hifumi was currently in the middle of a match. Her opponent was another shogi player. She made a rather questionable move, which left herself wide open. Hifumi took the opportunity, slamming the shogi piece down with a loud *CLACK*, and had to suppress her smirk.

“Check.”

She expected maybe some applause, but was instead greeted with a few murmurs of discontent from the audience. Hifumi bit her lip. The effects of her mother’s work were starting to be felt more and more severely. Her opponent got up and bowed, but Hifumi could tell it was more of a courtesy rather than a show of sportsmanship. As everyone cleared out, Hifumi left too, picking up her things and making her way to the train station, when she suddenly heard a voice call out to her.

“Yo Hifumi. You were awesome out there. Another piece for the Togo Kingdom eh?” Ryuji asked as he ran to catch up to her.

“Yea. Another piece for the Togo Kingdom.”

“Hey, what’s wrong? You just won a match! You should be over the moon!”

“Yea…”

“Hifumi, what’s wrong?” Ryuji asked, his previous enthusiasm no longer existent.

“It’s just… you heard the crowd out there. They weren’t happy about the fact that I won.” Hifumi explained.

“Well eff them. They’re just random nobodies. *I’m* happy you won.” Ryuji said, placing his hand on Hifumi’s shoulder, a gesture that made her smile.

“Thanks Ryuji. That means a lot.”

The moment was killed once again when Hifumi’s phone went off, and when the girl checked to see who it was from, her smile vanished.

Mom: if you’re done with that game, head over to the studio. Some new dresses arrived, and I need you to model with them.

Hifumi’s heart sank. More damage to her already badly hurt reputation. More fame for something that wasn’t her passion. And more reason she should give up on her dream entirely. Ryuji moved a hand to her face, and it wasn’t until he wiped away a tear that she realized she was crying.

“Hifumi. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“I need to get home.”

“Let me come with you.”

“You can’t.”
Ryuji grabbed her arm.

“Let go Ryuji.”

“Hifumi, if there’s some asshole out there hurtin’ ya, let me know so I can kick his ass.”

“You can’t help with this Ryuji.” Hifumi said as she started to struggle.

“Why not? I can’t stand seeing ya hurt like this Hifumi.”

“I don’t want to burden you with this.”

“Then what the hell are friends for?!”

“Playing a few matches, watching me play, and checking up on me in a church doesn’t make us friends. Now let go!”

“You’re right. Being there when it counts is what makes people friends, and that’s what I’m doing now!”

“You won’t understand!”

“Maybe that’s because ya won’t tell me!”

Hifumi stopped struggling, and sighed in defeat.

“Fine. Let’s find somewhere quiet to talk.”

In the park, Hifumi finished explaining her predicament. She told Ryuji everything. How her mother forced her to model for agencies in order to raise money and get fame. How her modeling was effectively destroying her ability to pursue her dream. How getting famous attracted several people that only cared about her for her body, and the harassment was enough to force her out of her school for after hours.

“Damn. Sounds to me like your mom is ruining your life for her own damn reasons.”

“That’s not true. Mother had a difficult life, and she wants to make sure I don’t go through the same hardships she does. She loves me. I know she does.”

“Then how come she’s making your life hell?”

“Well what do you know Ryuji? What hardships have you gone through in life?”

“Plenty.”

“Like what?”

Ryuji looked down at his feet, and let out a long, collected sigh.

“My dad… used to be in the yakuza.”

Hifumi’s eyes widened, but before she could do anything, Ryuji also added.

“Used to be. When he was dating my mom, he kept on standing her up on dates, running off on dinners, and so on, because the yakuza called on him to work. Finally, she had enough, and gave
him an ultimatum; her, or the clan. He chose her. But... the past has ways of biting ya in the ass. My dad’s clan brother, Munehisa Iwai, kept trying to drag him back to that old life, but under the pretense of looking out for his ‘brother’. Long story short, Iwai kept on trying to throw dad back into his old life, but it was for his own self interest rather than actually caring about dad, and my old man would’ve fallen for it if not for mom. Eventually, mom threatened to turn Iwai over to the cops if he didn’t stop harassing us. So yea, I do know what it’s like.”

“Your story is different. This Iwai was only interested in your father, not you, and he did not care for you like mother did for me. No matter what she does, she does with me and my father in mind. Iwai didn’t have a presence in your life like mother does in mine.”

“Well... shit. That’s a really good point. But your old lady, she ain’t gonna stop, unless someone makes her. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“I know you’re trying to help, but it’s not needed. But thank you for trusting me with what you told me today, I-”

Before Hifumi could continue, she was interrupted by the sound of a car approaching. Looking at the source, they saw it was a limo approaching. Once it stopped, a woman in a business suit stepped out and placed both hands on her hips as she glared at the two.

“Hifumi, who is this ruffian?” The woman asked in a harsh tone.

“Mother, this is Ryuji Sakamoto. Ryuji, this is my mother.”

“Sakamoto. I’ve never heard of you. Hifumi, what are you doing hanging out with this nobody?”

“Ryuji has been helping me practice for my matches.”

“Haven’t I told you to abandon that ridiculous game? You’re entering a new stage in your life, and you’ll need to abandon the childish past times in order to excel in life.”

Ryuji shot her a look. Hifumi decided to prove him wrong once and for all.

“Mother, shogi is more than just a childish past time for me. I’ve worked my whole life to be like father, to be a master. As much as I appreciate your efforts to look out for me, they are in direct contradiction with my goals.”

“Sweetheart, your goals won’t sustain you. Your goals aren’t practical. Being a champion of shogi is like working for Big Bang Burger; easily replaceable. And that simply won’t due for any daughter of mine.”

“But mother-”

“Enough! We’re late enough as is. Now get in the car, Hifumi. As for you, peasant, I don’t want to see you so much as look in my daughter’s general direction again, or I’ll make sure you and your family live on the streets, am I clear?” She threatened.

Ryuji almost snarled at Mitsuyo, but managed to settle for a blank stare before Mitsuyo asked again.

“Am. I. Clear?”

“Yea.”
“Splendid.” Mitsuyo smiled with sadistic glee before turning back. Ryuji saw Hifumi give him an apologetic look as the car drove away. That was all the proof Ryuji needed. He pulled out his phone and went to a site made so that people could voice their problems in the hope that they’d get fixed. And this was a big problem. The site hadn’t seen much activity for some time, the latest post was over a week ago. Most people only asked for petty things, and didn’t even provide a name. Ryuji decided to not repeat their mistake as he began typing.

“Dear Phantom Team. A friend of mine is having her life ruled by her controlling bitch of a mom, and it's really taking its toll on her. Please take the heart of Mitsuyo Togo.” -SharkBoi9001.
Trials of the Team

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbqVdoX_U4

The next day of school had come and gone, and when it ended, the Team found itself back inside Mitsuyo’s Palace, and teleported immediately into the Safe Room in the tower. After stepping out, Kaito waved and greeted them, which they returned. Yu turned to his teammates.

“Alright. So, to review, we need to beat Kaito Togo in a match of shogi in order to reach the Treasure. But before we can do that, we need to find the pieces of the board, which are scattered throughout the complex.” Yu started.

“It would appear so. Before we start our infiltration, we’ll have to find a map.” Akechi stated.

“Right. Let’s have a look around.”

The search didn’t take long. Shiho found a table along a wall that held several scrolls. After unrolling one after another, she eventually found a map, and all of their phones beeped, signaling that the information was absorbed.

“Alright, let’s see what we got.” Yu said as he pulled out his mobile device and looked.

“Ok, so we have three buildings to go through; the armory, the barracks, and the… princess chambers.”

“That must be where we’ll find cognitive Hifumi.” Morgana said.

“Alright. Kaito said that some of the pieces will be won by brains rather than brawn, so we’ll start with the barracks.” Yu said.

“We’ll follow your lead Seeker.” Akechi said.

The group moved out, following their map to the barracks. It was a building carved into the mountainside, and once inside, they found that it descended into several wide floors, and at the bottom floor was a lone figure dressed in ornate samurai armor colored in red stood on a stone circle in the shape of an arena. However, he was too far down, if the four tried to jump to his position, they’d die from the fall. There were three floors total, not counting the bottom one. First floor had three Shadows, second had five, and third had seven. The team turned to each other to discuss strategy.

“I say we rush them. Gather them all up in one spot, then blow them away.” Morgana suggested.

“Bad idea. For one, we don’t know what kind of Shadows they are. Two, they can call in reinforcements, so we could get flooded.” Akechi pointed out.

“Plus, this is a test. That means it’s going to get more and more difficult as we go. It would be wise to take battles in bite-sized chunks, heal, then continue.” Yu said, getting up and approaching the Shadows, all of which were dressed in plain samurai armor,

“Have you come to take the Trail of Warriors?”

“We have.”
“Then you know the conditions of this trail; Victory. Or death.”

The Shadows melted into a black tar substance, then merged together, the substance coming together and then morphing into a towering giant that had several claws, two horns, and appeared to be made almost entirely out of paper.

“Show your power to the soldiers of the Shogun!” It roared.

Yu pulled out his newest Persona; a small lion with green skin.

“Shiisaa! Frei!” Yu ordered, a small green orb exploding right on top of the creature’s chest. The other Team members joined the fray. Shiho using her flail to knock one of the legs at the knee joint, forcing their opponent to one knee. Akechi summoned Robin Hood and reduced the monster’s defense, while Lady Trieu unleashed a burst of wind, forcing it back. Now, it was the Shadow’s turn. Raising its hands, sudden columns of fire erupted underneath each of the Team.

“Hua Po!” Yu said, switching Personas just in time to reduce the damage. Akechi didn’t have that luxury if his screams were anything to go by, Shiho didn’t take much damage on account of her Persona, but Morgana was caught with her pants down; the blast had knocked her on her feet. Using this momentum, the creature punched Yu straight into the floor. Shiho summoned Boudica, and used her healing abilities to patch up the Team, allowing Morgana to get back up. As the monster turned its attention to the other two teenagers Yu summoned another different Persona; and angel in crimson red armor and silver lance.

“Power! Slash!” Yu ordered, and the angel slashed the Shadow’s arm, cutting it clean off. As it recoiled in pain, Robin Hood let loose an arrow that forced it onto the ground.

“This is our chance! All-Out Attack!” Yu ordered, he and the others performing the finisher move with grace and style.

The dust had settled, and Yu looked at his friends. A few scrapes and bruises, nothing too serious. They each gave him a thumbs up as if to affirm his assumptions. With that out of the way, they looked to the next floor, which held five guards this time. Walking down the stairs, the guards raised their swords.

“Victory or death. Show your power to the soldiers of the shogun!”

The five guards exploded into black tar again, which also merged into one giant puddle that merged into one single puddle that transformed itself into a humongous, fat, yellow tiger for a body with a monkey for a head It opened its mouth and unleashed a volley of spiked ice balls straight at Yu.

“Jack Frost!” Yu ordered, the adorable doll-like creature appearing right in the nick of time, absorbing the otherwise deathly hail like it was breakfast.

The beast changed strategies, pounding its fist into the floor, the tremors knocking both Shiho and Akechi to the ground. Morgana, however was able to dodge the attack by jumping, and Yu was far enough it didn’t affect him severely. Morgana pulled out her scimitar and slashed the beast across the chest, then rolled backwards, got on one knee, turned around with slingshot in hand, and shot it straight in the eye. Yu pulled out his pistol as the creature recoiled, and fired it in the other eye. Akechi, still on the ground, summoned Robin Hood, but the Shadow, despite being effectively blind, used its tail to swat away the Persona. Akechi pulled out his laser sword and with a single strike, chopped the tail off. Shiho called upon her inner self, and Boudicca unleashed several flames, knocking him down. The Team didn’t even need the order this time, performing the All-
“Is everyone alright?” Yu asked on instinct after the monster was utterly annihilated.

“Yea. We’re fine Seeker.” Akechi answered.

“Give me a few. Ok. Ready.” Shiho answered after taking some deep breaths.

“I’m good to go.” Morgana finished.

“Alright. Then let’s get to it.”

Yu waved at them to follow, and once again, they travelled down the stairs to the final floor, now with seven guards. The Team put themselves on guard, ready for whatever monster they transformed into this time.

“Victory or death. Show your strength to the soldiers of the shogun!”

Just like the ones before, the Shadows all exploded and melted into the black sludge, merging into a turtle with a dragon for a tail.

“Everyone split up!” Yu ordered as both of the heads prepared to attack.

The team ran in different directions, and the dragon tail launched a fire stream at Yu, while the turtle released an explosion of cursed energy, hurting Shiho. Morgana fired slingshot balls to get its attention, and Akechi assaulted it using holy magic. Both of which backfired horribly. All of Morgana’s hits were reflected back at her, and the Shadow managed to actually absorb the holy power of Robin Hood. Yu summoned Izanagi, and the thunder god brought down the wrath of the heavens, but to little effect.

“How is this thing so tough?!” Shiho yelled, dodging a blast of ice.

“It’s made of seven Shadows put together. It’s not that difficult to believe it obtained all of their strengths and powers, which cover its weaknesses.” Akechi explained as he dodged several bite attempts from the tail.

“Then we’ll have to find something it doesn’t resist. It repels guns, absorbs holy, and resists lightning. Everyone hit it with what you can!” Yu ordered, switching Personas.

Shiho and Morgana got back and summoned their Personas, unleashing both wind and fire attacks, which did minor damage. Yu pulled out Succubus, but curse damage was also minor. The turtle threw its tail, and the snake finally succeeded on chomping down on Akechi, and then slammed him into Morgana. Shiho tried to smash its head with her flail, but it simply retreated back into its shell, then counterattacked with its own tail, slamming her into a wall.

That tail has to go.

Yu summoned Izanagi, and the god flew towards the Shadow at breakneck speed. The tail opened its maw and attempted to counterattack, but Yu’s plan was already in motion. The Wild Card ran towards the monster, which saw the boy approach, and the tail switched targets as a result. With the tail distracted, the Persona dived and cut the dragon clean off, leaving the turtle borderline defenseless. The Shadow unleashed a barrage of fire, but Yu switched to Hua Po, which blocked it, and the Trickster leapt into the air, plunging his sword down into the Shadow’s head, killing it. Yu looked to assess the damage. Most of the Team had endured serious injuries, if how slow they were getting back up were any indication.
“You guys ok?” Yu asked as he helped Shiho up, while Morgana did the same for Akechi.

“Not really. That thing packed a nasty punch.” Shiho groaned.

“I can patch us up, but it’s gonna take a lot, so I’m not sure how useful I’ll be later down the line.” Morgana stated.

“What about Shoichi’s meds?” Akechi asked as blood oozed from his bite marks.

“No need. Here, everyone take one.” Yu said, reaching into his pockets and pulling out three rocks.

“Life Stones? Not sure how effective they’ll be, but it’s better than nothing.” Morgana said as she, Akechi, and Shiho each took one.

“How do we use these?” Shiho asked.

“Just crush them.” Morgana answered, crushing the rock like it was candy, resulting in a green energy washing over her. Akechi and Shiho repeated the action, with the same results. Shiho let out a breath of relief.

“Oh, that felt gooood.”

“Come on. We’ve still got that figure to worry about.” Yu said, waving his hand as he opened a door to the stone circle that the red samurai was on. As they approached, the figure turned around, revealing a feminine face.

“I am Suki. And you, infiltrator, have done well.”

“Um… thank you?”

“But one last part of the trail remains; me. Select your champion, and the two of us will do battle in one on one combat.” Suki declared.

“Alright then. I’ll be the champion.” Yu stated.

“Seeker, you’re our strongest member and leader. Are you sure it’s wise to fight one on one with her?” Shiho asked, worry in her voice.

“You’re right Pariah, I am the strongest member. I was also in kendo club back home, so I’m the only one with any experience in swordplay. Plus, I have a good few Personas if things get bad. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” Yu assured as he stepped into the circle, water splashing against the rock. Once he did, Suki pushed something on the ground, and a giant white energy wall surrounded the stone circle. Akechi hit it a few times to confirm his suspicions; the wall was meant to keep them out, and Yu in.

“Are you ready?” Suki asked, getting a nod in response.

“Good.”

Suki pulled out her sword, as did Yu, but before the Wild Card could move, she raised it to the sky, summoning the three Shadows the Team had fought before; the white paper giant, the yellow tiger with the monkey head, and the turtle with the dragon tail. The other Tricksters began pounding away at the wall almost immediately, while Suki smirked sadistically.

“You cheater!” Morgana yelled.
“VICTORY OR DEATH!! Show your strength to the soldiers of the Shogun!” Suki cried as she and the others charged.

Yu simply rolled his eyes and pulled out his gun, landing a headshot on Suki, resulting in her now lifeless body falling face-first to the ground. The other Shadows continued, undeterred. Yu summoned Izanagi and sent the god straight for the turtle, while he focused on dodging the attacks of the others. The god of Japan, now more prepared for the tail, simply waited to be attacked, dodged once the blow came, then cut off the tail. With the turtle’s main method of offence down, Izanagi plunged his blade into the turtle's head, causing the Shadow to change to ash. With two opponents defeated, Yu ordered Izanagi to call down the thunder. The god spun his weapon around, and several lightning bolts came crashing down on the remaining two Shadows. The tiger Shadow was especially caught off guard, as it seemed to be locked in place with electricity sweeping through its fur. Yu could now focus on the paper giant, which had been throwing fire at him, and getting closer at hitting him. Izanagi flew over, electrifying his blade and chopping the Shadow’s head clean off, turning the monster to ash. Now, only the tiger Shadow remained, and it was still suffering from the electricity. Yu moved and attacked with his blade three times before rolling back and shooting it in the head. It let out a cry of agony before also turning to ash.

With all of his opponents dead, the white wall disappeared, and his allies ran to his side, Shiho in particular was happy to see him alright, judging by how tight her hug was.

“Oh my God, I was so scared! But you sure showed them who’s boss!”

“And to think, when we started out, you didn’t believe you were cut out for this job.” Morgana reminded with a smirk.

“That was nothing short of amazing Seeker!” Akechi praised.

All the compliments caused Yu to look at the ground and blush furiously. When he did, he noticed a few Shogi pieces lying on the stone. He picked them up and counted. It was about three, but since Yu didn’t play any Shogi, he had no idea what they were. When he touched them, they glowed, then vanished. Shortly after, they heard Kaito chuckle.

“Well done. You have obtained three of the Shogi pieces. Continue your quests, infiltrators. I hope you prove worthy opponents.

“How’s everyone doing? Can we keep moving?” Yu asked.

“Still good!”

“I can keep going.”

“Ready when you are.”

Yu nodded, and the Team made their way back up from the barracks and into the courtyard, with the armory as their destination, and knowing full well they’d be tested there too.
Next up was the armory. It was a one story building, but it was also carved into a mountain. Entering, they found themselves in a rather small room, and were soon greeted by another woman dressed in Samurai armor.

“Greetings. I am Emiko. Have you come to take the Trail of Sages?”

“We have.”

“Very well.”

Emiko threw down a smoke bomb and vanished as the door behind her opened, revealing a flight of stairs. As the team walked down, they heard Emiko speak.

“There will be three obstacles standing in your way as you attempt to make your way to me, which I will explain as we reach them. The first will be a maze. In this maze, there is a door that is the exit, but it is locked. Somewhere in the maze is the key, and it will be on you to find it. But you and your friends won’t be alone down there. Prowling the maze are the Shogun’s troopers, and it’s their job to hunt you down and skewer your heart on a pike. Are there any questions?”

The four reached the bottom of the stairs, where a paper door was opening up.

“No? In that case, you may begin!”

The four entered the maze, and Yu pulled out his phone, hoping that he would be able to cheat his way through. But he had no such luck, as his phone returned only blackness with a purple circle and four arrows; one red, one yellow, one blue, and one pink. The maze itself had steel walls, and decorating those walls were a wide variety of weapons; swords, axes, bows, everything from feudal Japan. Yu and the others began to navigate the labyrinth before them.

“We can’t afford to wander aimlessly. That’s just asking to get lost.” Morgana pointed out.

“Maybe we could mark down spots we’ve been at? Like make an arrow pointing to where we went, and if it leads to a dead end, we could mark an “X” on it.” Shiho suggested.

“That’s a great idea Pariah.”

“Someone’s coming. Everyone get ready.” Yu ordered as he crouched behind a wall, ready to ambush the incoming Shadow dressed in Samurai armor. Once it was close enough, Yu jumped on.

“I’ll witness your true form!” Yu declared as he tore off the mask.

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

Another Shadow battle had passed. This was about the sixth in the maze, and the toll of these skirmishes was starting to become more and more severe. Case in point; Shiho was panting with both hands on her knees, Akechi’s prince-like outfit was completely soaked with sweat, and Morgana was sitting with her back against the wall. Even Yu was becoming exhausted by the whole ordeal. They had been trying to navigate the maze for hours now, using Shiho’s idea in
order to mark their progress, but every time they got in a battle, they would hear the sound of gears turning, and when they went back, they saw some of their arrows out of place or outright gone. The only good thing that’s happened so far was that they found some chests and got some goodies as a result.

“Seeker, we’ve been at this for hours. We can’t keep this up.” Morgana said.

“Carmen’s right. This is getting us nowhere.” Akechi added.

“Yea I know Ace. But I can’t think of how we can…” Yu started, only to be cut off by the gears turning again. But this time, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Turning his full attention to the sound, he finally saw what was the source of the noise; a wall was shifting and altering itself.

*The walls move whenever we’re distracted by fighting, of course!*

Yu sprinted towards the wall. Right now, the moving parts had made it so that the wall was smaller than the ones around it. Using Izanagi to boost his jump, Yu was able to land on top of the wall. By the time the other Tricksters had reached him, the wall returned to its original height, and Izanagi ferried them up one by one to Yu.

“Good thinking. We should be able to find the key easily from up here.” Akechi complimented as they started walking on the walls. From their new view, the maze was far more massive than they thought, with there was an absence of walls in the center, with instead four pillars.

“That’s cheating!” Emiko yelled.

“So is moving the walls!” Shiho reminded.

“Look! Over there! I think that’s the key!” Morgana yelled, pointing to a yellow gleam shooting upwards off in the corner. Jumping and leaping to different walls, they reached the glow easily, and it was guarded on all sides by four Shadows.

“We’re in no condition for a drawn-out battle. We have to find a way to draw them away.” Yu whispered, wiping some sweat off his brow.

“How?” Morgana asked.

“I have an idea.” Akechi said, summoning Robin Hood. The Persona took aim at a wall and let loose an arrow, reducing it to rubble rather quickly. The resulting commotion forced the four Shadows to leave their post and investigate. Morgana, taking advantage of Akechi’s distraction, reached into her utility belt, pulled out a grapple gun, and used it to snatch the key.

“Perfect. Now, we need to get to the exit.” Yu said with a smile.

“My money’s on the center.” Shiho stated.

With a nod, the Phantoms went back to the center of the maze. Waiting for them was a hatch with an ornate lock. Morgana inserted the key and turned. There were several noises as the gears in the room activated. The walls began to sink into the floor, revealing dozens upon dozens of Shadows, all of which bowed to the infiltrators as soon as they saw them. Next, the hatch swallowed the key and opened up, revealing a black pit, which was later filled by a rising platform. Once it reached them, the four stepped on, and the platform began to descend, the hatch closing as soon as they were far down enough. Once all the sunlight was gone, orange crystals began to glow, bathing the four in a dim light that looked downright romantic.
“Wow. This is pretty.” Shiho pointed out.

“Not as pretty as you.” Yu muttered.

“What’d you say Seeker?” Akechi asked.

“I said I hope there’s a Safe Room soon.”

“Me too. That maze really did a number on us.” Morgana said.

“Look on the bright side. If that maze was the worst this trial could throw at us, then the others should be easier.” Akechi said with a smile.

“And if the maze was the easiest?” Shiho asked.

“Then we get past them the same way we got past the maze; using our heads.” Yu answered.

Suddenly, the platform came to a stop, and a door opened, illuminated by more of the same crystals. As the Team walked down, they saw a pair of doors that shimmered. Entering the Safe Room, the whole group just collapsed on the furniture.

“Never before has something fake felt so good.” Shiho said as she rested on a couch.

“I knooooooow.” Morgana added.

“The Safe Rooms always looked like the perfect spot to relax, but only now am I taking advantage of the fact. What a mistake I’ve been making.” Akechi sighed out.

“Hey Seeker, why don’t you sit down?” Shiho asked, patting the spot next to her on the couch. Yu smiled, silently accepting her invitation as he sat down next to her. Pulling out her pink hairband, Shiho gave a soft murmur of bliss as her raven-colored locks cascaded down her shoulders.

“You know, in spite of everything we’ve been through in the Metaverse, I can’t wait for summer so we can work on Palaces all the time.” Shiho pointed out.

“I’m surprised you’re enjoying this so much Pariah. You always seemed very timid.” Akechi added.

“It’s because I’m very timid that I enjoy this so much. All my life, I’ve been told to make myself small, to accept the world for how it is, and all that other stuff. For my whole life, I’ve been abused, whether by my peers or by my parents, and all I’ve done is try to be nice.”

“And being nice has its perks. None of us would’ve meet you if you weren’t nice. And I’m certainly glad that’s the case.” Yu pointed out, causing Shiho to smile sweetly and blush, though no one could tell because of the poor lighting.

“Thanks Seeker. Though, I guess what I’m trying to say is that it just feels good to hit back. The blood on my face, the sound of bones crunching, the broken bodies turning to ash. It’s all so therapeutic.” Shiho said with obvious glee.

“Should we be worried about how much fun you have about beating up Shadows?” Akechi asked.

“I believe you Pariah. But back to the matter at hand. I know that maze took a lot out of us, so I have to know if you guys can keep going.”

“You’re the boss Seeker. Whatever you decide, we’ll follow.”

“What Carmen said.”

“Agreed Pariah.”

“Alright. In that case, let’s rest for about five minutes, then continue.” Yu stated, earning a sigh of relief from the others.

After 15 minutes had passed in the Safe Room, Yu finally managed to drag his team out. Walking down the hall, they soon entered a room with several doors on the side, while directly in front of them were three chairs, and one of them had a Shadow dressed in peasant’s clothes strapped in.

“Welcome infiltrators, to the second obstacle! The peasant sitting in the chair is the only one who knows which door leads to me. Now, all you have to do is find him. Once you’re ready to begin, three cups will descend on all the chairs, then begin to move. Your job is to keep your eyes on the cup that has the man. Succeed, and you’ll be able to open the way to me. Fail, and he dies. Any questions?”

“Will you cheat again?” Akechi asked.

“Depends. Will you?” Emiko replied.

Shiho opened her mouth, but Yu raised his hand to stop her. Arguing with Emiko would get them nowhere.

“No. We’re ready.” Yu said.

“Excellent.”

The three cups covered up the chairs, and began to move, shifting around and taking the chairs with them. For a few minutes, they kept moving, and Yu could tell that Shiho and Morgana had given up on trying to keep track of the man, while Akechi kept his gaze razor sharp with focus. Finally, the cups stopped.

“Alright, the time has come! Choose! Which cup is your only hope hiding behind?”

“That—”

“Wait a moment Ace.” Yu interrupted in a gentle whisper.

“What is it?” Akechi replied with an equally gentle whisper.

“Emiko has cheated before. I don’t see why she wouldn’t cheat again.”

“Good point. But I don’t see how to cheat ourselves.”

“Watch.” He whispered.

Stepping forward, Yu activated his Third Eye and smiled. He was right. If Emiko had played
by the rules, the man should have ended up on the right side of the room, but Yu’s Third Eye was
telling him that the man was in the middle. He pointed dead center.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

The cup was raised, revealing the man. The three cheered, and Emiko sputtered.

“W-what?! HOW?! I made sure it was rigg-I-I mean, congratulations on the victory! Now, all
that remains is the final obstacle.” Emiko said, though the venom in her words were palatable. The
man, now released from his chair, got straight to work, going to the various doors and doing
something to them, whether it be turning knobs, locking them a certain way, or just pushing a
certain part. By the time he was done, the room rumbled, and the wall behind the chairs collapsed,
revealing a tunnel. As they started walking through it, Akechi spoke up.

“How did you know where he was Seeker?”

“I used my Third Eye.” Yu answered nonchalantly.

“Third… Eye?” Morgana questioned.

“Its a power I can use when Izanagi and I… merge, for lack of a better word.”

“What do you mean?” Shiho asked.

“Well, in the real world, I can kinda summon Izanagi. He can’t alter the world, not like here,
but he does affect how the world affects me. I can use him to listen in and spy on people through
walls, far away, so forth. But in the real world, he can give me some of his power and let me see
the Metaverse differently. Specifically, if there’s something that might be useful for me to have, he
can highlight it for me with the Third Eye ability.”

“And you didn’t tell us this before because…” Akechi asked.

“Actually, he kinda did. For me, at least.” Shiho started.

“What?” Morgana asked.

“Back when we went on the trip to Mitsuyo’s news studio, he wanted me to be the one to
infiltrate Mitsuyo’s office, but since we didn’t have a blueprint or map of any kind, I didn’t know
where to go. Seeker told me to send out Boudicca, but I couldn’t do it, so he had to go. Though, he
neglected to tell me anything about this Third Eye ability.” She grumbled.

“After that, I figured that it must be unique to me, since I’m a Wild Card.” Yu explained.

“You’ll have to tell us how it's done once we get out.” Akechi said.

“Hey look, we’re here.” Morgana pointed out.

Climbing up through the tunnel, they saw Shogi pieces placed on a pedestal.

“This is too easy.” Akechi said.

“This is some kind of trap.” Shiho added.

“She’s planning something.” Morgana finished.
“Yea. All of you, head back. I think I know what she’s planning.” Yu said.

“Are you sure?” Shiho asked.

“Trust me. I know where this is going.” Yu said as he approached the Shogi pieces.

The Team, albeit reluctantly, complied, leaving Yu to do whatever he was planning. He approached the pieces, scooped them up, shoved them in his pocket, and ran. Behind him a loud crunch was heard. The Trickster dared to look back, and what he saw confirmed his suspicions.

There was a giant boulder heading straight for him

Music: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bTpp8PQSog](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bTpp8PQSog)

Yu wasted no time running for dear life, though despite the circumstances, he was having fun. The boulder was starting to gain on him, and up ahead, he heard sounds of a brawl and his fun suddenly evaporated. If Shadows had managed to get the jump on his friends, they might not be able to escape. Running back to the cup room, he saw that it wasn’t Shadows, but Emiko that was fighting them. He pulled out his pistol and shot her in the leg, screaming at his fellow Tricksters.

“RUN!! THERE’S A BOULDER COMING!!”

The others, seeing what was headed their way, sprinted as fast as their legs could carry them. Yu ran to Emiko, who tried to grab him or stop him in some other way, but Izanagi emerged, punching her right in the face. Yu ran right past her, and she didn’t even have a chance to scream before the boulder squashed her. Shiho held the Safe Room’s door open, ready and waiting for her leader. Yu didn’t dare turn around, because he knew the boulder was mere inches away from him. Shiho reached out as soon as she could, and grabbed him, heaving with all her considerable strength. As he was pulled to safety, Yu found himself face-first in Shiho’s bust. The boy and girl blushed madly as the Wild Card scrambled to get off. Outside, they heard the boulder come and gone, failing to achieve its mission.

“Seeker! Are you alright?” Morgana asked

“I’m fine. What about you guys?” Yu asked as he and Shiho got up.

“We’re fine. That boulder gave us quite the scare.” Akechi said with a faint smile.

“Good. I got the pieces.” Yu said, reaching into his pockets and pulling out the tiny slabs.

“Excellent. Now all that’s left is the princess’ chambers.” Akechi said.

“Actually, I just realized something; a lot of time has passed both in here and in the waking world. We should head back soon.” Morgana reminded.

“Carmen has a point. We should go back soon.” Shiho agreed.

“Fine. But first, I want to at least scope out the chambers. That way, we’ll at least be prepared for whatever comes next.” Yu argued.

“Alright.”

With that, the Team teleported out of the armory, and back to the tower. As they made their way back outside, Kaito noticed them and gave them a small wave and a greeting. They went across the courtyard and to the entrance of the castle itself. But there was a problem. The whole
palace was shielded by a yellow shield. On the front door, there was some writing.

“To whoever ye may be, know that only our glorious Shogun is allowed past this holy barrier, and that this barrier in invincible to all forms of harm and covers all forms of entry. Any who try to enter the Shogun’s daughter’s private sanctuary will be put to the sword.”

It took awhile for the four to process this new information.

“Shit.” They all cursed simultaneously.

“Does this mean only Shadow Mitsuyo can get us in here?” Akechi asked.

“If that’s the case, this infiltration got a lot more tricky.” Yu pointed out.

“Actually no. You guys remember when I told you about how the Metaverse is affected by cognition?” Morgana asked.

“Kinda.” Shiho answered.

“Well, the only reason this force field says its invincible is only true because the waking world Mitsuyo thinks so.”

“What’s that mean?” Akechi asked.

“It means that she only thinks that only she’s allowed in… whatever the waking world’s equivalent of this building is.”

“The Shogun's daughter... Hifumi’s room. What are you getting at Carmen?” Yu questioned.

“I think what she’s saying is that, if we show her that anyone can get in Hifumi’s room, then her cognition of it will change, which will let us get in.” Shiho answered.

“Exactly! Thank you Pariah.”

“Alright. During school tomorrow, we’ll discuss who gets to do it. For now, however, let’s go back.” Yu suggested, and the others nodded in agreement, quickly returning to the waking world for whatever tomorrow held in store for them.

Chapter End Notes

Alright yall, the Team's getting close to having a new member!
You excited?
Real Life Infiltration

Hifumi took deep breaths as she stood outside her mother’s room. She had hoped, she had prayed, that this would stop, that her mother would see just how much she didn’t want this. But it only got worse. The pictures got more risque, the clothing more revealing, and the money and fame got bigger. They even had a name for her now; the Venus of Shogi.

Ryuji was right; mother wasn’t going to stop unless someone made her, and that someone was going to be Hifumi. Or at least, that’s what she hoped. She took one final deep breath before knocking on her mother’s door. It took a few minutes, but Mitsuyo managed to answer.

“Hifumi? What is it, I’m busy.”

“Mother, I would like to discuss me being a model.”

Mitsuyo let out an annoyed sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I should’ve known that this would happen sooner or later. Alright fine-”

Hifumi let herself smile.

“You can have a slice of the profits. Does ten percent sound good to you?”

Hifumi’s smile faded.

“N-no mother, it’s not that…” The shogi player said, her voice starting to fade.

“Then what is it? Speak up child.” Mitsuyo demanded.

“I want to stop being a model.”

Mitsuyo let out a mocking laugh.

“A-and why is that child?”

“Because it’s getting out of hand. I could deal with some commercials that were small on newspapers, but the skin-tight dresses plastered on the front pages of magazines, the bikinis on the covers of gossip papers, these are too much. Every day, the shogi community grows more and more disgusted with me. Every day, more and more people leer at me and harass me because of my body. Every day, my dream becomes more and more distant.”

Mitsuyo glared at her daughter, and raised her eyebrow, before taking a deep breath.

“Child, I’m sorry for what you’ve had to endure things like that, but in this business, it comes with the territory. I myself know that people call me all kinds of nasty names behind my back every single day, and chances are that more than a few of them are trying their best to take me down, and it’s just something I’ll have to live with. But I’ll tell you what. Since you’re not used to it, I’ll let you have modeling time off until we have Risette on, ok?”

“I don’t want a break, mother. I want it to stop.” Hifumi whimpered.

“And I want your father to be well again. The sad fact is, we don’t always get what we want. We have to make sacrifices, and sadly, that includes you. If it seems like I’m torturing you, it’s because I don’t want you to suffer in the future, because, sad as it is, Shogi just isn’t a profitable or
famous profession. I’m only making you do this because I love you. You know that, right?”

“I… I do, mother.”

“Good. Now, go back to your room, and go to bed.”

Hifumi weakly nodded, and walked back to her room numbly. As soon as she was out of
eyesight, Mitsuyo scowled.

“Ungrateful brat.”

At Shujin Academy, Yu, Shiho, Morgana, and Akechi were all sitting on the roof.

“Alright, our goal is clear; we need to have Mitsuyo see that anyone can be in Hifumi’s room,
otherwise we won’t be able to continue infiltration.” Akechi reminded.

“We know. The problem is, who will do it?” Shiho asked.

“It can’t be Yu. Not only is he already on probation, but we don’t know if the effect will only
be temporary. He has to be in the Palace to lead us.” Morgana pointed out.

“But at the same time, his unique talents involving Izanagi would give him an enormous
advantage in the real world.” Akechi countered.

“Are we sure? I know I can’t do it, but what about you two?” Shiho replied, gesturing to
Akechi and Morgana.

“No. We both tried, but it would seem this is yet another talent reserved for the Wild Card.”
Morgana answered.

“Akechi is our link to the police. We can’t risk him being under investigation. Shiho has the
grace of a hippo, and Morgana doesn’t know the ins and outs of this world. It has to be me.” Yu
argued.

“I’m sorry, did you just compare me to a hippo?”

“No it doesn’t. Morgana is more than qualified to handle this.” Akechi countered.

“Akechi’s right. If you get caught, then you’ll be hauled away, and we’re back where we
started way back when you wanted to quit. The fact is that you’re infinitely more valuable than
anyone else here, and I’m the only other one with lockpicking experience. I’m going in.”

Yu opened his mouth to reply, but the lunch bell rang, signaling the end of break.

“Then it’s decided; Morgana will infiltrate the Togo residence, then enter Hifumi’s room when
Mitsuyo could see it.” Akechi finished.

“Relax Yu. It’s not like I’m going to bring anyone to the Metaverse.” Morgana reassured.

Hifumi found herself alone in church, tears streaming down her face. She tried. She tried to
make her mother see how much she was hurting her. She tried to convince her mother to stop
forcing her to do things she didn’t want to. She tried, and that’s all she did. She heard the church
door open. Father Simon shouldn’t be back yet, so chances were, it was one of her ‘fans’. Hifumi shook her head, thinking about what her mother said about sacrifices. Sacrifice was when someone gave up something they valued for something else they wanted. What was Hifumi getting out of this? Fame? Money? Her fame is what drove her away from her friends in the shogi club, and she didn’t earn a single yen from her shoots. The figure sat down.

“Look, whoever you are, if you’re here because you’re a fan, I’d greatly appreciate it if you left me alone.”

“I take it things with your old lady ain’t goin’ so well.” The man spoke, and Hifumi immediately recognized who it belonged to.

“RYUJI!!” She squealed, wrapping the blonde-haired delinquent in a hug, which he returned. He gave her a toothy grin, which she couldn’t help but giggle at. The two sat down, Hifumi’s mood improving considerably.

“So, have my wild charms finally broken through? Has the peasant Ryuji Sakamoto finally earned the love and admiration of the mighty Togo queen?” Ryuji asked.

“Hehe. Almost. I’m glad to see you Ryuji.”

“I’ll bet. Ya looked like… A friend of mine a few weeks ago.” Ryuji replied as he thought of Shiho, his tone a lot more serious.

“Yes. The situation with my mother has… escalated. And now, the only way I think I can get her to stop is by telling my father. But I’m not sure how his health will take to the news.”

“Well… if ya want, you could run away.”

“What?”

“For real! Ya could go to the countryside, change yer name to Hifumi Slow-Mo, start all over. Hell, I might come with ya!”

All Hifumi did was look at him with one eyebrow raised. It took a few minutes, but Ryuji eventually realized something.

“Ya know… on second thought… running away might not be the best idea.”

“You think?”

“Hehe… yea. But in all seriousness, I did try something. It might be a long shot, but I posted your mom’s name to have her heart stolen.”

“Wait, WHAT?! Stolen?! L-l-l-like ripped out?! Like surgery? Like-”

“Woah woah, not literally!” Ryuji stated.

“Then what do you mean?” Hifumi asked, still nervous.

“Well, at my school, there was this grade-A asshole named Kobayakawa. For years, the Goro Akechi tried to take him down, but always failed. Then, one day, plastered all over the public announcement board were these cards, that basically called Kobayakawa out, and said they’d make him confess by ‘taking his distorted desires.’ And on the back of the cards were ‘Take your heart’, and by the time afternoon rolled around, he confessed to the fuzz. Later, they put up a website that
allowed people to post the names of scumbags whose hearts they wanted changed. One of them even said that it worked. So, I… put your mom’s name on there.”

“I appreciate the thought Ryuji. But, I’d rather put my faith in something more… concrete.” Hifumi replied.

“Alright. But if your mom suddenly starts apologizing, you know who to thank.”

Hifumi smiled, and scooched closer to Ryuji.

“Thank you Ryuji. For being here.”

“Sure thing Hifumi. Sure thing.”

Before either Hifumi or Ryuji could do anything else, a sudden beeping cut through the air, and Hifumi’s bag was the source. Scouring through it, she found it was her cell phone. Her foul mood returned, and with a vengeance.

“Is it your old lady?”

“I have to go. Thanks for talking with me Ryuji.” Hifumi said as she left, and Ryuji could do nothing but ball up his hands in frustration.

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

Morgana was hiding in a bush.

Why was she hiding in a bush you may ask? Well, it was because she was waiting for the moment to strike, the “moment” being when Mitsuyo would see Hifumi’s room door open, and Morgana inside. The rest of the Team was already in the Metaverse, waiting for her mission to be completed, and once it was, they would rush in, secure a Safe Room, then get out, just in case the effect was temporary. Morgana had a pouch around her waist, holding all of the tools she needed. She tried to go in and pick the lock prior, but someone else was in the house, and she really didn’t need to risk getting the cops here and scaring off the target. So for now, she hid in a bush.

A car began to pull in, and Morgana grinned as Mitsuyo stepped out, having just hung up on the phone. The guide waited a few minutes after her target entered her home, then emerged from the bush, careful not to be spotted as she climbed up the wall to a window she had opened earlier. Once inside, she crouched down and checked her corners. Mitsuyo was down below, talking with someone. Judging by how he called her ‘my love’, it was safe to assume it was her husband. Morgana found the room she had marked earlier, and whipped out her tools. She also made sure to adjust her weight, which resulted in the floorboards creaking, which would hopefully get Mitsuyo’s attention. Morgana was roughly halfway done when she heard Mitsuyo’s voice from below.

“Hello? Is someone there?”

Following that question, Morgana heard footsteps, and doubled her pace.

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“Seeker, could you stop pacing around please? You’re making me nervous.” Shiho stated.

“I’m sorry. I’m still not 100% on board with this. Something could easily go wrong.”
“Have faith in her abilities. She’s not as naive as she once was.” Akechi said.

“She still gets distracted by sushi.” Yu retorted.

“That’s… a good point. But still, I doubt she’ll let us down. Besides, if she does get caught, I can work on her case and make sure there isn’t enough evidence to put her away.” Akechi replied.

Just as he finished speaking, the golden force field surrounding the castle went down.

“That’s our cue. Let’s go boys!” Shiho yelled, grabbing her flail.

The three immediately charged, entering a room where a lone Shadow in golden samurai armor was waiting.

“What the devil? How’d you get back our Shogun’s magic? No matter. I will stop you here and now!”

The samurai exploded into tar, and reformed itself into a giant armored man, which also had his armor encased in gold, with his headgear was pointed upward and curved at the end like an axe. He pulled out his weapon, a giant double-bladed sword, and charged at them, using wind magic to amplify his speed before any of them had time to react. He body slammed straight into Akechi, knocking the Detective Prince back out of the castle. The Shadow swung his blade at Yu, but the Wild Card barely managed to dodge. But by focusing its attention on Yu, it left itself vulnerable to Shiho, who had already summoned Boudicca. Hurling fireballs at him, the Shadow recoiled from the assault, then turned around, twirling its sword around, and suddenly, all three infiltrators suddenly felt weaker, and more sluggish. The Shadow, now looking at Shiho, unleashed a torrent of green energy, knocking her back.

“Let’s try this again.” Akechi grumbled as he called upon his inner self.

Robin Hood materialized and unleashed a blast of holy magic, but the attack only seemed to scratch the armor’s paint job. With Shiho knocked back, the Shadow turned its attention back to Yu, who had summoned Izanagi to protect him, but even the god was struggling against this opponent. Shiho pulled out her SMG and unloaded a full clip, which also did little. By now, the Shadow had punched Izanagi back, and unleashed a blast of pink orbs at Shiho, who didn’t look like she was harmed. But she then turned to Yu, and her eyes turned into pink orbs. She charged at her leader, her weapon at the ready.

“Shiho, what the hell?!” Yu asked as he tried his best to dodge his friend’s flail swings.

“She appears to be confused! Be careful Seeker!” Akechi yelled as the Samurai charged at the Trickster. Yu and Shiho’s weapons locked, and Yu headbutted her, pushing her back. He grabbed his mask and called forth a Persona he knew could at least put her out of condition.

“Come, JACK FROST!”

The adorable Persona erupted, and quickly launched an ice barrage that Shiho wasn’t ready for. She was knocked on her back, and Yu turned to the Shadow, summoning another Persona.

“ELIGOR!!”

A red knight on top of a horse materialized and immediately charged at the Shadow, and for awhile, it appeared they were evenly matched, until Yu suddenly felt his strength return as the weakness spell faded. Eligor pushed, breaking the deadlock and stabbing the Shadow in the chest and forcing it to the floor. Yu charged forward and turned to his partner.
“Ace, let’s finish this!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

The two jumped forward, performing an All-Out Attack on the defenseless foe. When they were finished, it turned to ash, and Shiho blinked, picking herself off the floor and looking around with a confused look on her face.

“Did we win?” She asked as Yu and Akechi collapsed to the floor.

“Yes.” Akechi answered through labored breaths.

“That… was tough.” Yu panted as he got up.

“I know. But Carmen could join us at any time, so we should find a Safe Room soon.” Akechi said, forcing himself off the floor.

“Alright. Everyone split up, and holler if you find one.” Yu said, turning towards the stairs.

“No need. Look straight ahead.” Shiho said, pointing straight ahead.

Way back at the Togo residence, after Morgana had successfully gotten inside and picked the lock, she made sure the door was open just as Mitsuyo came up. Hiding behind a corner, she smiled when she heard Mitsuyo gasp and rush into the room. Her job was done, and it was time to leave. Jumping out the window, she landed in a bush and got up to leave, only to come face-to-face with another woman. This one was dressed in a dress with blue, orange, and white diamonds in a checkered pattern, and a red braid in her hair shaped like a four leaf clover. And she did not look happy.

“Who are you, and what were you doing in my house?” She demanded.

Morgana froze like a deer in headlights, unable to say anything. When the woman approached, Morgana did what any scared person would do; run.

“Get back here!” The woman yelled, chasing after the Velvet Room guide.

After running for a dozen minutes, Morgana looked behind her as she approached the news station. That woman with the red braid was still chasing after her. Morgana pulled out her phone, and shook her head. No, she couldn’t risk entering the Metaverse with this woman watching. She needed to shake her pursuer and she needed to do it now.

She reached into her pouches and pulled out another one of her tools; a smoke bomb. While she wanted to keep them in reserve in case the Team needed to make a hasty retreat, this was an emergency. Throwing the smoke bomb behind her, Morgana then turned into an alley and hid behind a dumpster. She waited for a few moments, hearing the girl cough, then scream in frustration, then heard fast footsteps, as if she was running. Fortunately, they started to fade, and Morgana smiled as she stepped out of her hiding spot.

“Phew, that was a bit too close for my liking.” She said to herself as she stepped out of the alleyway.

“Alright. Time to rejoin the others.” She declared, pulling out her phone.
She pulled up the Meta-Nav, but what Morgana didn’t know was that not only did Hifumi hear her, but the shogi player also happened to be walking in Morgana’s direction when the Trickster stepped out, and immediately raced to the thief the moment she saw her. Morgana heard footsteps the moment her finger touched the button, and by then, Hifumi was in arm’s reach as the world began to twist and swirl.
Yu, Shiho, and Akechi left the Safe Room, and were now waiting for Morgana to join them. They were expecting her arrival in the form of her coming out of the new Safe Room, but instead, they heard screaming from outside. Then a **CRASH**.

“Carmen?” Akechi asked as the three head out to the courtyard, only to see that Morgana was under someone. Someone they recognized.

“Hifumi?” Yu asked as the girls got up.

“What…” Hifumi started groggily.

Hifumi looked around, taking in her surroundings.

“Where… WHERE THE HELL AM I!?” She screamed, crawling backwards.

“Hifumi… calm down. We’re not going to hurt you.” Yu started.

“What did you do to me?! Let me out!” Hifumi yelled.

“Hifumi, calm down!” Yu yelled, taking off his mask.

“You remember me, don’t you? Yu Narukami, Ryuji Sakamoto’s friend?” Yu asked, putting up his hands in the most non-threateningly way possible.

“Narukami… I think I remember you. But I do know Ryuji.” Hifumi answered, now starting to calm down.

“Alright. Everyone remove your masks.” Yu ordered, and the others obeyed.

“Hold on… I know you people. You’re the ones who came to my school!” Hifumi yelled, pointing an accusing finger at them.

“Yes we are. We are the Phantom Team.” Yu explained.

“You’re… the Phantom Team? Wait… then that would mean… this place… it wouldn’t have anything to do with stealing my mother’s heart, would it?” Hifumi asked, making the others take a step back in shock.

“How… how do you know about that?” Akechi asked.

“Ryuji said that he put my mother’s name on a site that you four run. And if you saw the name, there was a chance that you’d take their heart. I didn’t think it would actually happen. Did you all seriously think mother’s abuse to me was that bad?” Hifumi explained.

“Actually, and this will probably come off as asshole-ish, but we aren’t doing it just for you.” Yu replied.

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m sorry to say this Hifumi-san, but your mother is a terrible person.”

Hifumi scowled at the insult.
“Don’t slander her! It’s true that she might not listen to me in everything, but she’s a good person! She raised me, cared for me, provided for me, all at her own expense!” Hifumi argued.

“I’m not surprised you don’t believe it. Follow us. We’ll show you the truth.” Yu said, beckoning to Hifumi to follow them.

They walked from the courtyard and into the warehouse storing all of the paintings. Hifumi stared in awe at how many there were.

“Take a look. Every single one of these are people your mother has hurt.” Shiho informed as Hifumi started looking through the scrolls. It took a few dozen minutes, and Hifumi even went to the very top of the building. With each tale she read, some more color left her face, with each painting, her expression became more and more mortified. When she was done, she came back down and shook her head at the others.

“This… this is a lie, or nightmare. This can’t be real!” She screamed.

“This world is called the Metaverse, an alternate reality formed by human cognition. This place specifically is called a Palace, and it’s a place where one can see someone as they truly are. What you’re looking at Hifumi, is your mother’s heart laid bare.” Yu explained.

“No. No, no, no. This can’t be real, this is all a lie!” Hifumi screamed again, this time on the verge of unleashing tears.

“There’s one scroll you haven’t read. This one.” Shiho said, tossing the scroll next to the wedding picture at the shogi player. Hifumi took the scroll and read it. Roughly halfway through, she let go, and the paper fell to the floor.

“Aunt Ami…” Hifumi whispered.

“What?” Yu asked.

“I… knew Ami Ito. When I was in middle school, I met her and she said she’d like to be my friend, in order to ‘make up for a terrible mistake’ she did. She’d always sneak into the house to give me presents on my birthdays and Christmas. She would always be there to help me if I was struggling, whether it be with my studies, making friends, or anything else. I confided in her when I knew I couldn’t do the same with my parents. She gave me my first shogi board and… when I told mother who I got it from, the next day… a police officer came and told us she was dead; hit by a drunk driver…”

Hifumi couldn’t hold back any longer. She collapsed to her knees and began to sob. As her wails echoed throughout the whole Palace, Yu came close and wrapped his arms around her in a side hug. He knew all too well what she was going through. The denial that someone you knew so intimately was able to do something you never thought they could, then the full realization of reality, and finally the sorrow of that knowledge would threaten to break you. He knew. He had been there.

“At… at least… she still cares about me.” Hifumi sniffled, desperate to find some kind of positive of this whole revelation.

“Ah, there you are.” A feminine voice called, but the sound was distorted and twisted.

Hifumi and the others looked to the source, and saw standing at the entrance was a woman accompanied by four Shadows and dressed like a geisha, but the major difference was that instead of a tight bun, she wore her hair in a loose braid flung over her shoulder, with her kimono showing
off ample cleavage. Yu, Akechi, Shiho, and Morgana all got on guard immediately once they noticed another distinct feature; her eyes were a sickly yellow.

“W-who are you?” Hifumi whimpered out.

“That’s your mother’s Shadow. Her true self that she keeps hidden from everyone else.” Morgana answered.

“Correct peasant. You stand in the presence of Mitsuyo Togo, shogun of the fortress that you’ve been rampaging through. And apparently, that wasn’t enough, if your kidnapping of my daughter is any indication.” Shadow Mitsuyo growled.

“Hey, we didn’t kidnap anybody! She followed us here!” Morgana replied.

“M-mother…” Hifumi said hoarsely as tears still flowed from her eyes.

“Yes child?”

“I’ve… read all these scrolls. They said that you did terrible things to innocent people. That you blackmailed, framed, murdered, extorted, and so much more, just to secure your control and power. That you constantly hurt people just to send a message and intimidate others. That you steal what doesn’t belong to you simply because someone else has it. Tell me this isn’t true! Tell me that this is all some twisted dream, and that this isn’t what you’re really like! Tell me that the woman who married father did so out of love, and not because she was jealous of the happiness her friend would get! Tell me…”

Hifumi swallowed hard. Her next words croaked from her lips.

“Tell me you didn’t kill Ami Ito. Please.” She begged.

Mitsuyo let out a cackling laugh. It was cruel, unhinged, and disturbing as she gripped her stomach from all the wheezing and outbursts of giggling. After a few minutes of laughing at her daughter’s plea, she straightened her back and stared right at Hifumi.

“Oh child. Why on Earth should I? It’s the simple truth; they had something I wanted, so I took it from them.” She said with a mocking grin.

“But… but why?”

“Because they didn’t deserve it, and I did. Plain and simple.” Shadow Mitsuyo scowled, her once mocking smile giving way to a threatening scowl.

“What did Aunt Ami do to deserve death?!” Hifumi asked as fresh tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Oh, me and that bitch go way back. Or used to, I should say. It all began in high school, when we first met Kaito. Right from the start, I wanted him. He was from a wealthy family, had honor, was handsome, and stupid enough to be easily manipulated. But, he just had to fall in love with Ami. I tried so many times to break them up, but they were so determined to see it through to the end. Ami didn’t deserve what Kaito could give her, but I did. I deserved the happiness, I deserved the potential for something greater. So, I waited until they were engaged, and made sure Ami got caught being screwed by some horny bastard, and Kaito broke off the wedding.”

Mitsuyo smiled sadistically.
“In the end, I got what I wanted; a means to build an empire, and it certainly helped that all it took to pacify Kaito was one tussle in bed on our honeymoon. As for that bitch Ami, I made sure that she was spared. After all, without her, I doubt I could’ve gotten my means to an empire at all. After I obtained the resources I needed via Kaito, I was introduced to a whole new circle of society. I saw what they had; money, power, fame, success, recognition. And I wanted it all. None of them deserved any of it, but I certainly did. I had to claw my way to where I am, with blood, sweat, and tears.”

“No you didn’t!” Shiho yelled.

“What did you say, peasant?” Mitsuyo growled.

“You didn’t sacrifice, you schemed! You stole what others had simply because you didn’t have it!” Akechi barked back.

“SILENCE!! Who are you to judge me, worm?! Look around you! This building is a monument to all that I have achieved! Someone of my accomplishments deserves happiness, recognition, and power. Especially when compared to thieves like you, who have nothing worth having.”

“We have purpose.” Morgana said.

“We have skill.” Akechi added.

“We have spirit.” Shiho included.

“We have each other.” Yu finished.

“And those won’t save you from me. Besides, what good are those things, if you don’t pass them on.” Mitsuyo countered as she stared at Hifumi.

“Me?” The girl asked, still recovering from everything she’s borne witness to.

“Yes. Not going to lie, when I discovered I was pregnant with you, I strongly considered abortion, but then I realized; for all my talents, skills, and resources, I would eventually grow old and die. So I kept you around, as a way of making sure that I would have a successor. But then you told me that Ami befriended you, and had been seeing you for some time. When you told me that, I knew she was grooming you to be her vessel of revenge, so I had to end her before her plans bore fruit.”

Hifumi could only look on in utter horror as she remained on her knees. Her irises shrunk, her jaw dropped, and Yu could picture her mind snapping like a twig.

“Which is good. Now, if only you’d give up that stupid board game, I could finally finish molding you into what I deserve. Now, come here child.” Mitsuyo ordered.

Yu and the others looked at the shogi player, completely broken by the unending onslaught of ugly truth. Her eyes had been ripped open to show the monster she had so vehemently defended. And now, that monster was asking her daughter to stand by her side and remain shackled to a path that would break her.

Hifumi stood up, looked her mother square in the eyes, and said

“No.”
Mitsuyo pulled her head back, as if she was struck.

“Excuse me, what did you-”

“Shut up, mother.” Hifumi ordered, the last word dripping with burning contempt.

“To think, before you arrived, I was defending you. To think, when everyone was telling me how evil you were, I told them, and myself, that you loved me and father. To think, there was a time when I would’ve obeyed you simply because I thought I owed you anything.”

Hifumi took one step forward, and the ground cracked under its power.

“But no more! Now, I finally acknowledge that you see me the same way as you see everyone else; a stepping stone for your own selfish gain! You wanted to mold me into what you deserve? Well congratulations, you’re going to have it; I will be a means to destroy your empire, and make all of your so-called ‘sacrifices’ worth nothing!”

Just then, there was a sudden THUMP that resonated in the air. The Phantom Team smiled, knowing what came next.

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjzQXrUXuHk&t=86s

“You have finally accepted what everyone has been telling you. That the one you’ve so loyally obeyed cares nothing for you, or your desires.” A spectral voice asked.

Hifumi let out a scream as she grabbed her head. Her eyes glowed an unhealthy yellow as the voice continued.

“Are you prepared to strike out on your own? Are you prepared to bleed for your ambitions?”

“I am.”

“If that is true, then you must regain your drive for victory and conquer all who oppose you, starting with the woman that stifles your talent for her own gain!”

“If that’s what it takes, then I ask you… no, I order you to help me.”

“As. You. Wish. Let our contract be… an official declaration of war!!!!”

Suddenly, Hifumi felt something cover her nose and mouth. Tugging at it, she noticed it was a mask made out of wood, and was bright orange in color.

“I am thou. Thou art I.”

She grabbed the edges, and began to pull, and just like those before her, she ignored the blood that spilled from the torn flesh on her nose and mouth.

“The time has come to reclaim your dreams! May all enemies of the Hifumi Togo cower in fear, for her fire has been rekindled! And may all of her allies rejoice, for she will reward their loyalty! And may those who betray her pray to God for mercy, for they will get none from her.”

Hifumi tore off her orange mask and a blue fire erupted from the ground, consuming her.
“The world will hear her name… and TREMBLE!!”

As the azure fires were gradually snuffed out, Hifumi’s modern clothes were replaced by more traditional ones. Whereas before she had a dress with blue, orange, and white diamonds in a checkered pattern, she now wore the outfit of a ninja that was wrapped snugly around her figure, with an orange rope belt that was dotted with shogi pieces attached. On her shoulders were two steel pauldrons that fit comfortably, while wrapped around the sides of both her thighs were single pouches, and on her hands were fingerless gloves with an orange ribbon around her middle fingers. Covering her mouth was an orange oni mask, and her eyes were alight with burning contempt for the creature that gave birth to her.
"Fu Hao! Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war!" Hifumi ordered.

Sitting behind the shogi player was her Persona, sitting on a miniature siege tower. She sported short hair and a scar running across the bridge of her nose. She wore a fine silk robe with
only a steel pauldron with a dragon engraved as armor, and on her back was two blue banners, each having a gold star proudly on display. Strangely enough, the robe she wore had no sleeves, which revealed tattoos of the words “King General” on her left arm. On her hands, she wore fingerless gloves that had orange ribbons tied around her wrists, and her hands held two items; in her right was a shogi board, and in her left was an opened book, both of which were presented to Hifumi like prizes.

“That… was unexpected. G-guards! Kill the intruders! Leave my kin alive, but feel free to be a little rough with her!” Mitsuyo ordered, right before turning and fleeing.

“As you wish, Shogun.” was their united reply as they all exploded into tar, merging into a single being that grew so large the warehouse was destroyed trying to contain it. Once the form became recognizable, the Team’s legs froze with fear.

“I-is that…” Akechi started.

“A dragon? Yes. Yes it is.” Yu said, his limbs going limp at the sight.

The dragon reared its head and unleashed a massive burst of fire from its mouth. The four Tricksters scattered, each narrowly avoiding the blaze. Yu summoned Izanagi to attack, only to have the lightning bounce back and paralyzed him from the shock. Akechi attacked with holy magic, only to have it absorbed, and most likely give it strength.

“Oh great, this is the ‘Trial by Combat’ on steroids.” Shiho complained as she fired her gun.

“Hold on, you guys are hitting the wrong places.” Hifumi informed.

“Come again?!” Akechi asked loudly.

“This massive creature has several strengths and weaknesses, each located in different areas.” Hifumi replied as she read the book in front of her.

“Then which area is weak to fire?” Shiho asked.

“Let’s see…”

Hifumi turned a page on her book, then turned to Shiho.

“Aim for the wings! That part’s the most vulnerable to fire, and absorbs wind damage!”

Shiho did as told, and Boudica launched a massive barrage of flame, resulting in the dragon screeching in agony as its wings seemed to melt, then fade to ash. Shiho smiled, and the Shadow spun around, using its tail to counter attack. The tail managed to hit both Yu, which knocked him out of his paralysis and Shiho, but Morgana and Akechi dodged.

“The tail is weak to curse magic!” Hifumi called out.

“Succubus!” Yu yelled, taking off his mask and summoning the female demon.

The Persona twirled around, and a sudden burst of magic tore the tail like a guillotine, and the dragon breathed fire at the one responsible. Shiho sent in Boudica, the Persona absorbing all of the fire easily.

“This fight has dragged on long enough. Hifumi, what’s the head weak to?” Yu asked.

“It doesn’t have a weakness, but the neck seems to be vulnerable to physical attacks!” Hifumi
yelled as the Dragon charged.

Akechi summoned Robin Hood, who jumped into the air. With the wings gone, he had a clear line of sight, and with the tail gone, there was no chance it could knock him away. The Persona let loose a single arrow, and it cut through the neck like hot butter. As the head rolled, and the body turned to ash shortly after, the whole Team let out a sigh of relief and turned to Hifumi.

“Thanks for the help. That battle would’ve been so much worse if it wasn’t for you.” Yu stated.

“Yes, thank you Hifumi.” Akechi added.

“Yea, thanks. Hey, how’d you know what that thing’s weaknesses were?” Morgana asked.

“Oh, well, I read the book.” Hifumi answered, showing the others pages in Fu Hao’s book. On those pages were pictures and writing of all the Phantom Team members, from strengths, weaknesses, and even how powerful they were in certain areas, like defense, magic, and so on.

“That’s… strange. Carmen, do you know of any Personas that can do this?” Yu asked.

“I do now.” Morgana replied with a smug grin.

“Can we not be a smartass?”

“Yea, we aren’t being a smartass. She is.” Hifumi pointed out.

“Oh, I like her.” Shiho replied.

“To answer your question Seeker; every Persona is unique, and modeled after their owner. It’s possible that if someone isn’t the kind of person to get their hands dirty, or is more comfortable away from the action, then their Persona will reflect that.”

“I see. Hifumi is a Shogi player after all, so it makes sense that she prefers strategy.”

“Well regardless, the ability to determine the strengths and weaknesses will be an invaluable asset to the Team. Welco-” Akechi started.

“Woah woah, woah.” Hifumi interrupted, holding up her hands.

“I have no idea what’s going on, nor do I know any of you aside from your names.” she reminded.

“She’s right. Plus, chances are, her mom’s looking for her.” Morgana added.

“Oh yea, you’re gonna have to explain how you, oh, what were the words? Oh yea. Not bring anyone into the Metaverse.” Yu imitated with his best Morgana voice.

Morgana couldn’t do anything but offer a meek smile.

“In any event, we have what we came for. It’s getting late in the real world, so we should head home.” Akechi pointed out, earning a nod of agreement from everyone as they turned to leave.

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As soon as the five were out of the Palace, Hifumi’s phone went off.
“It’s mother.” She stated numbly.

“Take it. We can talk afterwards.” Yu replied.

Hifumi accepted the call.

“Hello?”

“Hifumi! Oh thank god you picked up! I was so worried about you!” Mitsuyo cried.

“I’m fine mother.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Where are you? I saw you chase after the person that was in our house.”

“Yes. I lost him. I don’t know what he stole.”

“That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you’re safe. Come back to the house, the police will be here soon.”

Hifumi hung up and turned to the group.

“Now what?”

“First thing’s first; we need to head back to our respective homes. Let’s exchange numbers.” Yu answered.

“Afterwards, we’ll answer any questions you may have about what all that just was.” He continued as they exchanged numbers.

“Alright. You’ll shoot me a text?”

Yu: Already did.

“Very well. I look forward to… whatever’s going to happen.” Hifumi informed as they went their separate ways.

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Yu walked in the living room and heard the rustle of paper. Turning to the source, he saw Sae sitting in a leather chair secluded in the corner with a newspaper in her hand. She folded it up and placed it on a nearby table, then crossed her arms and stared at Yu.

“You’re back late. And you didn’t shoot me a text.”

“The trains stopped running.” The boy replied hastily, making a break for his room.

“Stop right there.” Sae ordered, not letting him off the hook that easily. Yu turned around to face his prison warden.

"Where were you?” She asked.

“With Akechi and other friends.”

Sae gave him her trademark glare. She clearly did not believe it. Her next words sent a shiver down Yu's spine.
“Let me see your diary.”
Hanging with the Ladies

Chapter Notes

Well folks, this marks the first year anniversary of Shuffled Deck: Phantom Team! I hope you enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wbsyy6RiHeQ

Yu simply nodded and motioned for her to follow him. Entering his room, he opened a drawer and pulled out his diary.

“Here you go.”

Sae took the book and narrowed her eyes. Yu felt a cold sweat drip down his forehead as the prosecutor opened up the book and began to flip through the pages, reading each entry. Yu wasn’t sure if she picked up what he had done, but as she read it, her face became more and more softened, and once she was done, she handed it back, satisfied.

“You surprise me again Narukami. Have you considered being an author? You write well.”

“Thank you Sae-san, but no. I’m only doing this because I have to.”

“Shame. In any event, I apologize for being…” Sae paused, looking for the right word.

“Suspicious as usual?”

Sae let out a gentle giggle. That wasn’t something Yu heard everyday.

“You know me so well. In any event, I am glad you’re writing in your diary. Now, it’s already late enough. Eat some leftovers if you have to, but be sure to go to bed. Good night.”

Sae left, and Yu put his diary down, grinning like a criminal that narrowly evaded capture.

Your scheme worked. Well done Narukami.

Earlier...

“Thank you! Please come again!” A store owner shouted to an exiting customer. Yu turned his head to the second-hand store, and thought of an idea. He made his way to Shibuya Main Street, and hoped a certain store was still open before heading home.

Upon entering Shibuya’s Main Street, he saw what he was looking for; the book store. And it was still open. He entered the shop and started to look around.

What do we do if we can’t find what we’re looking for?

Then we keep looking. She had to buy it from somewhere.

“Hello sir. Can I help you find something?”
“Yes. Do you know where I can find blank books? Like diaries?”

“Ah yes, they’re over in the back.”

“Thank you.”

Yu went and sure enough, there were several blank books lined up. After some searching, Yu found what he was looking for; an exact copy of the diary Sae had given him. Shortly after purchasing it, he went home, and got out a pen.

**Before you begin, make sure to check for any marks on the original. Like ‘Property of Sae Niijima’ or something of the sort.**

Yu did just that, flipping to the front and back covers for any mark that could distinguish the original from the twin. Finding nothing, he smiled as he went to work, writing down his diary entries yet again. Most of them were the same, except for one detail; Yu didn’t make any mention of the Metaverse, Kobayakawa’s calling card, or anything else that could implicate him and his friends. Satisfied, Yu had another problem.

**Where do I put the original?**

**We could destroy it. Throw it out, tear out the pages and flush them down the toilet.**

No. Sae could walk in on me destroying it, and some random dumpster diver could find it if I throw it away. Plus, I can use it as something of a journal to write down the details of a target, like cognitive weaknesses. It would be better if we kept it here.

**If we get caught with it, the ramifications will be severe.**

So we won’t get caught. We’ll hide it.

**Where?**

*Sae has proven to be very perceptive. The best way would be in plain sight.*

Yu looked at his workbench. The tools had proven to be precise enough. He felt like he had enough proficiency to get it done. Without further delay, he went to work.

**Present…**

Yu closed the fake diary and opened the drawer he kept it in. In the drawer was a fake bottom he had installed specifically to house the real diary. Placing the fake diary on top of the fake bottom then closing the drawer, Yu proceeded to get out his phone and text Hifumi.

As Hifumi entered her home’s area, she saw the flashing lights of the police, and standing on the front porch with an officer was Mitsuyo. Upon spotting her daughter, the TV mongul sprinted over to her, and embraced her tightly.

“Oh Hifumi! Thank God you’re alright! The thief, did he hurt you?”

“No mother. In fact, he told me he wanted to meet me, and that’s why he broke in.”

“He was a fan?”
“Yes. The two of us talked, and I made sure he knew that if he wanted to talk to me, he wasn’t to break into our house again. I believe that this will be the last we hear from him.”

“You two talked? About what?”

“Oh nothing. He was just worried that you were working me to the bone. Even accused you of abuse, said you only saw me as a tool to build your empire, and that you even resorted to murder, blackmail, and framing people to get your way. But that can’t be true, right?” Hifumi asked, giving her mother a hateful stare.

Mitsuyo paused before replying, taken aback by how specific those accusations were.

“Of course not dear. I love you and your father with all my heart.” She answered, giving a fake smile and ignoring Hifumi’s stare.

“You know what dear? You look tired. Why don’t you go to bed, I’ll handle the officers.” Mitsuyo suggested.

“As you wish mother.”

Hifumi walked away, and Mitsuyo frowned. She never asked for the identity of the fan because at first, she suspected it was the peasant Ryuji, but now, she knows exactly who it was. The woman whipped out her phone and made a call.

“Hello Emiko. I need you to find out where that Narukami kid is living. He and I are officially at war.”

Hifumi went into her room, closed the door, and plopped down on her bed, not even bothering to get changed into pajamas. She rubbed her head in an effort to try and numb the pounding that was going on. So much had happened in so little time, she still couldn’t believe it all, even though she witnessed it minutes prior. Her mother was a monster that cared only about herself, and had ruined so many people’s lives. Not just that, but there was also that strange place, and those powers she had. Persona. Before she could think about it further, her phone buzzed.

Yu: Hello Hifumi. I imagine you have questions. Give me a moment, and I’ll bring in the others.

Akechi: Greetings.

Morgana: Y hallo thar.

Shiho: Hey Hifumi!

Hifumi: Hi. So… I’m confused.

Yu: We all were when we first entered that place, believe me.

Morgana: Uhhh, I wasn’t!

Akechi: Yu gave you the basic information beforehand. There exists a place known as the Metaverse, a separate dimension that’s formed and altered by human cognition. As such, people who have an extremely warped view of the world, such as your mother, created twisted pockets of the Metaverse, known as Palaces. That’s what you found yourself in with us.

Shiho: Palaces are also home to monsters called Shadows; creatures formed from the repressed
Hifumi: Those things that you guys were summoning during the fight with the dragon.

Yu: Yup. You have one yourself. Fu Hao, if I’m not mistaken.

Hifumi: Yes. Did you all have to go through that to summon yours?

Yu: Tearing off our flesh and bursting into flames because of the feels? You betcha!

Shiho: lol!

Akechi: In more serious terms, the process is essentially us forming a contract with our inner selves. In exchange for that power, we have to remain true to ourselves.

Hifumi: I understand. What exactly do you use that power for?

Morgana: I’m so glad you asked!

Shiho: Basically, the real world affects the Metaverse, and vice versa. At the heart of each Palace is a thing called a Treasure. What we do is, we infiltrate the Palace to get to the Treasure. But since the Treasure itself is just a giant gas cloud, we have to issue a calling card to make it something solid.

Hifumi: A card proclaiming that you’ll take their heart.

Morgana: Exactly. After the target sees that, the cloud will take on a physical form, which we can then steal. If we can get the Treasure out of the Metaverse, the target will realize that they did wrong, and will repent for it, confessing their crimes and working to atone.

Hifumi: But my mom is a massive figure in the business world, and has wronged so many people. If she apologizes, she’ll do so publicly. Her image, and by extension my father’s and my own, will be beyond repair. We will be made pariahs and cast out and disowned by all of our friends.

Yu: Well… shit… That’s something I know all too well, and I certainly don’t wish it on you or your father.

Shiho: Yea. How a change of heart affects the target’s family… that isn’t something we thought about before, is it?

Akechi: No…

Akechi: But as cold as this may sound, we cannot ignore the immense amount of pain she has brought into the world. And if she’s left to her own devices, it will get worse.

Morgana: Hey, calm down Akechi! Hifumi could turn us in now that she knows our secret!

Shiho: OH SHIT!!

Hifumi: Relax, I’m not going to turn you in.

Yu: Oh thank God.

Hifumi: But I’m not all that sure I should help you either. It’s clear to me now that my mother is a disgusting excuse of a human being, but… My father has been ill for a number of years now. If
he finds out about what my mother’s been doing, especially from her mouth… I’m not sure he’ll be able to take it.

Yu: This changes everything.

Akechi: If that’s the case… I’m not sure if we should continue. It would be one thing if the target’s life was at risk, but I’m not going to have an innocent man’s life on my conscience.

Shiho: Yea.

Morgana: We could find another target. And then there’s the matter of Hifumi knowing our secret.

Hifumi: Just… give me a few days to think. I’m still unsure as to what to do.

Yu: Alright. Let’s all have a rain check on the infiltration.

Everyone gave their agreement and Yu’s phone was silent. The teenager fell onto his back and into the comfort of his bed. He thought back to what Igor and the twins were telling him that he had to forge bonds in order to make his journey easier. Shortly after that, he remembered that, aside from Akechi in the diner, he hadn’t really put much effort into getting to know his fellow Tricksters. He then felt a tingling along his skin, a signal that Izanagi had something to say. Yu let out a sigh, allowing his inner self to come out.

So… you wanna get close to your team members.

Why yes Izanagi, I’ve been thinking about that, and I’m amazed you picked that up. It’s almost as if you and I have the same mind!

Hey, don’t get snappy my other self. Besides… I know who you wanna start with, and I want to give you advice.

What do you know about romance?

Only as much as you do.

… Fair enough.

Then what are you waiting for? Text her already.

Well, it’s a little late, so she might not be up.

Oh come on, it’s only been a few minutes.

Yu laid on his bed and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, weighing his options. Finally, he came to a conclusion.

Alright… here goes nothing.

Yu picked up his phone and selected Shiho’s number. Then he hesitated.

Come on, what are you waiting for? DO IT!!

Yea, hold on Shia LaBeouf, I’m trying to think of how to not screw up.
You didn’t have this much trouble with Rise. Come on man, just channel the same confidence into this, and you can’t screw it up.

Yea. Yea, you’re right. I can do this. I CAN DO THIS!!

That’s the spirit! Go get ‘em inferior me!

The Wild Card began to type.

Yu: Hey Shiho, you up?

About a minute before a response.

Shiho: I am now.

Yu: So… I’ve been thinking…

Shiho: About what?

Yu: About Dometown. About how I screwed up.

Shiho: Oh, really? It was a tiny mistake, it happens to the best of us. Besides, there’s no way any of us could’ve known that the virus was in the data.

Yu: I wasn’t talking about the virus. I was talking about the part where I didn’t know where we were going.

Shiho: Oh. Really? Why?

Yu: Well, I’d like to make it up to you, if you’d like. Just the two of us. If you catch my meaning.

Shiho: Oh. Oooohh!!

Shiho: Um, little random, given our circumstances, but sure! If you don’t mind someone who has the grace of a hippo, that is.

Yu: I didn’t say that.

Shiho: Yes you did. -___-

Yu was about to type ‘no I didn’t’, but Izanagi stopped him, reminding him that Shiho could still change her mind.

Yu: Oh right. Sorry about that.

Shiho: You’re forgiven. This time. Anything you had in mind?

Yu: Um… maybe. How about Destinyland?

Shiho: WHAT?! REALLY?!

Yu had to pause to collect his thoughts. He certainly didn’t expect this reaction.

Shiho: Wait. Are you sure? Do you have the money for it?

Yu cringed. He hadn’t thought about that.
Yu: Um… actually, let’s not go to Destinyland. I don’t have a lot of money.

Shiho: …

Shiho: …

Shiho: …

Yu started to panic. It had been a full five minutes now.

Shiho: …

Shiho: …

Shiho: …

**When I said you can’t screw it up, it wasn’t a challenge!!!**

Shiho: …

Shiho: …

Shiho: Did you put *any* thought into this?

Yu: No???

**Oh. My. Self.**

Shiho: You really know how to impress a girl Yu. :P

Yu: Sorry. I’m usually more confident than this.

Shiho: Really? Because from how you’ve been acting, I’d swear I was the first woman you’ve thought about romantically and was working off of online guides.

Yu: Hey, I’ll have you know, I’m very confident in the Metaverse.

Shiho: Shame it doesn’t carry over, lol.

Yu rolled his eyes, and he swore Izanagi was snickering.

Shiho: Alright, how about this. I have Volleyball practice tomorrow. The day after that, we can go on a date. Use the school day to think of something. That sound good?

Yu: Yeah. Yeah, that sounds great!

Shiho: Alright Yu. Good night. ;)

Yu put his phone away and pumped his fist in triumph.

**You know, I was kinda hoping you’d get rejected.**

*Why?*

**So that I could say “MISSION FAILED! WE’LL GET ‘EM NEXT TIME!”**
I really hate you sometimes Izanagi.

Hey now! I am thou, thou art I, remember? Love yourself!

Yu put his Persona away and went to sleep. He would need it if he was to think of something. That’s when an idea popped into his head, and he smiled as he drifted off.

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

Yu closed the door behind him. He was currently standing on the rooftop, with the idea he had. She looked at him with a mix of confusion and concern.

“Alright Yu. What’s Shiho involved with that’s so bad?” Ann Takamaki asked.

“I… need to know what Shiho likes by tomorrow. Activities, food, anything.”

Ann raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth at a curved angle.

“Eh?”

“I… I asked her out on a date. And she said yes.”

“WHAT?!” Ann squealed before Yu promptly covered her mouth.

“Shhh!! Keep it down!” Yu ordered.

“That’s so sweet Naru-chan. When did you ask her out?” Another, more adorable voice asked.

Yu turned to the corner and saw Haru sitting there, minding her own business, with an adorable smile on her face.

“Haru? How-how long have you been there?” Yu asked.

“Since the dawn of time.”

There was a moment of silence, as absolutely no one thought it was funny. Then she gave the real answer.

“Since lunch break started. I’ve been checking on the plants. I’m surprised neither of you noticed me until now.”

“Oh. Well, to answer, I asked her out last night, and on a bit of a whim. She said yes, and it starts tomorrow. And well… I don’t know what to do. Or at least, what she likes.”

“Oh, I see! And you wanna get to know all the ways to get into bed the fastest.” Ann said with a half-smile.

“Yes. W-well, I wanna make her happy! I-I don’t want to take her to bed, well I k-kinda, b-but it’s not a requirement.” Yu stammered, caught off guard by Ann’s boldness.

“Take who to bed?” A girl asked, standing in the doorway.

“Ah, M-Makoto! It-it’s not-”

Before Yu could finish his sentence, Makoto pieced it together.

“Did… did you ask Shiho out on a date? And you needed Ann’s advice?” She asked, turning
her hands to fists and pressing them against her chin, as if ready to squeal like a schoolgirl.

“Yes.”

“OH MY GOOOOD!!!” Makoto squeaked, doing small jumps.

“I know!!” Haru added, squealing and doing her own jumps.

Yu saw Makoto pull out a phone and start typing.

“M-Makoto? What are you doing?” Yu asked

“Texting Sis. She’ll definitely want to know about this.” Makoto answered with a small smile.

Yu panicked. If Sae knew about this, he might not even be allowed to go on a date. He sprinted forward and attempted to grab the phone, but Makoto pushed her right arm outward and landed her palm on his forehead, keeping him away, like an older sibling making sure their baby brother couldn’t get something in their hands. She hit the send button with a sadistic smirk, and Yu felt his heart sink. It was as if the universe itself was like “Look at him. Look at him and laugh”. Then he felt his heart jump once his phone rang. He picked it up with the enthusiasm of a death row inmate.

“Hello?”

“You are to come straight home after school, understand young man?” The woman on the other end asked, and her tone made it very clear she wanted no argument.

“Yes Sae-san.”

Yu hung his head low as the lunch bell rang. Before they made their way down, Ann put a hand on his shoulder.

“Shiho loves karaoke. In fact, she was so good at it way back in middle school that we called her Songbird Shiho.”

“Thanks Ann. At least something good came out of this.” Yu said, as he and the girls left the rooftop.

As Yu walked out of the principal's office, and then the rest of the school in a significantly more deflated state than when he entered. He knew that what was waiting for him back at the apartment was not going to be pleasant, but he knew that trying to avoid Sae Niijima would only make things worse. As he and Makoto got on the train, he felt a familiar sensation of prickling across his skin. Izanagi wanted to be let out.

Izanagi, you’d better behave yourself.

The god emerged, his helmet doing little to hide his shit-eating grin, and it didn’t take long for the Persona to absolutely lose it.

HAHAHAHA

What’s so funny?

I’m imagining what Sae’s gonna do to you. I wonder if she’s gonna drive you to Shiho’s
house and tell her to never talk to you again. Maybe she’ll force you to ‘practice’ with her so 
you have an excuse to not go.

*Izanagi, that doesn’t sound like Sae-san at all.*

I know. But still, whatever she’s got in mind is gonna be fuuuuuuuun

Yu and Makoto exited the train and walked at a brisk pace to the apartment. Once they were 
inside, Yu noticed that Makoto went for the elevator. As it’s doors began to close, Yu went and 
sprinted up the stairs. If he was fast enough, perhaps he could sneak into his room and barricade 
himself inside and talk to Sae through the door. But as he reached his door, he started to fumble 
through his pockets for the key, and when he found it, he was ready to insert it, but before he 
could, Makoto grabbed him by the ear and dragged him though the main door.

“Siiisss! We’re HOOOOOOME!!” She yelled with glee.

*Oh please dear God, let this be quick and merciful.*

*I’m standing right here.*

Sae’s door swung open, and the prosecutor’s eyes focused on him like a hawk that found a 
mouse, while Makoto looked up and grinned from ear to ear.

“Ah Narukami, there you are. Sit down.” She ordered, pointing at the dinner table, and Yu 
hesitantly obeyed.

“Now, Makoto has told me that you plan on going out on a date. Did you finally work up the 
nerve to ask that girl you liked out?”

“Yes Sae-san.”

“Alright. As happy as I am to see you take the leap of faith, I need to make sure that this girl 
won’t be a bad influence. Name?”

“Shiho Suzui.”

“Oh, the girl who tried to… alright. I can cross out some of the questions. Her phone number?”

“Excuse me?”

“If you go missing, and I can’t reach you, I’m going to have to call her. Phone. Number.”

“742-5530-4891”

“Address?”

“Oh come on.”

“If something happens to you, I’m going to have to be able to track her down. Also, I want to 
make sure that you don’t… stay the night with her.”

“Sae!”

“Address, young man. Now.”

Yu gave her the information, and she put the notebook down, satisfied.
“Alright. Now, when’s the date?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Well in that case…” Makoto smiled, and it was mischievous, like a prankster realizing April Fools was right around the corner.

“We’ll need to see where he stands in the charm department. Narukami, get changed into your best clothes. You too Makoto.” Sae ordered.

Makoto got up and went to her room, while Yu went to his own, getting dressed at a rather brisque pace, and went back to the living room. The lights in the room had been dimmed, as if someone wanted the atmosphere to be romantic. Makoto’s door opened with a creak, and out stepped the student council president, pushing a cart with a wine bottle, a box of chocolates, a rose pot, and… a bucket of chicken?

And then there was Makoto herself. She had ditched the Shujin uniform in favor for a dress. A long, black satin dress with her left leg revealed, and at her waist was a red bow, and fingerless opera gloves. She smiled, eyeing Yu up like a snack for her to eat, which simultaneously scared him, and thanks to what she was wearing, made him excited. But a cough from Sae sent a jolt of fear through his system.

**Zoo. Wee. MOMA!!**

“Well, at least we won’t have to work on your wardrobe. But, looking the part is only half the process to a successful date. The other, is charm. Now, whether or not you get to go on that date will depend on how you react to Makoto’s next words.” Sae stated, giving a nod to her sister.

On cue, Makoto gently pushed the cart to him, her devious smile growing wider with every inch it moved.

“Seduce me.”

“Um… I’m sorry what?”

“Seduce me.”

Yu’s face burned a bright red as his brain just seemed to fry at those two words. His probation officer’s sister just told him to seduce her. If Sae wasn’t in the room, and if he wasn’t going on a date with Shiho, he would take full advantage of the opportunity. The situation was made even worse by Izanagi.

**Alright Narukami. You can do this. Just don’t think about how that silky dress hugs her figure in all the right places, or how exposed her luscious and curvy body is. Don’t think about the things you would do to her if it wasn’t for Shiho.**

Izanagi hovered behind her, and let out an exasperated gasp.

**Oh my goodness! This dress makes her ass look…**

Izanagi breathed in deep.

**Scrumptious.**

*You’re a piece of shit Izanagi.*
“Narukami, while we’re still young please.” Sae said, impatience clear in her voice.

“R-right… so ummm… I just gotta…”

Makoto walked straight to him, with a small swing to her hips, and put her mouth next to his ear with a devilish smirk.

“Seduce. Me.” She whispered in a husky voice, the same kind of voice Rise would use when she was teasing him and trying to get him riled up. And had it been any other situation, Yu would jump headfirst into the fun, consequences be damned, but he had enough self control to know better. Finally, Yu gathered his wits, or what was left of them, and grabbed the bucket of chicken.

“Hey there, good looking. I… got a bucket of chicken.”

Makoto’s smile vanished immediately, and the teenager then proceeded to slap Yu, followed by harsh words from Sae.

“What kind of cheap harlot do you think my sister is? You think that all it takes to sweep her off her feet is a bucket of chicken?” She asked, disgusted.

Yu said nothing, mostly because he didn’t know what to say. Sae let out a groan and pressed her fingers against her nose.

“Dear God, we have so much work to do. Thank your lucky stars that the date isn’t today. We have to whip you into shape.”

“What kind of cheap harlot do you think my sister is? You think that all it takes to sweep her off her feet is a bucket of chicken?” She asked, disgusted.

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“Dear God, we have so much work to do. Thank your lucky stars that the date isn’t today. We have to whip you into shape.”

“To be what?”

“To be a proper gentleman. If you want to dazzle this woman, you’re going to have to earn it, and that means etiquette, table manners, dancing and the like. Let’s get started.”

“But… I have homework.” Yu excused. If her romance lessons were half as intense as her boxing lessons, then he had reason to be afraid. He had reason to be very afraid.

“I can do it for you. We’ll see to it that you are equipped to give Suzui-san the best romantic experience of her life. Now, let’s get to work.” Makoto countered.

And so it began. The Niijimas started with dinner lessons, with Makoto as the date and Sae used a riding crop to whack Yu’s hand whenever he did something wrong, all while instructing him how to properly dine at a five star restaurant. Next was dancing. Sae was not impressed with Yu’s breakdancing skills, especially since he accidentally knocked over and broke a vase. After that, Sae turned on some waltzing music and then proceeded to instruct Yu in how to do proper ballroom dancing. And when it came to practice, Makoto decided to be his partner.

Alright Narukami, first, stand up straight. If you want to ballroom dance properly, you’re going to have straighten your neck and body. Don’t lean on your partner. You want to have your hand just below her shoulder blade. Keep your fingers cupped and together. Now, as for the dancing-” Sae started, and Yu just shook his head. He had had enough.

“Sae-san, why is this necessary? I’m just going to karaoke. I’m not taking her to some place where we’ll meet celebrities. This whole thing is stupid and unnecessary, and frankly, given how you don’t have a man, I doubt you’re very qualified to give anyone romantic advise.”

Makoto’s mouth dropped open, as if to say ‘ooooo, you’re in trouble now.’ Sae, to her credit, kept her cool. She motioned for her sister to step away as she strode up to Yu, who didn’t step back
“This is necessary because you may not do much on your first date, but for the later times when you spend time alone with her, you may find yourself in one of the situations I’m training you for. Besides, you can pleasantly surprise her. And as for being qualified; I’ve helped four of my co-workers just like I’m helping you now. Three of them are happily married, and the fourth is moving to be with his sweetheart. So yes, I do know a thing or two about how the heart works. Any other stupid questions?” Sae spoke calmly, but Yu could feel the fury that was barely concealed in her tone.

Yu finally broke the staring contest he had with his guardian, and the tall woman simply nodded, and Moakoto got back into position, while Sae walked to a boombox to turn on the music. When the beat began to play, the first thing Yu did was accidentally step on Makoto’s foot.

Dear Diary:

All I ask is one day without some form of stress.

Just.

One.

Day.

Today, I wanted some help in knowing what to do about my date with Shiho. It was supposed to be just one conversation where Ann would tell me things Shiho did and didn’t like. Instead it grew into a horrific experience that will most likely give me PTSD. Sae’s lessons were brutal. Bruises have started to form on my knuckles where she hit me with a riding crop, I have been slapped more times today than I have in my entire life for saying the wrong thing, Sae looked ready to kill me when I almost broke her vase, and when I accidentally stepped on Makoto’s foot, Sae almost tasered me. The rest of the experience, I’m not even going to jot down. Here’s hoping this nightmare ends as soon as I go on my date with Shiho. But hey, at least it can’t get any worse, right?

Yu woke up to the sound of chains, signaling that he was in the Velvet Room. When he approached the bars, he was surprised to see only Caroline waiting for him. Even more confusing, she appeared to be... happy to see him.

“Hello inmate. Are you ready for the greatest comedy routine of your life?” She asked with glee.

“Um... what?”

“We’ve heard about your attempts to court one of your Confidants, and have decided to try and help.”

“Oh sweet Jesus, no.”

“Oh sweet Jesus, yes!”

That’s when Justine entered, holding a massive book titled “Velvet Puns”. She too, seemed
happy to see him.

“One of the traits that females desire the most from their mates is humor. So we are here to share our knowledge of everything funny with you!” Caroline stated as Justine opened the book.

“What about Igor?”

“Master has no idea we’re even doing this! If he did, we’d be punished. Now inmate, sit back, relax, and prepare to laugh! Don’t worry, if you come close to dying from laughter, we’ll stop.”

With that sentence, Caroline looked at her twin.

“Everything you’re about to hear were thought up by yours truly!” Caroline beamed with pride.

Justine took a deep breath.

“

“

“

“

“

“

“

“What’s more amazing than a talking dog? A spelling bee.” Justine read in a monotone voice.

“What?” Yu asked, puzzled.

“Why did the scarecrow get a medal? He was out standing in his field.” Justine said with a straight face, while Caroline’s began to contort into one of someone holding back their laughter.

“Oh God.”

“The cookie went to the doctor because he felt crummy.”

“Justine, please-”

“I like the food on the moon, but the restaurants have no atmosphere.”

“Make it stop…”

“I would give you an unemployment joke, but it doesn’t work.”

“Every pun is a new nightmare.”

“I got fired from the calendar factory for taking a day off.”

“All I feel is pain.”

“What’s the difference between snowmen and snowwomen? Snowballs.”

That’s when Caroline joined.
“What do you call a cow in an earthquake? A milkshake.”

“Captain Crunch’s murder was related to a cereal killer.”

“Why did the ancient Romans close down the Coliseum? Because the lions were eating up all the prophets.”

Yu could do nothing but scream as the twins continued their relentless barrage of awful humor.

“Why? Why?! WHY?!?!?”

Chapter End Notes

I do apologize if Makoto seems out of character in this chapter, there will be a reason for that explained later in the story.
Yu had managed to get through school without much harassment from the people there. Oh sure, there were plenty of rumors being flown about what he, Ann, Haru and Makoto were doing on the roof, ranging from Makoto doing a lecture to having a straight up porn shoot. The last bit caused a great deal of glares to be sent Yu’s way, but over the weeks, Yu has managed to get much better at blocking out the noise as he went about his day. He was so good in fact, that when he was texting the details of their date to Shiho, he didn’t hear his name get called on by a teacher in class, and had to report to Ushimaru for ‘discipline’. As he walked out of the principal’s office with a chalk mark on his forehead, he got a text from none other than Shiho Suzui herself.

Shiho: So? What’s the plan?

Yu: I was thinking we could start small. Do you know Big Echo?

Shiho: Do I know it?! Buddy, I was the queen of that place before highschool.

Yu: Great. I was thinking about 6. Should give us enough time to do homework and prepare.

Shiho: So, we’re gonna meet at Big Echo at about 6. Is that right?

Yu: Yup. Hope to see you there!

Shiho: Hope to have a good time. See you there!

Yu felt himself smile, grateful that waking up early to research karaoke clubs paid off. As Yu was getting his shoes from his shoe locker, he saw an envelope called ‘From: Ryuji. Here’s hoping you use it.’ Upon opening it, Yu had to roll his eyes and facepalm when he saw the condom roll out. And it was extra small too.

Well, at least it’s the thought that counts.

He could’ve at least gotten the size right.

Despite what he’s been through, Yu was looking forward to this. He got breath fresheners, he got his best suit cleaned, and, he had help from Shiho’s best friend. Now, all he had to do was put that knowledge to good use, and make sure he didn’t screw up. Making his way home, he breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that there wasn’t a single female around. The hours ticked by as he did his homework, studied, and even made a few lockpicks. His alarm went off, signaling that it was 5:15. Time to get ready.

Yu stepped out of the shower, the hot steam still radiating off his skin, and he had to admit, he felt good. He smiled as he put on cologne, and the finishing touches of his outfit, but that smile
vanished as he put on his belt and heard a voice.

“Narukami? Are you still here?”

**It's Sae!! Run boy! RUUUUUN!!!**

Yu could find no reason to argue, he had already done all the preparations. Grabbing his key and running out the door that led to the hall, he prepared to bolt as fast as his legs could carry him.

“NOT SO FAST!!”

He grimaced, but was careful to hide this fact as he turned around to a very unhappy Sae, who had her arms crossed.

“And just where do you think you’re going young man?”

“To my date??”

“Have you done homework?”

“Yes,” He answered.

“Have you studied?”

“Yes.”

Sae pulled out a brush.

“You forgot to brush your hair.”

Yu reached out to grab it, but Sae kept it out of reach.

“Lead the way. I’ll make sure to fix your hair on the train.”

“I can fix it myself-”

“No backtalk young man.”

**We are running out of time Narukami. Just say yes, and get it over with.**

Yu let a groan and motioned for Sae to follow him, which she did up to the train station. After they boarded, the prosecutor went to work, making sure any loose strands were taken care of and Yu couldn’t help but notice some people on the train giggling at him, no doubt taking pictures to show their friends. Finally, the train stopped and Yu led his guardian to the street the club was on. And there, he saw Shiho waiting for him at the entrance.

She was wearing a beautiful wrap dress that reached down to just past her knees. The dress itself was red with a white bow around her waist, while decorated with orange flowers. Upon spotting him, she gave an enthusiastic wave, and Yu gave a meek one in reply, still fearful of Sae’s reaction. The silver-haired woman turned him towards her, and let out a heavy sigh.

“Allright. Remember what Makoto and I taught you, and you should be fine. And remember, if she tries to pressure you to do something you don’t want to do, or something you know isn’t right, it’s perfectly ok to say no.”

*Why yes Sae, I wasn’t born yesterday, thanks for asking.*
“Also, if you absolutely have to stay the night with her, I fully expect you to be responsible, understood?”

Niijima? More like Nijimom, amiright?

“Yes Sae-san. Can I please go now?”
The prosecutor gave a gentle smile.

“Yes. Have fun.”
Yu didn’t have to be told twice. Running to Shiho, he looked back one last time to see his guardian board the train and finally leave him alone. He approached the volleyball player, who smirked.

“Mommy trouble?” She teased.

“More like jail warden. Ready?”

“Of course. You look really nice by the way, love the brushed hair. Let’s-a-go!” Yu’s now girlfriend declared enthusiastically.

With that, the two students entered Big Echo club, seeing a ton of other people in the place as well. The club itself was about two stories high, and wide enough to have an aquarium, with a dance floor that many of the patrons were currently on. As they looked around and Yu admired the sights, Shiho heard her name from somewhere in the crowd.

“Oh my God. Is Shiho really going on a date with him?”

“She does know that he tried to do a porn shoot with her friend, right?”
Oh great. Shujin students. Pricks seemed to be everywhere.

“She could do better than that bastard.”

“Wonder if he’s carrying any STDs?”

“Think he’s gonna give them to her as payback for what she did during volleyball?”
She shot them a glare and was prepared to march over and slap them, but stopped herself. She was on a date. She was supposed to relax, to have fun. She shouldn’t let a few untrue rumors ruin it.

“Ah, there it is.” Yu said, pointing away from their peers.

They saw a sign that said “Karaoke upstairs.”, so they went up there, and found an open door, signifying an unused room. Stepping inside and making sure to lock the door behind them. Switching on the machine, they saw a wide plethora of various songs to choose from.

“Which should we play first?” Shiho asked.

“Let’s see what we have to work with.”

Yu began to scroll through various genres. There was rock, there was jazz, there was electronic, and more.
“You know, not that I don’t appreciate it Yu, but I have to wonder, why Karaoke? Why not a movie, or dinner, or something of the sort?”

“Well, I figured that it would be better if we did something active, and I don’t really have all that much money for fancy dinners.”

“Gotcha. But I’m glad you chose karaoke regardless. You know, they used to call me ‘Songbird Shiho’ back in middle school.”

“In that case, I look forward to seeing, or in this case, hearing, how you got that. No way. They actually have this? What?”

“What is it?” Shiho asked, curious.

“It’s a song from a videogame. Here, take a seat. This is gonna be good, I promise.”

“Alright! Just let me get comfortable.”

Shiho sat down on a nearby couch while Yu grabbed a mic. The words began to show up on screen, the music started to play, and Yu took in a deep breath.

Music: Qwark's Opera

After a good few minutes of laughing at Yu's far too over-the-top performance of the opera song, the two highschool students decided it was time to get serious. Shiho decided to go first, looking through any songs that peaked her interest. Finally, she let out an ‘oooooo’ upon finding what she was looking for. Picking up the mic, the volleyball player took a deep breath and began.

Music: Butterfly

Shiho got ready to speak the lyrics, she eyed Yu, giving a coy smile and started to tap her feet in sync with the beats of the music. Finally, the lyrics came onto the screen, and the girl began her performance, her pitch was smooth and rich, like chocolate, a beautiful crescendo of words merging with the music, which was lively. Her body swayed side-to-side, refusing to stay still as she gave her performance. Yu could listen and watch her forever, and he felt infinite shame in the fact that the best he could do was a song from one of his favorite videogames that, somehow, made its way here. Finally, the eloquent performance had ended, and Yu gave as thunderous applause as one person could give. The volleyball girl gave a deep, but exaggerated bow.

“Thank you. Thank you. Oh, you are too kind.” She said, enjoying the fact that she was being doted on.

“I can see how you got your nickname, Songbird.”

“Please, keep calling me Shiho. But yea, it was nice to sing that again. But my parents want me back soon. And I’m sure your not-mom will get worried too.” The girl teased.

“One more song. I have to at least try to match you.” He replied.

“Alright. Make it good.”

Hifumi was sitting with her father. Right now, she had just gotten back from the church, and
she still hadn’t made a decision, despite thinking about it for well over a day. On one hand, she knew who her mother truly was, and that she had to be stopped, that she had to pay for what she’s done. But on the other, making her confess, and the sheer explosion of rage directed at her and her father… it could cause his health to deteriorate to fatal levels. And now, it was the moment of truth.

“How’s my favorite child doing?”

“I must confess to being conflicted father.”

“How so?”

“There’s… someone in my life, someone for whom my admiration is second only to you.”

“And you found out some unsavory details about them.” He guessed.

“Yes.”

“Hifumi, one of the many unfortunate lessons life will teach you is that no one is perfect. Everyone, myself included, have flaws that will weigh us down, and maybe even repulse others. The key is—”

“I’m not talking about that, father. I’m talking about… breaking the law levels of unsavory.”

There was a moment of silence as Kaito contemplated his daughter’s words.

“Oh.” Was all he could say.

“And now, I am torn. If what this person has done is made public… it could negatively impact our family for generations. And if they are not brought to justice, then they will not stop. They will keep hurting people, and they will keep getting away with it.”

“I don’t think I’m the best one to talk to about this, sweetheart. It is your mother who has all of the connections and resources to eliminate this threat. You should talk to her.”

“I… I can’t, father.”

“Why not? She has the means to fight any opponent. It shouldn’t matter, even if it’s the Prime Minister, she should be able to handle it. Unless…”

Kaito Togo looked at his daughter, and in his eyes, she saw an iron will that hadn’t made itself known since he was teaching her how to play Shogi for the first time.

“Hifumi, I need you to be honest with me. Is the person you’re talking about your mother? Don’t think about my health, don’t think about your love for her, just answer yes or no.”
“Y-yes.”

Hifumi found herself crying now. Kaito embraced his daughter into a tight hug, patting her on the back, and held her there until she could control herself, which she did after a number of minutes. Pulling herself back with puffy red eyes, her father spoke.

“What crimes has she committed?” He asked, his tone akin to that of a general interrogating a prisoner.

“She- she killed Aunt Ami.”

“Ami? As in Ami Ito?”

“The one who gave me my first Shogi board.”

Absolutely mortified would not do what Kaito was feeling justice. His whole life, he had known two women who were practically inseparable. One had looks, ambition, and brains, while the other had kindness, maturity, and wisdom. They were utterly inseparable, and once they befriended him, unstoppable. Both seemed more than willing to walk through hell to save the other, and now? Now he knew one caused the death of the other, and now that he thought about it, Ami was always the most responsible of the three, she would no better than to go drinking and get rowdy with someone, especially so close to their wedding. Unless someone wanted it to happen. It would explain everything, how she would drink more than she could handle, how he saw the deed just as it was about to finish. How Mitsuyo was able to come in and save him from drowning himself into an abyss just in the nick of time. How could he have not seen it sooner? Was he that desperate for comfort? Absolutely mortified would not do what he was feeling justice at all.

“I-I know it’s a lot to take in. It was for me too, but-”

Hifumi quickly stopped when she noticed something.

Her father wasn’t breathing, and when she pressed her fingers against his neck, she felt no pulse.

In a frantic panic, she pulled out her phone and dialed 1-1-9.
Yu and Shiho left Big Echo with smiles on their faces and, in Yu’s case, coughing up quite a bit.

“Man, that last song really did a number on my vocal cords. I feel like my chest is going to explode.” The teenager rasped.

“I can tell. For the record, it took years of singing in the shower to get where I am.”

“Yea, you were magnificent. I’m amazed you’re a volleyball player, because after tonight, I’d swear you were an Idol.”

“You know, when I was a little girl, I originally wanted to be. In fact, that was the reason I started singing in the shower to begin with. But my aunt, who was a former Idol, told me about all the challenges and… prices that came with it, and I decided that it wasn’t for me.”

“And volleyball? How’d you get into that?” Yu asked, letting out a cough.

“Honestly? Mom was pressuring me to join some kind of extracurricular, because it would look on my resume, college applications, and so on, but it was also to show the world her daughter could excel at school and then some. So to get her off my back, I chose Volleyball. Took awhile, but I came to enjoy it. Almost as much as I enjoyed this date.” She purred with a smirk.

“I aim to please. When do you want to have another?”

“I’ll leave that for you to decide. See you tomorrow Yu.”

“See you. And Shiho? I enjoyed this too.”

The girl gave a genuine smile and walked away to the train station. Out of the corner of his eye, Yu noticed something strange; there appeared to be a man in an overcoat with square sunglasses with a fedora and shaved haircut. Ignoring the figure that caught his attention for no apparent reason, Yu proceeded to get out his phone and let Sae know that he was coming home.

Yu: On my way back.

Sae: Perfect. I trust you didn’t do anything morally questionable?

Yu: We robbed a bank, killed a few cabinet members, dealt drugs, and abducted some kids to sell as sex-slaves. Pretty standard, I think.

It took a good few minutes before Sae replied, and Yu was getting legitimately worried that she couldn’t tell it was a joke.

Sae: Then it would appear congratulations are in order.

Yu: Yea, it was nice. Don’t know when we should have another one.

Sae: Depends on her schedule. But we’ll have to talk about it later. Right now, it’s late. Makoto’s probably asleep, so try not to wake her.

Yu: I won’t.
With that, the teenager pocketed his phone, but out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the same man in the suit and glasses was also on the train. And he seemed to be looking straight at him. Weird.

*Izanagi, keep an eye on that guy. I’ve got a bad feeling about him.*

Once the train stopped and Yu got off, he decided to take the long way home, taking so many nooks and crannies that he almost got lost himself, but was always able to get back on track. Suddenly, Yu saw the same man from before right in front of him.

*Izanagi, he’s following us.*

**No. The guy I’m with is in a limo. With Togo.**

Yu began to walk past the guy. But when he did, the goon reached out to grab the teenager, but Yu was ready. Side-stepping the man, Yu bolted the second his pursuer made his mistake, running faster than he did when he was running for his life back in Shujin Nation. The man turned to give chase, which only prompted the boy to run even faster. Yu knocked over trash cans, jumped over fences, anything and everything to get away, and he was steadily putting distance between himself and his pursuer. Finally, he hid inside an alleyway behind a dumpster, and waited. Recalling Izanagi and sending the Persona out, the god of Japan could find no trace of their stalker. Walking out of an alley, and back on the path home, a limo came up to the stoplight that, coincidentally, was the same light Yu was stopped at as well. The limo pulled over, and a window rolled down and a voice called to him. A voice that belonged to Mitsuyo Togo.

“Hello Yu Narukami. I apologize for the rather… unfriendly introduction, but I just had to meet you.” She said in a tone that made it clear she wasn't sorry at all.

**You're in public Narukami. Don’t indulge her.**

The signal was given to cross, so that’s what he did, and the limo followed.

“See, the reason why I wanted to meet you so is because of your… after school activities. Activities I’m sure the police will also be interested in.”

This forced Yu to stop in his tracks and grimace.

*Looks like we don’t have a choice anymore Izanagi.*

**Be. Careful. We know how far she’s willing to go to accomplish her goals.**

The door opened, and Yu stepped inside. The limo itself wasn’t all that massive, but it was big enough for Yu, Mitsuyo, and both of her goons. When the boy closed the door, the car began driving to distances unknown. The mistress of the vehicle gave a rotten smile as she addressed her prey.

“So glad to finally talk face-to-face. I trust you know why you’re here? I’ll give you a hint; it’s not something many can do.”

Yu felt his chest tighten. If she somehow knew about the Metaverse, or worse, that he and his team were trying to steal her heart, then this could get really bad, really fast. He swallowed, an act that seemed to take everything he had to happen.

“Well? Do you?”
“No, Togo-san, I-”

“Sama.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, you’ll beg alright. From this moment on, you are to address me as Togo-sama. And the reason for that, is because you are my bitch now.”

The woman reached inside her bag and pulled out a tablet which displayed a video.

“This is why you’re here.”

She hit play, and Yu saw that it was a recording of him in Mitsuyo’s office, breaking into her computer and stealing data from her. Once the recording ended, Yu’s current captor leaned forward.

“I know you didn’t access anything on that drive. I had a failsafe installed, and I know you triggered it, so don’t even try to bluff into blackmailing me. Now, I could’ve given this to the police, but since I’m feeling generous, I’ll give you a chance to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Yu had to stop himself from releasing a sigh of relief. Sure, he was still going to be strong armed into doing something that would no doubt involve breaking the law, but at least it wasn’t the worst-case scenario. Doing his best to hide his relief, Yu growled.

“What do you want?”

“Careful. I can always add terms and conditions. For now, I want you for your connections. See, your daddy dearest has been a real pain in my ass, and he’s come far too close to getting me. You are going to convince him to back off.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Get creative boy. I’m sure you can think of something before Rise gets here.”

“Wait, what?” Yu asked, eyes widening in surprise.

“Oh didn’t I say? I’m having that famous piece of jailbait, Rise Kujikawa on my station in a week. You have that long to make sure your daddy knows to stay away from me, or else that dear prosecutor guardian of yours might find something scandalous in the mail.”

“So if I get my father off your back, I’m off the hook?”

“Not quite. See, you could’ve made a very bloody mark in my empire, and even tried to drag my daughter into your schemes. I’ll see that you get what you deserve. Besides, I have many uses for vigorous, young men.” Togo replied, running a finger down Yu’s chest. If it weren’t for the henchmen, Yu would’ve allowed himself the small, defiant act of slapping her finger away. Finally, the limo stopped.

“Your stop Narukami. And remember, one week, convince your father to stop investigating me, or else.” Mitsuyo reminded.

“Understood.”

“Understood, what?”
Yu simply glared at her, and she matched him with a snarl.

“Well?”

“Understood, Mitsuyo-sama.”

“Good boy. See? You’re already becoming well trained!” She complimented gleefully.

Yu stepped out of the car, disgust and contempt coursing through his veins.

“Oh, and don’t worry about trying to contact me. My sources will know when you’ve done your job. See you around, pet.” The woman replied.

The limo pulled away, and Yu felt Izanagi rumbling in his bones. The boy shook his head, now fully processing everything that just happened, and growled. He was a fly caught in a web, and he needed to get out before the spider came to eat him. Pulling out his phone, he sent a single text to his group.

Yu: Guys, we have a problem.

Akechi: What? Did the date not go well?

Yu: No, I got cornered by Mitsuyo.

Shiho: Really? That’s not good.

Yu: There’s more.

Morgana: Of course there is. How bad?

Yu: Apparently, dad’s been trying to work on a case against Mitsuyo. She wants me to stop him, and I have a week to get it done.

Akechi: A week? Oh, that’s not a lot of time. That’s not a lot of time at all.

Yu: I know. We’re going to have to charge through the Palace as soon as we can. We’ll head in tomorrow, with or without Hifumi.

Shiho: I can’t make it tomorrow.

Yu: How come?

Shiho: Tomorrow I have a volleyball game.

Yu: Shit. Then it’ll have to be Wednesday, maybe Thursday. Any longer, and I’ll have to work at Leblanc.

Akechi: Plus Sae-san on Sunday.

Morgana: What about Hifumi? What do we do about her?

Yu: I’ll try to send her a text. Hopefully she’ll understand.

Shiho: Hopefully. I had hoped our break would last longer.

Morgana: Me too. But the work of us Tricksters are never finished.
Yu: If there’s nothing else, have a good night everyone.

After everyone had said their goodbyes, Yu walked into his room and got changed, letting out a low, heavy sigh. He just couldn’t seem to catch a break. First, that night happened, then he almost got killed, then he got blackmailed by Kobayakawa, and now he was being roped into slavery by Mitsuyo to do her bidding. And he would bet Izanagi that she wouldn’t stop with just getting dad off her tail. Probably some more... physical favors, if that touch was anything to go by. And then there was the mess with Hifumi.

I knew I shouldn’t have let it be Morgana to do the break-in.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed.

“Huh. Speak of the devil.”

Hifumi: Narukami, are you up?

Yu: I am. Have you made your decision?

Hifumi: I haven’t, no. It’s just... something’s happened.

Yu: Yea, tell me about it.

Hifumi: My father’s in the hospital.

Narukami was taken aback by the news.

Yu: Wait, what? How’d that happen?

Hifumi: I told him what I learned at that Palace place. The news had an impact on his health, and I had to call an ambulance. But he is still alive, and... I’m worried what taking mother’s heart will do to him.

Yu: I understand. I’d hesitate too if my father’s life was on the line.

Hifumi: Can... can we talk in person tomorrow? I air my grievances better face-to-face.

Yu: Sure. Just tell me where and when.

Hifumi: At my school’s rooftop. As soon as school gets out.

Yu: Got it.

Hifumi: Alright. Good night.

Yu put on the last of his pajamas, yawned, and pretty much fell onto bed. There was so much to do tomorrow, and so little time to do it.

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Yu had difficulty focusing during class today, and no matter how many slabs of chalk Ushimaru chucked at the boy’s forehead, the events of last night just would not leave his mind. Tomorrow was likely going to be their one and only chance to complete the infiltration. Maybe the day after, but they never knew what the future would bring. So many thoughts and scenarios whirled in his head that he didn’t notice a certain girl approach him.
“Hey Yu, whatcha up to?” She asked, making him borderline leap into the air from fright.

*God damnit Ann.*

“O-oh, hey Ann.” Yu chuckled nervously.

“Do you know what Shiho has today?” Ann asked, a coy grin on her face.

“A volleyball game?”

Ann’s smile vanished.

“Oh, you knew? Then I take it you’re gonna be headed there shortly.” She said, looking at his full backpack.

“Oh, umm… yea…”

“You *are* going to support her right? I mean, you’re her boyfriend now.” Ann replied, suspicion beginning to seep into her voice.

“Of course.”

“Well then, let’s go! It’s gonna start soon.” Ann replied, grabbing his hand.

“Um, actually, I have to go someplace else.” Yu retorted, breaking off contact.

“Really? Like where?” Ann asked, legitimately curious.

“Work.” Yu sputtered out. Ann narrowed her eyes.

“That’s funny. Shiho told me you only work on Fridays and Saturdays.” The blonde spoke, hostility steadily rising in her tone.

“Oh, um, well…”

Ann grabbed Yu’s collar and clenched her fist.

“Are you cheating on her? After your first date?”

“Of course not!”

Jeez, first sign of me being fishy, and you jump to the worst possible scenario.

“Then why lie about work?”

“He means work for his guardian.” Akechi answered from behind.

“Gah! You scared me.” Ann stated, putting a hand over her heart.

Welcome to the club.

“I apologize for the secrecy Takamaki-san, but Narukami-san here also works for his current guardian, Sae Nijima. She’s having him gather information on a case she’s building.”

“Nijima? As in Makoto-senpai?”

“Yes, Sae-san is Makoto-san’s older sister. No one but me and Narukami-san know about it,
so don’t bother asking Makoto-san.”


“Can I go now?” Yu asked, tired of all the drama.

“Yea sure.” Ann replied.

Both Yu and Akechi went their separate ways, but Ann remained where she was, her foot tapping furiously at the floor. She didn’t buy their story, not one bit. But she had put Narukami on guard, which meant she couldn’t act on her instincts. Besides, she had to support Shiho during the game. But she did have someone she could call on. Whipping out her phone, she shot that person a text.

“Hey Ryuji, I need you to do me a favor.”

As Yu walked towards Kosei High, he couldn’t help but notice that the day was the complete opposite of his mood. The birds were singing, the warmth of spring was in full swing, while a cool breeze was keeping the heat from becoming unbearable, and all the while, the trees began to finish sprouting their leaves. It was tranquil, orderly, and uncaring of the world’s problems. As opposed to Yu, whose soul was in disorder because of yesterday’s events, his mind spiraling with wild abandon as it thought about all the ways this could end badly for him, and his throat still sore from all the singing he did with Shiho.

The last thought brought a smile to his face, and a little peace to his mind. But when he found himself at the gates of Hifumi’s school, both of those vanished. Marching his way up to the roof, he saw the young woman sitting on a block of concrete as she waited, staring blankly into the horizon. He cleared his throat, revealing his presence to her. The shogi player turned to him and gestured to a seat across from her, which he took. Hifumi let out a forlorn sigh as she began the conversation.

“You know, one of the first things my father ever taught me was that violence didn’t solve anything. He told me that if I tried to get my way by hurting people, I’d eventually encounter someone stronger than me, and I would be beaten beyond healing. Because of that, he made me promise that I’d do everything in my power to stay away from physical confrontation. I promise I’ve upheld to this day.”

She looked at the game board tucked snuggly away in her backpack.

“But I always enjoyed seeing him do battle, and I always wished it was me who won the glory whenever he was victorious. So I became a shogi player, as a means of honoring my promise, and obtaining the greatness I craved. Father was more than happy to be my mentor and coach, but mother, on the other hand, disapproved. She always encouraged me to instead stay at school and study, rather than ‘waste time on a stupid game’. In fact, every time I attempted to make friends or join a club, she’d always discourage it. At first, I thought it was because, like father, she was afraid that the outside world would hurt me, but now I see it’s because a shogi girl isn’t very profitable or marketable. Now that I know the truth, there were so many signs. So many events and times that I deluded myself into thinking it was for my own good.”

Yu noticed Hifumi’s grip on her clothes tighten, and her eyes narrowed to a piercing glare, as if she was looking straight at the woman she was talking about; an inferno of fury building behind
her emerald orbs. But as quickly as it came, the fire flickered and faded. She turned to make eye contact with Yu for the first time.

“But… I wish to honor my promise to father. And given his critical condition, I’ve come to a decision regarding your offer. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to do it on your own. I won’t stop you if you decide to continue your operation, but I’ll have no hand in it.”

“I understand.”

Well, on the bright side, she isn’t stopping me or the Team. Still, she’d be a big help if she joined.

“But, there’s something you should know.” Yu replied as he stood up.

“Roughly a week ago, my Team and I started looking for evidence in real life that your mother wasn’t who the world thought she was. She was able to find out about our attempts, and used that knowledge to corner and blackmail me. Because of that, we’re going to steal her heart. If you change your mind, then meet us outside your mother’s TV studio on Wednesday after school.” The teenager informed.

“But, you won’t force me to help you?”

“No. We asked you if you wanted to join, and you rejected the request. We’re not going to force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And… I hope your dad pulls through. Losing a parent isn’t something I’d wish on my worst enemy.”

Hifumi smiled at Yu’s kind words as he walked off of the roof.

I am thou. Thou art I.

Thou hast acquired a new vow.

It shall become the wings of freedom that will lead thee to the truth.

With the birth of the Star Arcana

Thou hast obtained the blessing that will lead thee to new power.

Unknown to either of them, Yu had been followed and watched by a certain someone. Once he saw Yu meeting with Hifumi, he left the building, sending only one text:

“Ann, I did what you asked. He was meeting with another girl.”

“Come on Shiho!!” Ann cheered as her best friend was set up for another spike, which she delivered with maximum force, making to a boom so loud it could be mistaken for an explosion of thunder. The referee blew the whistle, signaling that it was the end of the game. As Shiho and the rest of her team went to rest, Ann tossed an ice-cold water bottle to the exhausted player.

“You were kicking all kinds of ass today! I’m pretty sure that’s a new record for fastest volleyball game.” Ann complimented as Shiho took a swig of the refreshing liquid.
“Hehe, thanks.” Shiho said, ready to take another swig but stopped when she noticed a mischievous glint in Ann’s eyes. A glint that always told Shiho that her closest friend was up to no good.

“Ann…”

“Yes Shiho?”

“What are you up to?”

“Huh?”

“I see that look in your eye. You’re up to something.”

“Well, I wanted to ask you after the game, but since you figured it out…”

Ann wrapped her arm around Shiho and smiled a wicked smile.

“So0000, how’d the date go, huh?” She asked, eager to get all the juicy details.

“It went… fine…” Shiho replied, unsure which words would set Ann off and cause her to scream some untrue statement for all to hear.

“Just ‘fine’? That bad huh?” Ann asked, a little disappointed in her friend’s answer.

“No, no, it was fun, it’s just… some of Yu’s personal stuff happened after words, and it really rained on our parade.”

“Awww, that sucks. What’d you guys do?”

“Karaoke, mostly. Yu’s really bad at it though. Was coughing up a storm by the time we were done, and his voice cracks were hilarious.”

“Heh, well I’m glad you had a good time.”

“Me too. Here’s hoping his home life doesn’t ruin it.”

“Eh, I doubt it. My intuition tells me that he’s a good guy, and it hasn’t been wrong yet. He’ll take care of you.”

“Yea, I know.”

“You wanna get a bite to eat?”

“If by ‘bite’, you mean ‘mountains of cake’ then no thank you. Some of us don’t have the luxury of sugar going straight to the curves that boys like.”

“Awww, come on! At least let me treat you for your win! Please???” Ann pleaded, giving Shiho her best puppy eyes.

“Alright fine. The usual place?” Shiho asked, giving in.

“YES!! Yea, the usual place.” Ann chirped.

“Alright, let me get changed, then we can head out.”

Shiho nodded, and the second she was gone, Ann’s phone buzzed, as if it was trying to hide
and now knew that it was safe to make noise. Ann opened it up and read the text from Ryuji. She grinded her teeth at the message. Her intuition when it came to people hadn’t led her astray before, but there was a first time for everything. The device beeped again, like it had sensed her rising anger and wanted to fuel the flame.

Ryuji: There’s more. Her name’s Hifumi Togo.

Ann: How do you know?

Ryuji: I’ve been hanging with her. Not like dating, but I like to think we’re close.

Ann: How close, exactly?

Ryuji: Very. She’s going through a really tough time right now with her mom.

Ann: Really? Does Yu know you have the hots for her?

Ryuji: What?! I never said I have the hots for her!

Ann: Not directly, but I know you too well Ryuji ;)

Ryuji: Back on topic, Yu should know I’ve been seeing her, since he encouraged me to do it.

This news made Ann’s eyes widen. Not only was Yu seeing another girl, but he was seeing one that Ryuji had laid eyes on first. Dick. Move. As she prepared to shoot a text back, she saw Shiho emerge from the locker room. Putting her conversation on hold, she beamed as her friend approached.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Ready.” Shiho replied, sporting a smile of her own.

Ryuji: So, um, what are we going to do about it?

Ann pulled out her phone for one last time.

Ann: I have to go for now, but we’ll talk about it later.

With that, she put her phone on silent. She wasn’t done with this, but she was going to push it out of her head long enough to enjoy spending time with her friend.

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Ryuji read the last text and let out a huge sigh, feeling like he was caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, his best friend could potentially be cheating on Shiho with what could only be the only girl that seemed to actually care about him who wasn’t Shiho and Ann. But on the other, it could just be a huge misunderstanding, and jumping to conclusions could end his relationship with both people. He let out another heavy sigh, and made a decision. Walking up the roof, he saw that Hifumi was still there, as Yu left a while ago, and she looked… conflicted. The teenager took a deep breath and strolled over to the shogi player.

“Yo.” He said, and internally cringed at how meek he sounded.

“Oh. Hey Ryuji. What are you doing here?” She asked, actually getting up to look at him.

“Oh, I just thought that your mom wouldn’t let ya go to church anymore, so I figured I’d try
my luck here.”

“How’d you know that I go here?”

Ryuji did his best not to hide his surprise at the question, and desperately searched for an explanation that didn’t make him look like an obsessive stalker. That’s when an idea popped into his head.

“Oh, I have a friend in the modeling business; Ann Takamaki. She told me where to find you.”

“Oh. Yes, I’ve heard of her. So, what are you doing here?”

“Checking up on ya. How are things with you and your mom?”

“Well… not pleasant.” Hifumi hesitantly answered, unsure of how she’d explain to Ryuji.

“That sucks. I take it asking nicely didn’t work out?”

“No, it didn’t. And that’s not all. My father… father’s been admitted to the hospital.”

Ryuji’s jaw dropped.

“For real? Man, that’s awful, I hope he pulls through.”

“So do I.”

Ryuji took a few steps closer.

“Hey. I know how hard it is. Dad was hospitalized, once upon a time. We had to sell our home to pay the bills, and now we live in a shitty motel. Having a shoulder to lean on helps, trust me.”

Hifumi silently nodded, and she decided to take a leap of faith.

“Ryuji… what if I told you I had a way to take down mother? I can’t divulge the details, but I think I’ve found a way to put her behind bars. But, if I do it, it could be the final nail in father’s coffin. What… what do you think I should do?”

The question caught the track runner off guard. He put his thumb to his chin, deep in thought, before he gave his answer.

“Honestly? I think you’re asking the wrong question. The better one would be what do you want to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, you shouldn’t define your life by what your parents want. You’re your own person, you should decide how ya live.”

Hifumi looked at him like he was crazy, but he kept going.

“Letting someone else decide how ya live is what got ya in this mess to begin with, right? So shouldn’t you decide for yourself? I mean, what do you want to do?”

Hifumi said nothing, instead pondering his words.

“Decide for myself…”
Suddenly, Ryuji’s phone went off, and he groaned when he saw the caller.

“Ack, my old man wants me to pick up some groceries, I gotta run. But…”

Ryuji pulled out a piece of paper and wrote his phone number on it.

“If you ever need someone to lean on or vent to, give me a call.” He explained as the girl took the piece of paper. With that, he took his leave, and Hifumi pondered his words.

“What do I want?” She asked herself, looking at the horizon.

As Yu finished getting dressed in his PJs, his cell phone chimed a special ringtone, one reserved just for the person most important in his life. Picking it up and smiling, he answered.

“Hi dad.”

“Hey Yu, how’s it going?”

“It’s going fine.”

“You always say that when things aren’t going fine. What’s up?”

“I…”

_I’ve been blackmailed by a psychotic bitch to get you off her back._

“I got roped into a hand-to-hand training session with Sae. She hits hard.”

“Really? Do I need to intervene? Give her a few ‘sessions’ myself?” Dojima asked, fury starting to seep into his words.

“No no, you don’t. I’m just upset I lost.”

“Oh. Wait. You lost? Really?”

“Yea. But on the bright side I managed to get close to her, so it was worth it.”

“I see. I’m glad you and her are getting along.”

“I am too. What’s been going on back home?”

“Ah… not much. Nanko told me that you spoke to Minato?”

“Yea. He seemed… subdued.”

“Minato is… blunt and honest. If he ever tells you something, you can bet your life it’s the truth, no matter how ridiculous it sounds.”

“Really?”

“Yup. When he first got here, and met me, he told me, to my face and in front of Nanako, that I, and I quote, ‘Reek of ass’. I smelled my armpits and… well, he was right. Certainly explained why Nanako was keeping her distance that day.”

Yu was left with an open mouth, trying to fight a small smirk that was forming.
“Really?”

“Really. Thankfully, he’s been a bit more quiet and reserved since then, though if that’s because he learned his lesson or because of the murders, I can’t say.”

“Murders?”

“Yea. There’s been two murders so far, and a few kidnappings.”

“Well, if you’re on the case, it probably won’t be long before their caught.”

“That’s the thing. There’s so little evidence it’s near impossible to even figure out how they died. But I’ve got a lead. It’s a total longshot, but if I can pull it off, I’m pretty sure I can catch the culprit before you’re back.”

“You can do it. I know you can.”

“Thanks Yu.”

Suddenly, Yu thought back to his experience with Mitsuyo.

“Hey dad… have you heard about a woman called Mitsuyo Togo?”

There was a pause, one of silent fury, like a person overhearing other people saying nasty things about them.

“Yu… where did you hear that name?”

“I went on a field trip to her news station, and overheard one of them say ‘Dojima’s onto us’, and I’m just curious.”

“Well stay away from her. She’s nothing but bad news, trust me. I’d rather you come home alive, thank you very much. Promise me you’ll stay out of it this time.”

“I promise dad.”

“Good. Hey I gotta put Nanako to bed. Stay safe Yu. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The tone went dead, and Yu slumped onto his bed. He really hoped they didn’t have much more of the Palace to do.
Yu and the other members had assembled outside Togo News Station. Or at least, most of them anyway. Morgana was running late on account of getting distracted by something, and Akechi went out to find her, but Yu would bet his right arm that it was sushi. It was always sushi. His train of thought was broken because he heard someone panting and calling his name, and the noise was getting louder. Turning around, he saw Morgana running as fast as her legs would allow, and coughing up a storm when she finally reached them. Walking at a brisk pace behind her was Akechi.

“I’m sorry for being late!” She wheezed out.

“It’s alright. Now that we’re all here, let’s get to work. And hope we don’t have much left of the Palace.” Yu replied, getting out his phone.

“Hold on, shouldn’t we wait for Hifumi?” Shiho asked.

“I already told you, Hifumi said she’s not joining us.”

“Well, she could’ve changed her mind.” the volleyball player reasoned.

“If she did, she would’ve been here by now.” Akechi pointed out.

“There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you.” A voice called out, as if waiting for Yu to say that.

Everyone turned to the source, and saw none other than Hifumi herself. She was dressed in her usual attire, but something had changed. Her posture, her tone, and her eyes all spoke of unending clarity of what must be done and ironclad conviction to see it through.

“Hifumi? Did you change your mind?” Yu asked, puzzled.

“Yes. I’ve decided… that I want to see my mother brought to justice, to be free from her influence, and pursue my own dreams. So, I’m coming with you.” She proudly declared.

“Alright. In that case, let’s get to work.” Yu said, happy that she decided to join them after all.

“So… what do we do first?” She asked.

“First, we go in.” Yu said, activating the Meta-Nav. The world around them swirled and morphed as usual, and it wasn’t long before all of them, Hifumi included, stood inside the Palace, dressed proudly in their Trickster attire.

Music: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbgqVdoX_U4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbgqVdoX_U4)

“Alright Hifumi, if you’re going to be working with us, you’re going to have to learn the ropes.
You already know what Palaces and the Metaverse are, so we’ll go over what we do.” Yu began, turning to their newest member. He began to explain everything Morgana told him before, what Personas are, how he was able to wield multiple, how to go about stealing the Treasure, and so on. It took a good few minutes, but Hifumi was listening intently, like a general weighing the options their advisors had presented.

“And when it’s over, the person has a change of heart, and confesses. That about covers it. Any questions?”

“No, but I do have some concerns. My Persona doesn’t seem to have any inherently offensive or defensive capabilities, just support. What should I do?”

“Hmmmm… that’s a good question. Wait here, I’d like to test something.” Yu stated, turning and walking over the bridge. Long after he was out of sight, the Team heard a noise coming from the shogi board Fu Hao held.

“Alright, I should be out of hearing range now. Wonder how I’ll be able to signal them?” The Wild Card pondered aloud, though his voice seemed to echo through the piece that was marked as the King, which also glowed with every word.

“Yu? Is that your voice?” Hifumi asked.

“Hifumi? Can you hear me?”

“Yes. You’re… you’re talking through my shogi board. Or at least one of the pieces.”

“Huh. That’s interesting. But if you can hear me, that’s great. Hey, send Shiho over. I want to see how far we can push this.”

“Alright. On my way.” Shiho replied, making her way over the bridge as well. It didn’t take long before her voice was also heard, this time through a piece marked “knight”.

“Yu? There’s something else. The book in Fu Hao’s hand… it’s drawing something. It looks like… skeletons.”

“That’s exactly what I’m looking at. Let me know if it’s changing.”

“It is! Now I’m seeing… a wall?”

“Huh. So apparently you can look through my eyes. That’s going to be useful.”

“Hey guys, I can hear you just fine.” A voice in Yu’s head informed.

“Shiho? That you?” Yu asked.

“Yup!”

“So we can hear each other even if we’re not close to the board. Perfect. Head back to the others, I’ll join you soon.”

As Shiho made her way back, she heard Yu’s voice in her ears as he explained.

“So, basically, I wanted to see if we could have some kind of long-range communication. Now that I know we do, we can have Hifumi stay in Safe Rooms and provide support from there. The fact that she can also see through my eyes is also a plus.”
“I look forward to it. Though I’m curious.” Hifumi started.

“Yea?”

“What gave you the idea? Of me being able to communicate like this?”

“Oh, I just figured if I have unique abilities as a Wild Card, you’d have unique abilities with a support Persona.”

“I see.”

The silhouette of the Wild Card appeared before them, and this time, Yu’s voice was heard through his lips, not the shogi piece.

“Alright, so now that we’ve got that all ironed out, let’s get to work.”

“Wait a moment. We need a codename for Hifumi.” Akechi pointed out.

“Oh, that’s right!” Morgana exclaimed.

“Codename?” Hifumi questioned.

“Since the Palace is affected by the real world, and vice versa, we don’t go around yelling our real names. Helps us avoid complications.” Yu explained.

“Oh, that makes sense. What’ll mine be?”

“It has to be Shogun. Or Samurai.” Shiho suggested.

“Her attire is more ninja-like. Perhaps ‘assassin’?” Akechi suggested.

“Uh, no. We have to call her ‘mastermind’. Cause she’s pretty much the strategist of the group.” Morgana retorted.

“Actually, now that I think of it, I already have a nickname.” Hifumi said, getting everyone’s attention.

“Really? What is it?” Yu asked.

“Venus. It’s a nickname the media gave me because of my beauty. I think it’s rather fitting I’m called that if I’m going to tear down mother’s empire.”

“Alright. Welcome to the Phantom Team, Venus. I’m Seeker.”

“Pariah.”

“Ace.”

“Carmen.”

“Thanks for the welcome, I’ll try not to let you all down.”

“I believe it. Oh, one more thing.”

Yu reached into his pocket and pulled out all the Shogi pieces he had collected so far.

“Hold onto these. We’re going to need them later.”
“Got it. So, where to first?”

Yu pulled out his phone and teleported them to the Safe Room just inside the previously sealed off castle. Leaving through the door, he and the others were relieved to see that the Shadow from before was still gone. Making their way up the floors, they saw that it was a rather small room, and Hifumi let out a gasp.

“That’s my room!”

Looking around, they saw that it was decorated with various paintings of samurai armor, and a portrait of Hifumi herself, which Yu guessed was from Yosuke, and a few stuffed toys. But strangely in the center of the room was a mirror. Looking at it closely, there wasn’t a reflection, but there were the words ‘Hifumi’s potential’ written above it. Yu looked at the map on his phone. There was absolutely nothing else in the castle, and yet they were missing shogi pieces, and he couldn’t shake the feeling the clue laid in the mirror. Pressing his hand against its smooth surface, the mirror rippled as his hand passed through. Pulling his hand out, he looked at his Team, which noticed what he was doing.

“Once more unto the breach.” He whispered, stepping in. His eyes widened and he let out a gasp at what he saw. It wasn’t long before the others joined him, and they too ogled the sight.

The Tricksters found themselves standing on a cliff. To their right was a staircase carved in stone that led to a tower, while in front of them was the edge that overlooked a wide mountain range and a valley that appeared golden because of the setting sun. But that’s not what was the most surprising feature about the landscape. The entire area was flooded by buildings that were in various states of completion, from the highest mountain peak to the lowest point in the valley.

“Are they building a city here?” Shiho asked.

“No. They’re building an empire.” Hifumi answered.

“The mirror was called ‘Hifumi’s potential’, so it makes sense Mitsuyo would envision an empire. The question now is where do we find the missing Shogi pieces.” Akechi pondered.

“Not by standing around. Let’s try that thing.” Yu replied, turning around and spotting a tower marked ‘Togo News Station’. But it wasn’t an ordinary tower. Unlike the fortress the Tricksters had just left, this tower was both medieval in design, and broken apart with its pieces swirling around, like a vortex trying to magically put it back together. The Team made their way to the foreboding structure.

“And so, ready to do battle, the heroic Phantom Team made their way to the building, unafraid of the perils ahead.”

Everyone looked at each other.

“Um, Venus? Was that you?” Yu asked.

“O-oh. Didn’t realize I said that out loud. Sorry, when I’m excited I have a tendency to start roleplaying.”

“Roleplaying?” Morgana asked as they entered the bottom floor, with the only intact piece of it being a staircase, while pieces of debris were flying close to it.

“It’s basically where you play make-believe. Let’s see if that doesn’t sink under our weight.” Akechi replied as a platform began flying close enough for them to get on. Stepping onto it like an
escalator, the four didn’t fall or crash to their doom, much to their relief.

“How does that work?” Morgana questioned as the platform began to rise.

“Basically people pretend to be something or someone they’re not. Like they could pretend to be a secret spy, or a wizard.” Yu clarified.

“Ooooooh!! What’s Venus pretending to be?” Morgana asked as the wooden board began to spin around the tower.

“Yea Venus. What’re you roleplaying as?” Shiho asked teasingly.

“A… a queen.” Hifumi answered, embarrassed.

“Maybe your codename should’ve been ‘your majesty’.” Akechi added with a small laugh.

“You can roleplay, but don’t go overboard, alright?” Yu ordered as another platform approached, but when it got closer, they saw a pack of Shadows, who immediately transformed into what looked like a bunch of men in orange jumpsuits and metal wings. The Tricksters immediately summoned their Personas, Yu and Morgana getting onto the Shadow’s platform, while Akechi and Shiho were forced to stay behind.

“Power!” Yu called out, removing his mask to give creation to an angel in red armor. Ordering it to attack, it shot out a ray of light, hitting the Shadow, but not going all that much damage to it.

“Damn. I’ll have to visit the Room after this.” Yu muttered to himself.

“With the blood sacrifice of seventy-two virgins, your queen bestows incredible strength upon thee!” Hifumi declared, grabbing the piece that represented Yu and slamming it down on a square that pulsed red. When she did, Yu suddenly felt a massive surge of power, both in body and in mind. With this newfound strength, Yu ordered Power to attack again, and this time, the holy magics reduced the Shadow to ash.

“Hold up. Where does someone get seventy-two virgins?” Morgana asked as she sliced another Shadow.

“Comic Con, easily.” Shiho responded, Boudicca lighting up other Shadow, while Akechi shot the last one down with his pistol.

“Focus guys, we’re almost at the top.” Yu replied as he and Morgana hopped onto another platform.

“Oh come on Seeker, just having a little fun.” Akechi said.

“Get the Treasure now, have fun later. One week deadline, remember?”

“Alright, fair point.”

With that, Morgana and Yu had reached the top of the tower, one of the two completely stable rooms the tower had. Inside, they saw that there was another portal dead center, but Yu also noticed a shimmering set of doors. After getting the Safe Room marked, Shiho and Akechi had arrived.

“Hey Venus, do you have a map of the area?” Shiho asked.

“Yes, I do. Why do you ask?”
“If the final shogi piece isn’t here, then that means it has to be in that massive construction zone. It would be nice if we knew where to look.”

“I’m not sure if I have the ability to pinpoint a specific thing.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it Pariah. If the Palace keeps up its pattern, then we should only have a relatively clear and straightforward path.” Yu reassured as he stepped out of the Safe Room.

“Everyone ready to continue?”

“Always.” Was Shiho’s response.

“Alright then. Once more unto the breach.” Were Yu’s words as he stepped forward, his team right behind their leader.

Waiting for them on the other side was an extremely blinding light. Shielding their eyes from the lights, the group waited for their eyes to adjust. When it did, they realized the bright light was none other than the sun, and they found themselves in what could only be described as a wooden jungle gym. There were wooden beams and planks everywhere, the bulk of which were covered in some kind of heavy covering. That’s when the Tricksters realized where they were.

“We’re in the construction site.” Yu stated aloud.

“It would appear so. Where do we go from here?” Akechi asked.

“Um guys? The map is only reading one path. And it’s a really, really long one.” Hifumi informed

“Well, then we’d better get started.” Yu answered, turning to Morgana, who blew into her whistle and summoned the Mona-mobile. As they began to drive down, Shiho couldn’t help but talk out loud as she looked upon the sea of unfinished buildings.

“Mitsuyo had some big plans for you Venus.”

“Her ambition is matched only by her ruthlessness. Whatever plans she has, you can bet they’ll involve hurting people. I won’t let that happen.”

“Still, this must be hard for you.”

“It was hard. A part of me still wants to hope that the woman I loved is still here, but that part’s getting smaller and smaller. Besides, we’re at war. Emotions like remorse and sorrow have no place on the battlefield.”

“We’ve all come from difficult walks of life Venus. We’re more than happy to talk and help if you need it.” Akechi added.

“Thank you. But let’s deal with mother first.”

“Speaking of which, it looks like we’re here.” Yu said as they stopped in front of a series of docks, a number of small ships moored already. Directly in front of them on the water was a giant ship. The ship had sunk, and the bow was the only part still visible, jutting upwards like a mountain, with its name emblazoned in bright orange. The Ami Ito.
“So, I’m guessing that’s where the final pieces are?” Shiho asked.

“Only one way to find out. Let’s go.” Yu ordered as he got on one of the moored boats.

“Do any of us know how to sail?” Morgana questioned.

“It appears everything’s already done for us. Plus, there’s a paddle in the ship, if we need it.” Akechi pointed out, which was enough for everyone else to get in. Yu undid the line holding the ship in place, and almost immediately it began drifting to the Ami Ito, almost as if compelled by an unknown force to approach the vessel. As they approached it, a fog began to seep in, and the light of the sun dimmed, blocked by the boat’s imposing figure. The Team arrived at a giant hole in the ship, with the only light now being from within.

“And so, the mighty Phantom Team disembarked. Where others would be frightened off by the ghoulish sight before them, the resolute heroes had wills of steel, and pressed on in their noble quest.” Hifumi said, albeit more quietly this time.

Yu surveyed the area. Right now, he and the others were standing a room with water that was only a few inches deep, with broken chandeliers that dimly illuminated the room. But there was something else in the room which disturbed Yu and the others. Hanging from a support beam was a human body with a bag over his head, and on his body the word “Traitor” had been branded on his chest.

“So this barge… is where traitors go to die.” Akechi said.

“And aunt Ami must be the biggest traitor in mother’s mind.” Hifumi added.

“Where do we go from here? I don’t see a way up.” Morgana pointed out.

“First thing’s first.” Yu replied as he entered a set of shimmering doors. With the Safe Room marked, he joined the others in brainstorming ideas.

“Think we can make our Personas fly us up?” Yu asked, summoning Izanagi to test his theory. The god grabbed his master, but try as he might, he couldn’t get Yu more than a few feet off the ground.

“Alright, that didn’t work. Anyone got any ideas?” Akechi asked.

“Yea; we make one.” Shiho replied, summoning Boudicca and having her fire at a platform. The result was a great deal of crashing and noise, but when it was over, they had some kind of path upwards in the form of crates and broken boards.

“Well, that works. Let’s get going.” Yu said, grabbing onto the nearest hanging platform and climbing up that, like he was in a platforming video game, with the others quickly following him.
up. It wasn’t long until he found himself on a walkway that led to an archway which no doubt led further into the ship. But what was strange was the fact that wasn’t tilted on an axis like everything else. The others arrived, and also noticed how out of place the even walkways were.

“Shouldn’t these be tilted?” Morgana questioned.

“It looks like we’re not alone. Stay sharp everyone.” Yu ordered.

“I heard something! We may have intruders!” A voice yelled from beyond the archway. A voice that obviously belonged to a Shadow.

“Quick, everyone hang off the edges!” Yu loudly whispered.

“Why? We can take them.” Shiho replied.

“We don’t know how many there are, and we don’t want to get swarmed.” Yu replied.

“Fine!”

The Team did as Yu said, and it wasn’t long until the Shadow entered. Unlike the others, which had variation of samurai armor, this Shadow didn’t have a shirt on, his pants were torn rags, his hands were more akin to claws, and his mask was reminiscent of an Oni, its fangs dripping with blood. It looked around in a way similar to a hound sniffing the air. When it got close enough to the ledge, Akechi reached up and grabbed its leg, pulling it over and sending it plummeting to its death. With the immediate threat gone, they pulled themselves back up and made their way through the archway.

“Holy…” were the first words out of Yu’s mouth when he saw what laid before them.

The group was looking at the interior of the ship in its entirety, but the entire hold had been stripped of virtually everything. Instead, all that there was a massive labyrinth of paths, criss-crossing like headphones in a person’s pocket. Jutting out underneath these paths were wooden beams. Hanging from these beams were bodies, both men and women, some had their guts spilling out, some were hanging from their hands without the lower half of their bodies, but all of them had one thing in common; they all had ‘Traitor’ branded on their chest.

“Geeze. Where do we even begin with this?” Morgana asked with a heavy sigh.

“Good question. Venus, can your Persona give us a hand?” Akechi asked.

“But of course. I’m trying to map out the correct path now.”

“Wait, really? But we don’t have a map.” Yu replied, pulling out his phone, the static confirming that this area was unmapped.

“Guess it’s another one of my Persona’s abilities.”

“That’ll save us a ton of time later on!” Morgana exclaimed.

“I’m so glad you joined us.” Shiho remarked.

“Alright, we have two paths, left and right. Which one?”

“Left. But there’s a Shadow.”

“We can take it.” Shiho replied, cracking her knuckles.
“Let’s not rush blindly.” Akechi replied, getting an eye roll from the girl.

Yu led the charge, but since he knew that there wasn’t some kind of horde waiting for him, he didn’t wait for it to turn around, instead slashing it when it spotted him and charged. The monster dissolved into a puddle and reformed into a cluster of scantily-dressed girls with teal skin. Yu and the others reached to summon the inner selves, but the women proved to be faster, one of them launching an ice attack that knocked Shiho down. Surprised by how fast she went down, Yu didn’t call Izanagi, leaving him vulnerable to an attack by another girl. Akechi summoned Robin Hood and tried to fire, but the Shadow he was targeting dodged. The fourth girl charged Morgana, but the Velvet guide dodged out of the way, and used the opening to counterattack with a deep sword strike and a metal pellet to the throat, finishing her off. Yu got up and decided to call upon a different Persona.

“Chimera!”

One of the creatures that they thought way back during the trials emerged next to Yu, and it quickly spewed fire, only to be dodged by its target.

“These bastards are fast.” Akechi grunted as Robin Hood let loose an arrow that would again miss.

“Worry not noble archer! Your queen commands forces of immeasurable power!” Hifumi boldly declared, grabbing everyone’s respective pieces and slamming them on different positions. A green light engulfed everyone, and suddenly, they all felt lighter on their feet, but their vision was also sharper, more refined, and they felt like they could shoot the wings off the fly. Shiho got up, ready for round two.

“Alright. Let’s try this again.” Shiho growled, summoning Boudicca and launching an attack for the second time. This time, the assault hit. This time, the Shadow went down. This time, the creature didn’t stand a chance. Once she was vaporized, Shiho transferred her power to Akechi, who used it to destroy the third woman. The final one, in a panic, surrendered, and Yu convinced her to join them. With the surprisingly tough battle over, Yu turned to his team.

“Alright. We underestimated the Shadows. Let’s try to not do this again.”

“Yea.” Shiho agreed as Morgana patched them up.

“Thanks for the support Venus. That could’ve gone much worse without your help.”

“Anytime Ace. Oh, and when you arrive at the crossroad, take the one that goes up.” Hifumi explained.

The group continued their way upwards, and they came at a crossroads, there were three distinct paths; one went up, one went to the side, and the final one went down and led to a chest. After picking the lock and obtaining the goods inside, which Morgana called a “Goho-M”, which could teleport them to a Safe Room, the team continued their ascent, finding remarkably little in the way of security. No traps, no barricades, not even another Shadow. It was just them and the lifeless corpses that occupied the broken barge. Finally, they arrived at another archway, and above this was a sign that read “Captain’s Cabin”, and from within, they heard groans and wails of agony. Having learned from their previous skirmish, the four quietly entered the room, and saw a man locked in a chair with a basket over his head, and with him was a Shadow that was carving up his skin.

“You will submit to our Shogun, or met a fate worse than death!” It hissed, raising a red hot
poker for another strike. Yu rushed towards it, and ripped off its mask, transforming it into a flying black goat with a ball of fire between his horns. The others summoned their Personas, with Akechi leading the attack with Robin Hood hitting it with a ray of light, knocking it down.

“Oh, now it’s super easy. All-Out Attack!” Yu ordered, and every member following through, bashing, hacking, and slashing. When it was over, Akechi had a smug look on his face, smirking at how easy the monster had been bested. Only for him to get pulverized a moment later by a sudden blast of curse magic that knocked him back. Yu and the others looked, and the Shadow was still very much alive and kicking.

“How’d it survive that?! An All-Out Attack’s our strongest move!” Shiho pointed out.

“Guess it wasn’t strong enough. Alright everyone, stand your ground! We can still win this!” Yu replied.

The flying goat flapped his wings just as Akechi got up, and four straw dolls appeared directly in front of each Trickster, and a needle began poking into each. Yu sidestepped his doll as soon as it appeared, but the others were caught of guard by theirs, and when the dolls exploded, Yu realized it was the same move he used on Morooka back at Kobayakawa’s Palace, but on a larger scale. Morgana literally vomited blood, Shiho clutched her throat as if she couldn’t breathe, and Akechi’s eyes rolled into his head as his body fell to the floor. In a single strike, this Shadow had almost completely eliminated the Phantom Team and nearly ended Yu’s rehabilitation. The Wild Card knew that he stood no chance alone, so the first thing he did was keep moving, calling upon Izanagi to round up the bodies of his comrades. The goat tried again and again to hit Yu, but the teenager proved to be too illusive. Izanagi told his master that all the other Team members were wrapped up together. Yu made a mad dash towards his friends, and when he arrived at the bodies, he pulled out the Goho-M, slamming the device onto the floor. A bright light emerged from the impact, and it vanished as soon as it came, with the Tricksters vanishing with it.

Yu found himself back in the Safe Room at the bottom of the ship, along with the bodies of Akechi, Morgana, and Shiho. Almost immediately, he summoned a Persona with a healing spell, but the magic proved to be ineffective, the corpses still as lifeless as ever. So Yu went to the next best thing; Morgana’s utility belt. Opening up all the pockets, he viciously shook it until all of the contents had dropped out. He frantically searched for something, anything that could help them. Grappling hooks, smoke bombs, lockpicks, and…

“What the hell?”

Yu found a string of beads attached to each other. There were about four of them, and they were teal green in color and big enough to fit in some… naughty places. Izanagi approached them too, just as curious as his master.

“Are those…”

“It would appear so. Didn’t know Morgana was into that kind of stuff.”

As Yu said that out loud, he had a revelation; apparently, Morgana enjoyed these so much that she carried them around even in the Metaverse, so she must have used them plenty of times. And he was touching them. He flung them away at once, and when he did, one bead hit Morgana’s face. The bead vanished, sinking into her skin like how a coin would fit into an arcade machine, and the woman’s eyes flashed wide open and she gasped for breath, bolting upright lightning quick. She looked around to get her bearings, and once she did, she immediately grabbed the string of the remaining three beads, breaking off two and tossing them to Akechi and Shiho.
The other two Tricksters had a similar reaction, except Shiho clutched her chest and Akechi grabbed his head. Yu let out a sigh of relief. He didn’t lose them. Not today.

“Good going Seeker. I’m impressed you knew what the revival beads were, even though I didn’t tell you about them.” Morgana congratulated.


“Yup. Special beads made by Master in case any Trickster fell in battle.”

“Oh, that’s what they were.” Yu muttered.

“Yea. Why? What’d you think they were?” The guide asked innocently.

“Nothing nothing. Why didn’t you tell us about these earlier? I would've had less of a meltdown at Shujin Nation if I knew you could bring me back from the dead.”

“Well, as you can see, we’ve only got four. Or one now. Plus, they have to be administered no less than ten minutes after death, before the soul leaves completely. Also, I figured that we wouldn’t fight as hard if you guys knew you could get a second chance.”

“Makes sense. Why bother getting it right the first time if you could get a do-over?” Akechi replied.

“Is there a way to get more?” Shiho asked.

“I dunno. You’d have to ask Master about that.”

“I will when I see him again. But for now, let’s focus on beating that thing.” Yu replied.

“Good point. We’ve been able to win decisively so far. What went wrong this time?” Akechi asked.

“We got cocky. When I was starting out in volleyball, there were a few games where I thought ‘I don’t have to pay attention. We got this in the bag.’. We lost every game that happened.”

“Pariah’s right. Kobayakawa’s defeat made us think we’re invincible. Now that we’ve been reminded that we’re not, we ready for round two?” Yu asked, to which everyone gave a resolute nod.

“Perfect. Venus, did you manage to do an analysis?”

“You’re in luck Seeker. That thing’s weak to holy magic and wind of all things.”

“Alright. Here’s the game plan. Pariah and I will go in first, grab his attention. Ace, you and Carmen will follow and take turns keeping him down. Don’t go for an All-Out Attack, keep him in a corner. While you two are doing that, Pariah and I will hit him with our guns, and use our Personas if we run out of bullets. We’re gonna keep it up until that bastard’s dead. Any questions?” Yu asked as he finished explaining.

The others looked at him, silent and ready.

“Alright. Then let’s get to it.”

With that the Phantoms retraced their steps up the tangled paths of wooden walkways all the way back to the captain’s cabin, where the Shadow had turned its attention back to the mystery
prisoner. As Shiho and Yu prepared to rush in, they heard Hifumi speak.

“By royal decree, this skirmish will end quickly!” She cried, slamming everyone’s pieces down on multi-colored squares. They all felt faster, stronger, tougher, like someone had given them all a massive boost to everything they had. Yu looked at his girlfriend, who nodded with a smile, and the two charged.

“Hello asshole!! We’re baaaaaaack!” Yu yelled as he summoned Izanagi, who unleashed a cleave. The Shadow diverted its attention back to the intruders, only to be knocked down by a gust of emerald wind, followed by two spears of holy light. Shiho and Yu pulled out their respective guns and unleashed a hail of bullets. Yu’s strategy had worked perfectly. Between the attack from before and Hifumi’s power-up, the Shadow didn’t last very long at all, fading to ash before Akechi could get his second attack in. With the threat gone, they all let out a cheer.

“Now that that’s over with, let’s keep going.” Akechi suggested.

“Hold up. I want to see who our mystery prisoner is.”

Yu walked up to the man and pulled off the bag. And was greeted with a face that looked almost exactly like his.

“My God.” Was all Akechi could say.

The cognitive Yu was missing an eye, his lips were swollen from repeated attacks, his jaw was slack, no doubt because it was broken, his chest had deep cuts, like someone was trying to carve words into his skin, and on his back were leeches, which the Team promptly removed.

“So this is how mother sees you; a helpless prisoner she can torture to her heart’s content.” Hifumi spat venomously.

“Not only that, but based on the hanging bodies I saw out there, I’d say she’ll do more than show Sae what I’ve done if I don’t bend to her.” Yu added.

“All the more reason to take her heart.” Shiho replied.

“Right. Let’s keep moving, can’t have too much to go.” Yu replied, freeing his cognitive self. Directly ahead was a ladder, which he and Akechi climbed first, followed by Morgana and Shiho. Waiting for them at the top was a single room with the only thing in it was a golden box. Opening it, Yu contacted Hifumi.

“Hey Venus, how many pieces do we need?”

“Let me see… just one actually.”

“Ok good. Because that’s all I got.”

“That’s the gyoku. The leader of the armies. The most important piece.” Hifumi replied as the book drew a sketch of what he held.

“Alright. Let’s all meet up in the Castle Safe Room.”

The Tricksters made their way out of the room, back through the ship’s main hold, and into the Safe Room. Teleporting back to the room where Kaito and Hifumi were waiting. Placing all of the pieces on their respective board places, Kaito gave a deep and respectful voice. But it also sounded… frail, weak. Like it took everything for him to move his lips.
“Well done. You have earned the right to challenge me. To best me in battle would mean you would have access to the shogun’s personal quarters. To fall to me is to forfeit your life. Would you like to play?” He asked.

“Alright Venus. We’re in the home stretch. Just need to beat him, and we can finally get to the Treasure and send the calling card.”

“Actually Seeker… there might be a problem.” Hifumi began.

Yu let out an extremely deep, and annoyed sigh. Hifumi took it as her cue to explain.

“You said that this world was affected by cognition. Well, mother knows of father’s prowess with Shogi, and to her knowledge, he cannot be beaten.” The girl explained.

“And because she thinks he’s invincible, you’re afraid that you won’t be able to beat him in here, no matter what you do.” Akechi finished.

“Precisely. If we’re to continue, it’d be best if we did it after she saw me beat him in the real world.”

“Can you?”

“I haven’t so far. But I know I can. He’s been training me since I was a child, and so much is depending on me. I promised to not let you down, and I’m a woman of my word.”

“Alright, so tomorrow, you beat your dad in the real world, we send the calling card, you beat your dad in here, and then we steal the Treasure.”

“Ummm, I wouldn’t recommend that Seeker. Palace security is at its max right before a heist. We can’t risk a Shadow interrupting the game.” Morgana pointed out.

“Plus, we don’t know how long the game will take, or how much more of the fortress we have to go. Better we treat tomorrow as our last day of infiltration.” Akechi added.

“But tomorrow’s my last free day. If we miss that, then by the next time we can infiltrate the Palace, we’ll only have two days before Mitsuyo makes good on her threat.” Yu reminded.

“Don’t worry Seeker. We’ll win.” Shiho reassured.

“I know we will. We beat Kobayakawa. We can beat Mitsuyo.” Akechi replied.

“If there’s nothing else, I advise we leave. It’s probably very late in the real world.” Hifumi suggested.

As Yu walked through the streets, he noticed that yet another thunderstorm was brewing. When a lightning strike struck a nearby antenna, Yu saw something strange out of the corner. Strange, but familiar; the azure glow of the Velvet Room door. The glow was coming from within an alleyway, and there it was, with Caroline sitting at the top of its frame, dangling her feet without a care in the world. When Yu approached, she quickly turned her head towards him and smiled.

“There you are inmate.”

“Hey Caroline. Why are you here? In the real world, I mean?”
“Master has decided to extend the list of places where you can access the Velvet Room’s services, especially if you’re going to be traversing both Palaces and Mementos. Now get in. My sister and I have something to discuss.”

With that, the door opened just as Caroline jumped off her perch, and before Yu could react, she literally kicked his butt, forcing him in. Once again in the Velvet Room, his clothes changed to his prisoner outfit, and Caroline managed to get in without having to walk through his cell. Inside the Room, Igor was nowhere to be seen, and neither was his desk, with only the twins occupying the space. Justine began the conversation.

“You’re probably wondering why we asked you here.”

“Well, it was more like ‘forced’ but yea, I am.”

“We have a request for you inmate!” Caroline replied, standing at attention.

“Oh joy.” Yu said, rolling his eyes.

“After we helped you with your courting attempts, we decided it’s only fair you return the favor.” Justine continued.

‘Helped’

“That favor is simple; you are to bring us artifacts from your world!” Caroline finished.

“Um… what? Why?”

“It’s been a tradition of the Velvet Room Attendants to receive glimpses into the waking world. It’s interesting to see how humanity has changed.” Justine lied.

“Alright, fine. What do you want?” Yu asked.

“Some form of entertainment from your world. It can be a movie, video game, or manga.” Caroline answered.

“Alright fine.”

“Excellent. Now that that’s out of the way, do you have any other business in the Velvet Room?” The attendant asked.

“Actually yes. I need some Personas fused.”

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With some new creatures to arm himself with, Yu quickly made his way back into the apartment complex, lazily stumbling his way into his current home, and he was very surprised to see Makoto waiting for him.

“Makoto? What are you doing up so late?”

“Waiting for you, actually.”

“Why?”

“Well, for starters, you’re up far past curfew. Eleven PM. Tsk tsk tsk.” She scorned, shaking her head.
“What do you want?”

“First, what were you doing up so late?”

“I was… helping Akechi with something.”

“With what exactly? It wouldn’t happen to have something to do with the thugs from when you first got here?”

“Who? Oh… no, this is completely different. He thinks it’s a lead on a case he’s been working on, but it could also be a wild goose chase, so he doesn’t want Sae involved.”

“I see. I’ll have to check with him then. Now, as for why I stayed up so late for you.”

Makoto fidgeted about, as if trying to figure out how to best say.

“If it isn’t too much trouble, I’d like to come with you next time you go to work for Sis.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well… we… we haven’t really had too much time to ourselves. And since you’ve been here… you’ve had more time with her than I have in the past three years combined.”

“Alright sure. But just so you know, it’s not my choice to spend time with her.”

“Oh I know. But still.” Makoto replied, a bit forlorn in her tone.

“Yea sure, you can come. Though whether Sae-san lets you stay or not I don’t know.”

“That’s fine. And thank you.” The teenage girl replied with a warm smile, which Yu returned before going inside his room. The teenager had stripped off his clothes, ready to change and go to bed. But the moment he opened his drawer to pull out some pajamas, he heard a crack of thunder, and he knew Makoto heard it too. Knowing what was to come this time, Yu prepared himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a very specific costume. Something that he knew would embarrass him to no end, but at the same time, would calm her down to no end.

“Y-Yu?” Makoto’s voice squeaked from beyond the closed door. Her volume was down compared to last time, but Yu could still hear the desperation in her voice. Grabbing what he saw and putting it on, he went over to the door.

“I’m here!” Yu replied, flinging it open.

Tears were starting to form in Makoto’s eyes, but those quickly vanished the moment she saw Yu. In his panda costume.

“Pffft…. HAHAHAHA!!”

Makoto burst out laughing, pointing a wobbly finger at the man standing before her. She clutched her stomach as she barreled over, gasping for air and wheezing the whole time. Under normal circumstances, he’d either be embarrassed or furious, but for now, he was just glad she wasn’t hurting. A sudden boom of thunder rippled throughout the room, and Makoto covered her mouth with her free hand, as if she was told to stop laughing by Sae, and she had to suppress the giggles.

So apparently her laughter can override her PTSD. That’s very interesting.
Another crack of thunder, and Makoto’s laughing fit started to subside. The phone rang, and Makoto raced to pick it up.

“Hey Sis. Don’t worry, I’m fine.” Makoto answered hastily, knowing who was calling and why.

“Narukami was ready this time?”

“Yes.”

Makoto began to snicker.

“Sis… he’s wearing his panda costume!” She said with a snort.

“Really? Well, I’m just glad you’re alright Makoto.”

“Don’t worry Sis. I’ll be fine.”

“Alright then. I trust Narukami will stay with you until you go to sleep?”

“If it comes to that, sure.” Yu answered.

“Alright. Good night Makoto.”

“Hey Sis, wait!” The teenager implored.

“What is it?” Sae replied, alarm clear in her tone.

“Is… is it alright if I come with Yu-kun to work with you next time he goes?”

“You want to visit me at work? Why?”

“Because… I hardly ever spend time with you. And this could be our only chance.”

“… Fine. But only if you have all your homework done.”

“I will! Thank you so much Sis!” Makoto replied.

“Good night Makoto.” Sae repeated, hanging up this time.

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