**Resolve and Regression**

by **VeggieGuru**

**Summary**

Lupin and the gang are out of dodge after the interesting events that happened at the Shake Hanz headquarters, and the past is behind them—but that doesn't mean it's gone. As the trio begins settling into their new hideout, it seems Goemon has carried along some psychological baggage, and not just that of recent. Lupin and Jigen have been there for him through many rough instances, including multiple betrayals and suicide attempts, but this time things are becoming more complicated.

**Notes**

If you like Lupin III: Part 1-4, I hope you'll like this because I plan to do a lot of referencing! If you haven't seen or don't remember the older Parts, don't worry because I will make sure to recap enough so the reference is understandable. (If there's a reference you know but aren't sure where it came from, just ask and I'll tell you the episode in case you'd like to watch it for yourself!)

**The fanart** (just sketches, really, not even scanned... *cough*) **will be posted at the end of each corresponding chapter, if you're interested!**

If you'd like to know a bit of reasoning behind this story, see the end notes. And if you have any constructive criticism or suggestions, I'd love to hear it! Thank you!
Resolve
and
Regression

See the end of the work for more notes.
A Trio's Profession

Lupin, Jigen, and Goemon were not your average thieves—definitely not. In fact, they were so far from average that there was never a doubt that they would be able to overcome whatever predicament they were in…and that belief went beyond their own views. Inspector Zenigata of the ICPO knew better than anyone that the cunning ways and relentless enthusiasm of the Lupin gang were sure to get them out of trouble—or rather, let them get away with making trouble. It wasn’t that Zenigata was bad at his job. Countless times he’d proven that no person of the law had a better chance against Lupin. The only thing the gang had over Zenigata was that crazy dash of luck that never failed them.

Speaking of which, the Lupin gang had just gotten away from Zenigata after an exhaustingly long chase. As if the whole incident with the Shake Hanz Corporation wasn’t enough, they had just spent an entire week sneaking about under the inspector’s nose—and no heists to benefit from! Finally, it was good to kick back and relax in their newly found hideout.

“Well, we’ve outstayed our welcome in Italy and now France; what better place to visit next than Spain?” Lupin joked, putting his feet up on the coffee table. Jigen smoked a cigarette on the old sofa adjacent to him, while Goemon took his place on the floor in his usual contemplative posture.

“Don’t jinx us,” Jigen said, sounding out of all motivation. “I never thought the day would come when I’d actually run out of bullets. You hear that, Lupin? Pops was so hot on our heels that we didn’t even have time to stop for ammo!”

Lupin let out a chuckle, one that was far too amused for Jigen’s liking. Jigen’s sharpshooting skills were what made him after all; having a gun with no bullets felt like being stripped naked and dumped in Antarctica with nothing but a matchstick. “C’mon, Jigen, lighten up!” Lupin encouraged. “Even Goemon had a bit of fun!”

The samurai looked up at Lupin with disapproval. “I beg to differ,” he said flatly. “Our escape was going well until Fujiko fled, leaving us stranded.”

A grimace came over Lupin’s face. Of course they were going to use Fujiko against him… Jigen and Goemon had been pretty convinced at the end of the Shake Hanz event that she was more or less their ally—turns out it was less. Sure, she would always have their wellbeing in the back of her mind (“wellbeing” denoting all but death), but they should have known that she was never going to become a predictable woman. “Listen…” Lupin defended, a hurt grimace on his face, “she took our helicopter, but if you look at the big picture, she was a great distraction for us to escape!”

“Women…” Jigen grunted, pushing his hat down as Goemon nodded with a grunt of agreement. “We barely made it out of there, Lupin, so don’t give me that crap.” He leaned forward and put out his cigarette butt in the ashtray, breathing out a stream of smoke.

“Yeah, but you have to admit, that’s half the fun,” Lupin said with a smirk. “When you went to reload at the cathedral…the look on your face was priceless when you saw you had run one shot left! But you made the best of it. Disarmed that agent with no problem so we could hightail it.”
“Don’t try to get on my good side with flattery,” Jigen warned, but Lupin just chuckled.

“I have to agree with Lupin,” Goemon spoke up with a hint of a smile. “Your expression was quite…memorable, but you pulled through.”

Jigen let out a heavy sigh, realizing that he couldn’t deny the enjoyment of their flee. “Alright, it was fun,” he admitted, grinning and joining in with Lupin’s cackles and Goemon’s stifled laughter. “But your face was even better when your hair got caught between those two pillars, Goemon.”

“Oh yeah! The pillars that you cut, then tried to look all cool by not moving as they collapsed right above you!”

“And crashed into each other so close to you that it pinched the back of your hair.”

Goemon’s face fell before he scowled and blushed a bit with embarrassment. “My hair must’ve been ruffled from all the commotion.”

“You wouldn’t cut it to get away, and you got so mad when Jigen pulled out his pocket knife… ‘YOU WILL RUE THE DAY YOU TOUCH MY HAIR!’” Lupin quoted, then started snickering too hard to continue. Goemon furrowed his brow, looking at him curtly. It wasn’t often he panicked, but when he did, they weren’t going to let it go unnoticed.

“You had to block all those bullets while we pulled your hair from between those pillars,” Jigen added.

“I’m kinda glad you didn’t let us cut your hair,” Lupin said openly. “We would’ve had to shave your head bald to make it all even!” Goemon dreaded that horrific thought while the other two laughed.

“Don’t forget the laxative you were slipped, Lupin,” Goemon retorted, reminding them grimly about the most humiliating incident of their escape.

“Did you have to bring that part up…?” Lupin whined, but was soon joining right in with their hilarity.

They’d made it out, were back in hiding, and planning their next scheme. Things were back to normal…or so they thought.

---

Faces from their great escape: Jigen with one shot left, Goemon getting his hair caught, and Lupin about to have to deal with some laxative problems...
An Unanswered Question

The atmosphere was rigid. Something didn’t feel right, but his eyelids were too heavy to lift…. It wasn’t surprising considering this was the first normal sleep he’d gotten in days. What was that smell? Blood…?

“How does it feel to almost be the strongest man in the world?”

Goemon drew in a sharp breath through his nose, jolted awake. I know that voice…

“That’s why you hang around with him, isn’t it?”

His hand instinctively grasped Zantetsuken as he sat up, any trace of tiredness dispersing. It was dark, the pulled curtains blocking any moonlight from granting him sight. He’d heard that doubt-inducing phrase before. “Show yourself,” Goemon said stiffly, getting up on one knee. He heard nothing, not where the person was, not even the breathing of Lupin and Jigen, which made him question where they were.

“Do you recall saying, your ‘relationship with Lupin is not something a mere machine can put into words’?” the voice asked. Goemon turned on his heel, unsheathing Zantetsuken in a flash—only to pierce nothing. “The mind is often seen as a machine as well. Was that a way to admit that even you don’t know where you two stand?” Goemon’s brows knitted together. His eyes darted around, looking for the slightest movement. Listening for the location of the voice was getting him nowhere… “Words, time, and data did not offer enough of an explanation. And neither did Zantetsuken.”

“Why are you here?” Goemon demanded, making it quite clear that their presence was unwelcome. “Answer me!”

“Answer you? You never answered me.” Their voice suddenly became callous, “Have you forgotten?” Goemon’s breath got caught in his throat. He ran towards the curtains, slashing through the fabric to reveal the window. The room flooded with silvery light, but exposed no one. Goemon strained his eyes for anything—and there it was, the blood he had smelled. There was a pool of it steadily making its way across the floor.

“L-Lupin!” He let out a sudden gasp, eyes wide—but he quickly shut them. The room was so bright—but why? Shielding his eyes with his sleeve, he squinted around the room. He was sitting right where he was the night before, having fallen asleep propped up on Zantetsuken.

“That’s right, it’s me! With groceries!” Lupin’s voice announced as an old man walked through the front door. Behind him was another, scruffier old man. They were new personas, but old men, just as they had disguised themselves in France. Jigen kicked the door closed behind him, both of them setting down bags of food in the kitchen. Lupin ripped his mask off and chucked it aside. “How’d you sleep?” Goemon looked at the two of them, then at the window from which the daylight was flooding in. Lupin followed his gaze, then looked at him, unamused. “You could have just opened the curtains, you didn’t have to slice them off. Now we gotta buy new ones…”

Goemon hardly heard him, staring blankly at the pile of cloth beneath the window. How did that happen? In his sleep? “What time is it?”

“It’s almost nine,” Lupin replied, digging in one of the bags. “You were fast asleep, so we didn’t bother to wake you. Here!” He tossed a clear plastic box over to Goemon, who caught it
nimbly. “Grocery-store sushi for breakfast!”

The samurai looked down at the box filled with sliced sushi rolls and gave a little smile of content. Lupin headed over to the small kitchen, tying an apron on and cracking a few eggs into a new pan as Jigen continued to put the groceries away. Goemon opened the container, but for some reason felt too uneasy to begin eating. His mind was muddled. It had only been a dream, but the words were still heavy around him. He knew exactly what they were geared towards—to confuse him and plant doubt within him, make him feel conflicted about his choices. He knew, and yet they were working.

He shook his head, and like most experiences with bad dreams, concluded that was all it was. Nothing more. “Itadakimasu.” Goemon reached over to the disposable chopsticks and paused before splitting them. The last thing he needed right now was the premonition of a bad omen. A bead of cold sweat fell from his temple as he gripped a stick in each hand and prepared to pull.

Snap!

They split apart evenly, granting him some relief. Feeling much more reassured, he picked up his first piece of sushi.

“Back at it with the superstitions?” Jigen asked, sitting on the sofa with a plate of eggs and toast.

“Hey, the bacon’s not ready!” Lupin yelled at him.

“Well, I’ll eat the bacon when it is ready,” he replied with a smirk, picking up a whole fried egg on his fork and delivering it to his mouth. It’d been so long since he had a real breakfast—a real meal—so this was definitely going to hit the spot. The bacon continued to sizzle as Lupin muttered something about Jigen being a pig, but it was all in jest.

“Oh, yeah, Goemon,” Lupin called out to him, holding up a plastic-wrapped tray. “Salmon fillets—with the skin, just how you like it.” Goemon looked at him, surprised.

“Why did you buy that?” he asked unsurely.

Lupin blinked, looking at him oddly. “I could’ve sworn you said you liked grilled salmon, right?”

“Yes,” he responded. The other two raised their eyebrows at Goemon. Wasn’t that enough of an answer? Jigen paused, narrowing his eyes from underneath his hat.

“Well, that’s why we bought it,” Lupin said with a shrug and unconcerned smile, opening the refrigerator and placing it in before returning to the searing bacon. While it had been a relevant answer, that wasn’t what Goemon had meant. Why would he buy something that Goemon likes? Courtesy? To win his favor? Because he saw him as a friend?

It doesn’t matter. That struggle is behind us. Goemon placed his hands together after finishing his last piece of sushi. “Gochisousama.” Knitting his brows together and shutting his eyes, he hoped to shrug off that irked feeling lingering inside him. He didn’t know why it was there, or what even brought it on. Sure, perhaps that dream had initiated it, but that didn’t help him identify it. He wasn’t sure if he should try to understand in order to conquer it, or just try to extinguish it without any second thoughts. I’m getting nowhere… Goemon opened his eyes, only to see the room vacant of any others. He looked around, confused. How… how long have I been meditating…?
“Hello.”

The unexpected voice made Goemon jump, once again automatically placing his hand on Zantetsuken. In one swift movement, he had his sword drawn and was perched on the coffee table, eyes intent…until they widened with disbelief. “Y-you…?”

There the figure stood, looking down at him with a sort of arrogance. Those old white hakama, that grey kimono, that unsympathetic exterior…it was a perfect mirror image of him, but…colder. Goemon shook his head but didn’t dare take his eyes off the doppelganger. The voice he had recognized in the dream was his own…? How did he not realize? “Care to continue our talk?” Goemon was speechless, making his mirror image smirk. “That’s fine. Talking to yourself only takes one person, after all.”

Goemon clenched his jaw. Was he really talking to his former self…? He knew it was insane, but he felt as if he had no choice, as if he were being forced to. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I thought I would come to remind you, but it is clear you indeed have not forgotten,” the copy told Goemon, as if the thought were absurd. “You have just been defying it the whole time.”

“Defying what?” Goemon narrowed his eyes, gripping Zantetsuken and keeping it pointed at his counterpart. The other scoffed, unimpressed.

“Defying your purpose,” he answered. “And, in reality, we both know why. It’s fear.”

“Fear?” Goemon asked, taken aback, but a look of confidence came over him. “You are sadly mistaken. Clearly you do not know me.”

“Oh, I know you,” the copy said, finding that display of confidence almost satire. He casually pushed the blade aside as he stepped forward. “And you know me much better than you care to admit. I am you. I am who you are deep down. Your roots. Your foundation. Your clarity. But you have been keeping me buried down. Why do you think you have been so troubled?”

My clarity? Goemon tried not to think about what this illusion was telling him. “I am not going to be the victim of your mind game again. I won’t let you deceive me.”

“Deceive you? Ha. I’m here because I know you’re tired of this inner turmoil, and I’m tired of being locked away. I am going to make sure you stop ignoring your needs.” The copy looked at him with a stony expression. “The sooner you listen to me, the quicker this remedy can rid you of those feelings,” he continued, “but you are wrong if you think some antidote will simply come along on its own.”

Remedy? Antidote? Goemon glared at the clone. “What are you talking about?”

“The doubt, uncertainty, anxiousness…. There is only one way to rid yourself of all your internal anguish,” the other replied. He grinned. “I am your only option.”

Goemon wasn’t exactly sure what he was talking about, but that smirk was enough for him to determine the end of their conversation. He lunged forward, teeth bared, driving Zantetsuken straight through the copy’s torso.

“Woah, woah!”

Goemon raised his eyebrows.
“That’s my bacon, you know!” Lupin criticized, holding his hands up to avoid the blade of Zantetsuken that was hovering over his plate. Goemon’s eyes flashed around, seeing that he had been seated in the same spot on the floor before thrusting forward. Lupin added, “If you wanted some bacon, you could’ve just asked!”

The samurai slowly sat back down, looking a bit disordered as he sheathed his katana. As the agitated expression faded from Goemon’s face, Jigen discreetly removed his hand from his revolver tucked in the back of his pants. “I don’t want any bacon,” he said simply. “I apologize, I must still be tired.”

Lupin shrugged, digging into his breakfast. “No harm done.” However, he and Jigen exchanged subtle, concerned glances. Goemon turned his eyes down at the table, a grim expression taking over his face as he held his head. He then realized that his sushi was untouched, save for one piece. “You were mumbling something,” Lupin spoke up, seeing Goemon staring questioningly at his food.

“We thought you were reciting some type of mantra or something,” Jigen added after swallowing a bite of toast.

“Why is that surprising?” Goemon asked, furrowing his brow at their attempt to gang up on him. “Mantras are a common meditation practice. Or is that something not to your liking?” Goemon paused as they looked at him with a bit of surprise, which worked its way over to him as well. He swallowed, feeling embarrassed at his sudden defensiveness. “Sorry…”

“Man, you really are tired. I haven’t seen you irritated like this since Fujiko made fun of you for having a mother complex,” Lupin said, he and Jigen laughing a bit at the memory: Goemon had been admiring the Mona Lisa, commenting on her beautiful motherly portrayal. As consequence for that being one of the very few times he’d ever praised a woman, Fujiko had diagnosed him as having a mother complex—which resulted in him becoming very defensive…

“Oh, man, I remember that. You know, I saw a thing on T.V. the other day about some psychologist talking about guys that wanna be with women like their mother. I think it was called the Oedipus complex.” Jigen explained.

“Oedipus? Ew, isn’t that the guy who killed his dad to screw his mom?” Lupin asked, looking over at Goemon suspiciously. They clearly were not choosing their words wisely, realizing the very sinister look upon the samurai’s face.

Jigen hurriedly said, “N-not that you wanna do your mom or anything.”

That didn’t help—in fact, it only made them want to laugh more. Goemon’s eyebrow twitched, growing annoyed behind his firm expression as they giggled.

“Come on, looking back, it was pretty funny…” Lupin tried to persuade. Goemon stood up. “Ah—come on, it was a joke, just a joke!” Lupin scrambled back behind the chair, Jigen backing away as Goemon stepped over, putting a hand on Zantetsuken.

Now they remembered what had happened when they made fun of him the first time…
Chapter 02
An Unanswered Question
A Lack of Discretion

“You owe me a new chair, Goemon,” Lupin said in a reprimanding tone, looking at the addressed in the rearview mirror. They were driving in their new yellow Fiat—if one thing was to never change despite trying to keep a low profile, it was Lupin’s preference for yellow Fiats. Goemon wondered how he always managed to get cars so quickly…. Jigen sat in the passenger seat, letting the stream of his cigarette smoke filter out the slightly opened window. Goemon, as usual, sat in the back seat, arms crossed. He opened an eye to look at Lupin.

“I owe you nothing. If anything, you owe me gratitude for cutting only your chair.”

Goemon let out a little huff. “Yet again, you’ve made me cut needlessly.”

“I made you—?”

“Eh, just drop it already,” Jigen interrupted, putting his cigarette out in the car’s ashtray, “before you make him cut the car in half again.”

“Again—? Oh, wow, I almost forgot about that,” Lupin said with a little chuckle.

“Remember, Goemon, it was one of the first times you tried to kill me!” Of course he remembered. It ended with them laughing it off, and Goemon had been teaming up with Lupin and Jigen ever since. However, the samurai wasn’t too keen on Lupin’s laughter.

Tried? he thought to himself, watching Lupin’s expression in the mirror. “Is that supposed to be condescending?” Lupin met his stare and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s up with you lately? Do you have a headache from your hair being pulled too much?” He shook his head to indicate he was giving up on trying to understand, then glanced over at Jigen. “It’s easy for you to not be upset, it wasn’t your chair! Goemon never goes after you.”

“Maybe it’s because I don’t push him. You’ve got no restraint—you don’t stop until somebody makes you,” Jigen pointed out. Lupin argued that they were both laughing equally about Goemon’s…preference of women earlier, and joked that he was just a bully. Goemon thought about that for a moment. A bully? Did Lupin really not appreciate the self-control he displayed when he curbed his aggravation? Jigen saw Goemon’s unamused face. “You joke too much, Lupin.”

“Man, you guys are no fun right now…” he complained. As if driving the boring backroads to avoid being caught wasn’t dull enough, they had about three more hours to go until they reached their destination. They had debated whether to wait a little longer and get settled in before doing another heist, but decided that was out of the question. They couldn’t stay in one place for too long, even if it was their new home base. But doing a heist would bring the authorities right back on their trail…which Lupin planned to use to their advantage. They wanted to keep Spain out of the picture, so that meant backtracking and pulling a scheme in France to make it seem like they never left, or go south to Morocco and make a scene there to give the idea they had completely bypassed Spain.

In the end, it was all up to the goods, and France had more to offer at that particular time. That night was a grand ceremony for the Pierre Industries, recognized as the classiest, most innovative architectural business in France. It was perfect timing: No need to wait in hiding for a few days before it happened, and it was too short a notice for the ceremony to be rescheduled. Lupin had already sent out his card; Zenigata was sure to be there.

“Finally, a gas station!” Lupin said eagerly, not bothering to hit the breaks as he pulled into
the parking lot—he’d had to use the restroom for what seemed like hours.

“Good, I need to buy some cigarettes,” Jigen commented while Lupin drove up to one of the gas pumps. Jigen turned to Goemon before stepping out. “You want anything?”

“No, I’m fine,” he answered, staying seated.

“The last thing you ate was that sushi this morning, you’ve gotta be hungry,” Lupin said.

Goemon looked at them indifferently. “I’m not.” He could go days without eating. Even when he tried to starve himself to death, he was unaffected. With that and a chipper “Alrighty,” Jigen and Lupin made their way to the store.

“Ingrate…”

Goemon stiffened and eyed the seat next to him, which was suddenly occupied. Not you again… He nervously looked at Lupin and Jigen walking away. Of course they hadn’t noticed the copy. He wasn’t real, and Goemon wasn’t going to acknowledge him.

“Are you really going to try to ignore me?” the clone asked, furrowing his brow in condemnation. Goemon gritted his teeth, unable to help looking over at him. Now that he had his attention, his doppelganger continued. “I can’t believe you put up with that.”

“What?” Goemon asked, a bit surprised.

“Do not play stupid with me. ‘Tried’? ‘Bully’? That got under your skin just as much as it did mine.” The illusions voice was harsh, and Goemon didn’t like it, but he didn’t have a reply. “Lupin should be grateful that you have not done worse, things that would make him think of you far more unforgiving than a mere ‘bully.’”

“That doesn’t bother me,” Goemon told his other self. “I have learned that Lupin means no harm with his jokes.”

“Jokes? What makes you think you can even discern joke from mockery?” Those words formed a pit in Goemon’s stomach. They both knew he was never good at distinguishing the two. They were so similar, he just couldn’t grasp it… “Because you can’t recognize the difference, you tell yourself all those offensive remarks are jokes, but it doesn’t mean they are.”

“That one about being a bully was,” Goemon defended. “I know it.”

“How so? Have you figured out some sort of equation? Something that proves Lupin doesn’t classify you so lowly?” the copy challenged. There was a moment of silence between them as Goemon began to lose confidence in his capabilities. “That’s what I thought. But that aside, you and I both know that ‘tried to kill’ statement wasn’t a joke.” He sniggered at Goemon’s reluctance to address the subject.

“That one about being a bully was,” Goemon defended. “I know it.”

“I have no objections. It is something that happened in our past.”

Goemon’s mirror image scowled. “And something he’s trying to deride you for! It’s a failure that you committed, and you are just going to let him use it as satire?!”

“That is not what he’s doing!” Goemon argued, heatedly turning towards the illusion. “Those are good memories to him!”

“Good because you failed to kill him, and because he succeeded in overcoming your
attempt!” the copy said brashly, unmoving contrary to Goemon’s agitated state. “And you could have killed him at Shake Hanz. You were killing him. He was on his deathbed. But what did you do?” Goemon felt his chest tighten. “What did you do?!” It was all Goemon could do to attempt to keep his breathing steady as the copy narrowed his eyes at him. “You let him live! No, you saved him! Why?”

“I…” Goemon looked around the car, anywhere but his double.

“Why?!”

“I don’t know!” he yelled back, glaring.

“What, are you going to tell me that you didn’t want to kill Lupin? That you don’t want to kill Lupin?!”

“Of course I do!”

For some reason, the clone gave a satisfied smirk. “I am glad you acknowledged that fact. Remember what you just said.” Goemon looked at him, shaken at how he had just been played. “Now, I will tell you why you let Lupin live. You’re weak. You’ve become a coward.”

“No,” Goemon opposed firmly. “Choosing not to kill someone isn’t cowardly!”

“Perhaps not, but doing so out of fear makes it so!”

Goemon glowered at him, saying lowly, “You keep speaking of fear, yet you have no rationale.”

The copy raised his eyebrows in amusement, as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. It wasn’t often that Goemon, past or present, laughed, but this was one of those instances as the illusion’s stifled snickers grew into full laughter. Goemon snarled, having had enough of this—

“Goemon, what are you doing?”

With a quick gasp, he looked up to see Lupin and Jigen at their respective sides of the car. He blinked, seeing he had one leg on the seat, the other stretched across the car floor, ready to lunge with his hand gripped and prepared to unsheathe Zantetsuken. The other two looked at him, waiting for an answer, but he couldn’t conjure up one. He had always been a terrible liar, and this instance was a truth he couldn’t bring himself to reveal.

Lupin and Jigen looked at each other oddly before the former shrugged. “Here,” he said with a grin, throwing a plastic-wrapped item at the now seated Goemon. “It’s teriyaki, haha!”

Goemon looked down at what was in his hand as Lupin began putting gas in the car and Jigen stood outside with his cigarette. It was a stick of beef jerky—teriyaki flavored, as Lupin had indicated. It was a joke. A joke on how Goemon ate only Japanese food, unless he had no choice. He knitted his brows together, determined that Lupin wasn’t being disrespectful or mocking him. He knew it, he just did. I know it’s a joke, I can tell, Goemon told himself over and over. “Something being teriyaki flavored doesn’t make it Japanese,” Goemon criticized as the other two got in the car. “But…it does make it taste tolerable,” he admitted, tearing off another mouthful with his teeth. Jigen and Lupin grinned with amusement as they pulled out of the gas station, their companion steadily eating his snack.

Perhaps he had been a little hungry.
The ORIGINAL Teriyaki Boyz, complete with drifting capabilities!
A Heist in Session

“You ready?” Lupin asked in a sultry voice underneath silky locks of blonde hair falling over his shoulders. He brushed them out of the way as he drove down the streets of Paris, checking his lipstick in the rearview mirror. Man, he made a sexy woman--it was a shame he had to wear a mask for this disguise.... “Hey, Goemon, does this remind you of anything?”

“Eh?” he said from the backseat. He thought for a moment. “Do you mean when you posed as a woman and married Onabess?”

“Um, no, but I can see why you would think of that...”

“Then I’m not sure I understand.” Goemon said flatly.

“Oh, you know, maybe a certain girl you fell for…” Lupin said in a dainty voice, then added in his usual manly tone, “or should I say guy?”

Jigen let out a little chuckle, but Goemon clearly didn’t find it amusing.

“Oh, come on, it’s okay to laugh about it now,” Lupin assured as he parked and adjusted his fake breasts before exiting the car. Goemon thought about those words, the ones Lupin had told him after their duel at Shake Hanz, as he laid bandaged and bloodied in front of him.... It was hard to laugh about being won over by a man in disguise, and even harder now that it was associated with an even worse memory. “Catch you later,” Lupin said with a wink and a grin before strutting off around the corner in his form-fitting red dress.

“Has he no shame?” Goemon said flatly.

“HA! It’s Lupin. Do you even have to ask?” Jigen said, getting out of the car. It was time to pull off this heist. They hadn’t done a proper one in what seemed like ages. “Let’s get a move on.”

There it was, the enormous building that served as a hotel for the rich and luxurious and seconded as a festivity hall. Lupin approached the vast open doors, the light careening out of them stretching all the way across the street. Two burly men in suits looked him down as he walked up the steps gracefully. “Is something wrong?” disguised Lupin asked in a casual, womanly voice.

“Mrs. Pierre is supposed to be sick,” one of them said with suspicion, stepping forward, “and unable to make it to the party.”

“Mrs. Pierre is supposed to be sick,” one of them said with suspicion, stepping forward, “and unable to make it to the party.”

“I just couldn’t miss tonight—it means so much to my darling.” He sighed wistfully. “I know he wants the best for me, but sometimes you just have to make sacrifices to show you care. Don’t you agree?” he looked at them emotionally, his persuasiveness winning them over.

“You’re certainly right,” the man said, backing away to let Lupin through as the other man wiped a sentimental tear from his eye.

Lupin suppressed a smirk. *Disguising myself as the successor’s wife was too easy! Without a snag, he sauntered across the marble of the entrance hall, looking up at the interior balcony lining the walls, the ceiling stretching stories high. People dressed to the pique of fashion all seemed to be heading one way. Lupin followed suit. He knew the celebration was in the ballroom on the seventh floor, so he passed the two spiral staircases and entered the glass elevator. Up he went, and exited onto white polished tile. He could already hear the chatter from the ballroom, giving him no*
doubts as to where he was headed. Through the wooden double doors he went. All around were upper-class people, many of them probably not even from France. Long tables displayed food and drink of all sorts, as well as an open bar with two bartenders. This was indeed a party, complete with a four-man classical ensemble performing on a small stage. Even with so many people, Lupin was confident in his disguise as the wife of Mr. Pierre.

Speak of the devil, Mr. Pierre stood at the head of the room with his father, who would be giving him official ownership of Pierre Industries tonight, and along with it the key to all their doors...including the door of a particular safe. Ah, and with them was a very attentive Zenigata. Lupin’s lips curled up into a mischievous smile.

“Darling, I made it!” Lupin called out to Mr. Pierre, who looked over with surprise. Lupin took his arm, sidling up next to him.

“But earlier today you were completely bedridden,” he said, astounded. Mr. Pierre’s father looked equally surprised, although Zenigata looked rather suspicious.

“And who is this capable-looking man?” Lupin asked, gesturing to the inspector.

“Oh, this is Inspector Zenigata,” Lupin’s temporary husband responded. He had an annoyed air about him…

“Zenigata of the ICPO,” he introduced himself politely, although looking at Lupin apprehensively.

“Zenigata? I know you, you’re practically famous!” Lupin said enthusiastically. “You’re always after that troublesome Lupin. I can’t think of a better person to be guarding us here tonight.”

Zenigata was taken by surprise with such flattery. “That’s right, ma’am. Rest assured, I won’t be leaving either of the Mr. Pierres’ sides tonight.” he said determinedly.

*How lovely...* Oh well, an obstacle, but not a tough one to overcome with the plan they had in mind.

Meanwhile, Goemon and Jigen kept to the shadows as they made their way around the outskirts of the building. It seemed quite a few guards had been dispatched around the place, despite the lack of security at the front to keep appearances looking classy. They crouched down behind one of the pristinely trimmed hedges, watching the silhouette of a pair of guards doing their patrol. They waited for just a few more steps to bring them closer. Then Goemon dashed out, slashing them with Zantetsuken—with the back of the blade, of course, rendering them unconscious with precise hits. Goemon kicked each over to the hedge before they could collapse, where Jigen pulled them out of sight. He quickly took one of the uniforms and dressed himself in it, Goemon waiting patiently and keeping watch. Luckily, he had taken them out quickly enough that they avoided any of the other guards’ sights. Jigen zipped up his pants after tucking his uniform shirt in, then pulled on a mask just as another pair of guards rounded the corner. They waited for them to walk a ways down the building before quietly making their way over to the wall and underneath one of the giant ground-floor windows. The lights were off, the room unoccupied, as expected on the night of such a big event.

Stone-faced, Goemon sliced a hole in the incredibly thick wall just big enough to crawl through, hoping not to attract attention to any security who might be passing by. Jigen made his way through, followed by Goemon, and they stood up in the vacant office room. Jigen paused, thinking. Goemon had been acting very strange that day. Sure, everyone had their off-days, but he seemed...disordered. With that type of mindset, Jigen wasn’t quite sure if he wanted to leave that
role up to Goemon—for Lupin’s sake—but he knew that they couldn’t switch spots now.

“Alright, you get headed to the seventh-floor vents. I’ll be at the hall in ten minutes.” Jigen said, to which Goemon nodded. The plan was for Jigen to trick Zenigata into thinking they’d found Lupin and lure him away from the party. Goemon would be up in the vents, and when the time was right, would jump down and hold “Mrs. Pierre” captive to start a scene. There were honestly far more discreet ways of going about stealing this key, but Lupin wanted to make sure everyone saw what was going on and leave a mark.

Jigen, on the other hand, was pretty sure Lupin just wanted to wear the dress.

Goemon stood on the solid oak desk, taking a split second to gather himself before jumping forward and slicing a hole through the ceiling. He landed, sheathing Zantetsuken as the thick piece of the second floor fell to the ground, then jumped back on the desk and forward, reaching up through the pass in the ceiling and pulling himself through. Jigen shook his head. He was such a showoff. Through each floor, chopping through a random, well-manicured hotel room, Goemon would give a quick look about before finding the tallest piece of furniture and making his way to the next level. He wasn’t surprised that during such a grand ceremony no one was in their rooms, and he managed to make it to the seventh floor undetected. However, this one was clearly not for suites or staying the night. When he crawled up through the floor, it was just a large open room full of darkness. He supposed that it must be some sort of room for smaller parties, considering this was the floor the ballroom was on. No matter; he needed to get into the vents and find his way to the celebration.

Locating the vents was easy. However, there was no furniture in this room to help him reach the ceiling—which was higher than the other rooms he’d encountered so far. Goemon hated to do it after he’d already cut so much floor...so worthless...but it had to be done. He sprinted towards the wall and jumped, piercing Zantetsuken securely into it. Sequentially, he planted his feet on the wall and held onto the sword tightly, allowing him to flip his body backwards and up, nimbly placing his feet on the wall again. He pulled Zantetsuken out and sprang off his toes towards the vent. Quickly, stabbing the katana into the ceiling, he held it to swing his feet forward and kick the vent in. In a fluid movement, Zantetsuken was removed and he was in the ducts.

The vents were spacious—for vents. Goemon crawled on his hands and knees, following the direction in which the jumbled amplified voices were coming from. In front of him, he could see into the ballroom—from the side. It became clear that the hall must take up two floors, and he was staring through a vent in the wall. It was very crowded, and a horizontal perspective didn’t do him much good; he needed an aerial view. Simple enough. Goemon sliced his way up and began crawling through the vents from above, peering down into the party hall. The giant crystal chandelier didn’t make seeing what was going on any easier, but he was able to catch sight of Lupin. Goemon looked at Lupin with scrutiny—that man was too convincing as woman, holding on to “her” husband’s arm and casually talking it up with Zenigata. It was difficult to hear, but he could tell the old man among them—presumably Mr. Pierre’s father—was giving a speech, gaining everyone’s attention. There it was; he was about to pass on the key...

“Inspector Zenigata!” a frenzied voice called out, bursting into the hall. Goemon watched quietly as a disguised Jigen explained how the ground floor office had been broken into. Naturally, Zenigata was rushing off. Although, Goemon pondered. Zenigata was a smart enough man to know to stay where the goods were—especially after Lupin had broken in. He wasn’t that same foolish detective he was when they had first started out. Nonetheless, whether Zenigata was privy that they had some sort of plan or not, Goemon staying in the vent wasn’t going to help either way.

To introduce his dynamic entry, Goemon kicked the vent out and began his descent—it was
quite a ways up, but posed no problem for him. There were a few shrieks of terror, including Lupin, as Goemon landed agilely onto the floor and raced over to him. He grabbed Lupin’s arm and held Zantetsuken up to his throat, making the Pierres’ eyes go wide. One glare from Goemon told them that he meant business.

“Help me!” Lupin cried out as Goemon bent his captive’s arm behind his back, the blade getting ever-nearer to his throat.

“H-here, take the key!” the older man said desperately.

“What, are you crazy?!” his son said, whirling on his heel to face him. “Don’t you dare!”

The attendees of the ceremony were either stunned silent or loudly panicking, and it was like a muffled drone in Goemon’s head. His hand was becoming unsteady, making the blade tremble as it worked its way against his will, exhibiting his indecisiveness as it came within just a fraction of an inch of Lupin’s neck. Goemon didn’t want to—but at the same time, his grip on Lupin’s arm showed just how much he didn’t want to give up this chance. If he did it now, he’d never have to doubt himself again.

“Ouch, hey, you can take it easy!” Lupin said in a hushed voice. “It’s just an act!”

Startled, Goemon instantly let Lupin go while he knew he still had the willpower to do it. He was beginning to feel overwhelmed, all those voices swarming around him, Mr. Pierre yelling at his father.

“Don’t just give up—!” Lupin started to say, but then had a better idea. He flung himself forward onto the short, hefty old man, letting out a delicate cry as if Goemon had pushed him. It interrupted the dispute between father and son, and it was in that instant that the lights suddenly went out. It must’ve been Jigen’s doing, his improvisation providing them some cover. This chaotic moment was perfect for Lupin to snatch the key. Then in mere seconds, the backup generators kicked in, lighting the hall.

“Th-the key!” the older Pierre shouted from the floor underneath Lupin, realizing that the key was gone. Lupin quickly got to his feet, making sure to straighten out his dress.

“Pierre is gone,” Goemon pointed out in a serious tone.

“Sorry, boys!” a familiar voice sounded—a voice that one would call enchanting, another absolutely dread-inducing. At the ballroom entrance, Mr. Pierre stood—at least, it seemed to be him until his face was torn off to reveal Fujiko’s. In a simple swipe, she tore off the pricy suit that was her disguise, leaving her in a skin-tight black bodysuit. She waved at them, key in-hand. “Bye-bye!”

Goemon glared after her, but Lupin merely grinned. “Well played.”

“How can you say—” Goemon started, but realized in the frenzy of people, guards were approaching the entrance. All the guests were clearing the way; it was no doubt who the target was. “Get down!” He kicked over one of the tables for Lupin to hide behind, gourmet food scattering across the shellacked floor. They could play the hostage situation to work their way out, but now the key was on the run, and they had to go claim it. Lupin pulled his pistol out from his cleavage, smirking as Goemon stopped bullets in their tracks with unbelievable accuracy. There were six guards there now, so definitely more to come. Lupin aimed over the table and shot for the one automatic rifle—and successfully put it out of business.
“Let’s go!” Lupin said, vaulting over the table and rushing after Goemon as bullets ricocheted off Zantetsuken. The samurai narrowed his eyes, angling his blade just so as another round came forth. Much to the guard’s surprise, his gun was knocked straight from his hand, the bullet having been deflected back at him. “You’re such a show off!”

Goemon couldn’t help but grin, working in tandem with Lupin as he shot at the security, dividing their attention so Goemon could plunge into the fray and begin taking them out. Each guard toppled to the floor—but apparently they hadn’t been fast enough. Reinforcements were rushing down the hallway, albeit in an unorganized fashion. However, Lupin and Goemon knew what to do. The latter dashed towards them, deflecting all shots fired and easily knocking the first pair of the pack unconscious. Then Goemon leapt up above the group ahead, taking them by surprise and—as expected—avoided getting a single scratch on him as Lupin aimed to disarm them.

Piece of cake. They might not have all been taken down, but it was enough for the duo to rush by. They didn’t have time to waste and came to the end of the hall, finding themselves on the indoor balcony—which connected to the glass elevator. They could see it coming down and made their way towards it, Goemon pausing to block any bullets from the remaining guards until Lupin got around the corner and out of sight. In no time, the samurai cut an opening to the clear elevator shaft just as the car passed below them. They jumped in, landing on the roof of it as it traveled downward, earning a few shrieks from the passengers.

Seventh floor…sixth floor…fifth floor…. The security didn’t dare shoot while Lupin and Goemon were in the direct line of innocents, giving Lupin time to fix his hair as they watched through the glass more reinforcements gathering in the entrance hall. Fourth floor…

Goemon had had enough. He cut an opening into the glass and kicked it forward, making any entering guards move out of harm’s way as it shattered across the floor. This gave Goemon his chance at their escape. He grabbed the strap to Lupin’s dress.

“Hey, what’re you—ACK!” Lupin slammed his hands against the opening in protest to being pushed out. “I’m wearing heels, I can’t land in these!” Goemon furrowed his brows. Lupin couldn’t take them off either, now that there was glass all over the floor. This whole interaction only lasted about three seconds, after which Goemon wrapped an arm around Lupin and jumped. “THIS IS WAY TOO HIGH, YOU’RE CRAZY!”

Goemon landed on the ground almost noiselessly, Lupin’s midriff tucked up into his armpit. The thief felt a bit of sweat drip off his forehead, his nose hardly inches off the ground when they landed. But there was no time to dwell—and no time for Goemon to bother putting Lupin down. It was open fire—while Goemon had cleared the center of the room, that didn’t mean there were less people. As he darted forward, he hiked Lupin over his shoulder, allowing him to aim at those behind him while Goemon took care of the shots fired from the front.

The cold night air hit them, and with a swift leap they were at the bottom the entrance stairs. There was enough time for a breath and Lupin to get back on his own feet.

“Oh, Goemon, you really know how to treat a woman,” Lupin teased in a girly voice. Goemon looked back at him, not amused and quite possibly disturbed. Just in time to dissolve that awkward situation, an unmasked Jigen pulled up in the Fiat not a moment too soon. Goemon hopped atop the roof of the car as their defense as they drove away, Jigen having scooted over to let Lupin be their designated getaway driver. As they turned the corner, Goemon slipped into the car through the backseat window.

“I had a hell of a time,” Jigen said with a wide grin. “How about you?”
They could hear police sirens, sounding like a couple blocks away. “I’d say things were pretty relaxed,” Lupin jested, taking off his wig and mask. “What do you think, Goemon?”

“We didn’t get the key,” he stated, summing up what happened and how he felt all in one.

“You what?!” Jigen said in disbelief. “After all that trouble I went through with Pops?! But it was right there in front of you!”

“Fujiko was disguised as Pierre,” Goemon said grimly. “I don’t know where the real Pierre is, but it seems he was not present at the ceremony.”

“He wasn’t supposed to be,” Lupin said confidently.

“What?”

“That key was a fake,” Lupin explained. “I fell on the old man when the lights went out and I grabbed the key from his hand. It wasn’t weighty enough to be real. It was probably a transmitter that Pops came up with since he knew we were gonna be there. Then someone took it out of my hand—that being Fujiko.” He paused his explanation as he rounded a corner, just as the police lights were indicating their presence on the street. “I’m guessing she showed up at the party as Pierre, and knowing her, she probably has some guy around here making sure the real Pierre never made it. Zenigata most likely caught on to that and contacted Pierre to stay away. They let us in and let us go, so they could track down our new location. Only, now it’ll just be Fujiko’s location, so I guess we have to thank her for that.” He giggled.

“So, what you’re saying is that we never had a chance to get the real key in the first place,” Jigen gathered, his tone dissatisfied.

“Oh, no, I got it,” Lupin said with a toothy smirk, reaching down in between his fake breasts and pulling out the real key, which was indeed quite weighty. The other two looked at him in awe. “If there’s one thing I know about rich people, it’s that they keep their valuables locked up or on them at all times. And to lock a key up would be kind of redundant, don’t you think?”

Jigen let out a hearty laugh. “Lupin, you are one sly bastard.”

“Hey, it’s thanks to you guys I was actually able to pull it off,” he commended, giving them both grateful looks of acknowledgment. He then gave a determined grin. “Now let’s lose these cops; we’ve got some riches to steal tomorrow.”

---

Successful heist selfie!
(Oof, this one came out kinda messy, sorry about that.)
It was no surprise that Zenigata had all the hotels in Paris being monitored—usually his operations wouldn’t have been so large-scale, but with funding from the Pierre family, he had officers checking every establishment that provided room and board. Of course…something like that wouldn’t help much when the Lupin gang wasn’t even in Paris anymore.

“Poor Fujiko…” Lupin said sadly, letting out a yawn as he lay in his sleeping bag. The three were placed around a dying fire in the middle of a forest, one that Goemon was familiar with. “She’s gonna get caught if she kept that phony key.”

“Good thing she doesn’t have anything on us,” Jigen said with a relaxed grin. He liked not having to worry about any sneak attacks in the middle of the night. He put his hands behind his head after pulling his hat over his eyes, ready for some sleep.

“Come on, you act like she would actually put us in danger,” Lupin said, rolling over to look at Jigen. “She never tells anything unless she knows we can get out of it.”

“Which must be all the time,” Jigen pointed out. There really wasn’t anything they couldn’t handle, though it was a challenge they were constantly searching for. “I’d like a break every now and again.” Lupin grunted in disappointment. “Ask Goemon, I bet he feels the same.” Lupin looked over at the samurai, who was sitting cross-legged on his sleeping bag.

“I do not ask nor wish for ‘breaks,’” Goemon said bluntly, not bothering to open his eyes as he crossed his arms in his sleeves. “The value of life lies within the experience, not lack of.”

“See, Jigen? Goemon thinks—”

“Although,” Goemon interrupted, “I only join on your outings that I deem having an experience worthy of my time.” That was true; he did only join them when he was interested in what they were doing, or if they really needed his assistance. He was their “ace in the hole,” after all. What did that mean, exactly? It made Goemon wonder if he was just some sort of tool to make their heists easier…

Jigen gave a short laugh while Lupin frowned—before seeming to cheer up and say, “Well, I guess that means hanging out with us is worth your time.” Goemon opened his eyes and looked at Lupin, awaiting explanation. “You came to my wedding, right?”

“Your second wedding,” Jigen reminded jeeringly.

“Your fake wedding,” Goemon added irately. He was still upset that no one had told him Lupin’s marriage to Rebecca was a hoax all along.

“Well, neither of you showed up to my first wedding. Some friends you were!” Lupin huffed, but turned back to thinking. “Hm…you went to that casino with us!”

“Ah, right, that night was embarrassing,” Jigen said with a grin, thinking back on it.

“Yes, losing money is indeed an undesired circumstance,” Goemon agreed.

Lupin stared at him—that guy really just didn’t get it sometimes. “Jigen’s talking about when we had to walk back in just our underwear.”
Goemon seemed unmoved. “Then I cannot empathize with your embarrassment.”

“Yeah, that really didn’t seem to bother you at all—ever,” Jigen said. That was also true. Goemon had absolutely no shame in his body. He’d been stripped down to nothing but his fundoshi more times than Jigen and Lupin could remember, never thinking twice about it.

“Speaking of which,” Lupin began, “I noticed you started swimming in your clothes instead of taking them all off like you did before. Maybe he is growing some self-consciousness!” he said to Jigen, as if there was some sort of hope for their friend.

“Doubtful.”

“Or, perhaps, it came to light of what sort of people you are interested in.” Goemon retorted. He was referring to Albert and the fact that Lupin apparently did not limit himself to just women (at least before Albert). In all actuality, Goemon was really just not willing to admit that yes, perhaps some self-awareness had overcome his traditional ways and compelled him to keep his clothes on.

Jigen cackled at Goemon’s comeback. “I guess he doesn’t want to provoke you, Lupin.”

“Oh, Goemon, you’re worried that you’re my type?” Lupin said in a teasing way. The samurai stiffened, an uncomfortable blush appearing on his face—he had meant his comment to cease the topic altogether, but he should’ve foreseen Lupin’s antics. “People just keep getting the wrong idea about me—first it was Amy thinking Zenigata and I were a thing, then the whole internet thinking Jigen, and now Goemon? I’m in high demand, but I have standards.”

“None of those are true,” Jigen reminded, “so don’t flatter yourself!” Lupin laughed at his bit of defensiveness. The sharpshooter really disliked the “lovers” label having been on the Shake Hanz database.

“Sorry, guys, I know you both have terrible luck with women, but I just can’t fill that void,” Lupin jested.

“That’s it, I’m going to bed,” Jigen announced, turning over in his sleeping bag.

“Good night, Jigen,” Lupin said in a sing-song voice.

“Lupin, don’t misunderstand me,” Goemon said seriously, wanting to clear the air, jokes aside.

Lupin laughed. “Don’t worry, Goemon, I was just messing with you. Besides, we know you have a weakness for cute girls.”

“‘Weakness’?” Goemon eyed him. Pointing out someone’s weakness was most certainly an insult, correct? Why was he dealing with this…? “You seem to think of me less because of this.”

Lupin looked surprised. “Not at all. You’re the toughest guy I know—you’ve been through things I couldn’t even imagine!” With one last stretch, he cozied up in his sleeping bag. “You earned my trust a long time ago, and when Wolf and Rose kidnapped you…. Well, I know it’s probably the worst memory you have, and I’ll never forgive myself that it was all because of me, but it’s one where I decided nothing could make me consider you anything less than a friend.”

Goemon’s blinked. He felt some sort of turmoil within him, as if he didn’t know how to take those words. True, being kidnapped and tortured by Wolf and Rose was awful…but not his worst memory. That he was certain of…but couldn’t admit to himself that his worst memory was
when he almost killed Lupin. He took a deep breath, building up his confidence to ask, “How do you know when you consider someone a friend?”

Much to his disheartening, there was no answer, both of them having fallen asleep faster than the drop of Jigen’s hat.

Or, at least, he had thought; Jigen was still awake, just not willing to pick up the conversation. Goemon had been acting differently, and Jigen didn’t want to push a subject that ran the risk of making him annoyed. The samurai hadn’t done anything questionable during the heist, but Jigen was still feeling a bit perturbed. Lupin was very good at reading people; he viewed it in ways to get to know a person better—Goemon’s behavior was just another thing to learn about to strengthen their comradery. On the other hand, after living the life of a hitman, Jigen had learned to read behavior in ways that displayed potential threats…despite considering Goemon his friend.

He paused, Goemon’s odd new habit of mumbling to himself starting up. It was completely unintelligible, although the tone was more than clear. Jigen watched from under his hat, seeing Goemon’s feet as he stood and kicked some dirt over the glowing embers to put them out before going to sit back down.

Goemon sat on his sleeping bag, looking at the unwanted company of his replica, who had just brushed some dirt over the fire to extinguish it. There was nothing to see by but whatever moonlight could sift through the canopy of the forest. The specter seemed much more joyful about their meeting. “Were you expecting me?” There was no answer, just a glare. “Do not tell me you’re going to try to ignore me again—it will not work. I know what will make you talk.”

“Tch…” The genuine Goemon prepared himself to take an unwavering mindset.

“So…you want to know how to make friends?” he asked jeeringly. “You do not have any friends; you never have, and you never will.”

“Whether or not I have friends is my decision,” Goemon said determinedly.

“Your decision?” the copy asked with false surprise. “Everyone you ever trusted has betrayed you. Those stupid girls you have a ‘weakness’ for. Your old clan. Even your own instructor!” he said as he walked over to Goemon and leaned over, just inches from his face. “Nobody cares about you!” he laughed, poking Goemon’s forehead. Goemon quickly slapped the copy’s hand out of his face.

Why did the things being said feel so true? Goemon was beyond trying to get over the fear that this imaginary self existed; he was really now only concerned with not letting the clone’s words get to him. “I am tired,” Goemon said, ignoring the pang in his chest. “Now go away.”

“‘Go away’?” the copy jested, letting loose a fit of laughter. When finished, he crouched in front of Goemon. “I am never going to disappear. I am going to be here until you accept who you really are and become me again, the real you…” Goemon looked at him defiantly. “Nobody likes you, so why even try to be someone you simply are not?”

Goemon gritted his teeth, clenching his fists before rising to his feet. “You are wrong.”

The fake stood up calmly to look him in the eye, appearing quite satisfied at the doubtful edginess he was provoking. “Am I? How so? Because Lupin said you are his friend? That does not mean he likes you.”

“Then you do not know what friendship is,” Goemon challenged.
“You are right. I do not. And neither do you,” the imitation reminded.

“Lupin remembers Wolf and Rose, and he says it is what solidified his trust in me. I know that loyalty is part of friendship, and Lupin followed through then as well.”

“So, your torture and him ‘saving’ you is the same level of loyalty? Did it ever occur to you that maybe he came for you because he was afraid you would talk? Or does it actually take that much suffering on his behalf to prove yourself to him?” The clone’s words stopped Goemon. “I have to ask again. Why are you looking for reasons to be this person you are not? So you can be the ‘friend’ that Lupin says you are? Is your life just dictated by Lupin now?”

“Of course not!” Goemon said. He shook his head. “No. I do not have to listen to you. I was able to defeat you earlier today. You do not have a hold over me.”

“You mean when you had Lupin in that fake hostage situation?” the copy asked, then smirked. “The fact that killing him even crossed your mind is a win for me.”

Goemon stiffened. “That…that is not true!” he denied. He couldn’t just let this imaginary person steal his achievement and make it his own.

“You want to be that friend that Lupin and Jigen see? Here is the thing,” the specter said. “They do not see you as anything. They can say all the words they want, call you whatever they want, but in the end, you are still you, just a confused coward who cannot even understand friendship.”

Goemon wished this manifestation of his thoughts would just disappear. All those statements were crowding his head, making it harder and harder for him to find the will to rise against it. “I know I can come to understand friendship,” he said, conjuring some false determination.

“No, you cannot. Why are you wasting your time? What does friendship have to offer you?!” the clone asked, grabbing Goemon’s collar and pulling him closer with a grin. “Whether you believe they are your friends or not, the end result will always be the same: If you dropped dead, no one in this entire world would care. Not Jigen. Not Lupin. No one.”

Goemon’s breathing was unsteady, trying to resist those facts—no, they weren’t facts, they were just lies, he knew they were. They had to be just lies. “Get away from me!” he yelled, pushing the fake away. His breaths were quick and shallow, though he tried to stay calm. Just that day, Goemon had combatted the urge to follow through with his past priorities. He had taken control and stood up for his current self, and had finally gotten the fortitude to open up to Lupin and Jigen and ask about friendship. And now it was all gone. “I will not let you take my progress and twist it around.”

“I don’t twist the truth, Goemon. I just tell it.”

Jigen sat up, hearing Goemon’s mumbling replaced with heavy breathing and Zantetsuken being unsheathed. Goemon stood, sword held still in the air, having pierced nothing. The dim light outlined the blade, as well as the sheen of cold sweat upon the wielder. “Goemon.”

The samurai looked over at Jigen, caught off-guard. His nerves were getting the better of him, and he felt hands trembling. Quickly he sheathed Zantetsuken as Jigen got up and approached him. However, he couldn’t take his hand off the hilt. What if Jigen knew that he wanted to kill Lupin—? No, I do not want to kill Lupin, it’s him, that fake! Goemon thought desperately. But to anyone else, it would still be just me…. Jigen would think it was me wanting to kill Lupin...
found his eyes traveling over to the third member of the trio, still sleeping soundly.

However, he tensed up upon hearing the sound of Jigen’s revolver being pulled out. Goemon stared daggers at the bearded man, Zantetsuken ready at any moment. Of course Jigen would eliminate anyone planning to kill Lupin, that was his best friend—and Goemon was prepared to combat it. He didn’t want to kill Jigen, but they wouldn’t be in that situation in the first place if Jigen thought of Goemon as a friend as well.

Jigen, gun in hand, raised his arm up, and instantly Goemon had his blade up against the other’s neck.

*Clack!*

Goemon’s eyes widened. Jigen had merely thrown his revolver back onto his sleeping bag. There was never any intention of killing him. It was all in his head…. And yet, even with a sword right at his throat, Jigen seemed completely trusting. He put his hands in his pockets, asking lowly, “Goemon, what’s going on?”

Feeling more than ashamed, the samurai put his sword away. What was he supposed to say? If he explained everything, Jigen really would think he was trying to kill Lupin—probably both of them. Would he just put a bullet in Goemon’s head? Have him sent to an insane asylum? Maybe Jigen and Lupin would just leave him there in the woods and never speak to him again. All the options running through Goemon’s mind, just cutting him out of their lives for good…. Maybe it was better that way.

“Hey,” Jigen said, pulling Goemon out of his drowning thoughts. He looked at Goemon, the slightest hint of something…sad coming over his expressionless face. “I know something’s up. I’m not going to force you to say anything, I just want you to know that you can tell me what’s wrong. And the same goes for Lupin.” Goemon looked at him with something that Jigen could only place between apologetic and disbelieving. “We’re here for you.”

Goemon felt a lump grow in his throat. He wanted to tell Jigen and Lupin that he was struggling with something, something he just couldn’t put his finger on. But even if he did tell them, what could they do? They certainly couldn’t get rid of the problem for him. If anything, it just gave them one more reason Goemon didn’t belong. He looked at the ground. “Nothing’s wrong.”

He had always been a terrible liar; Jigen had told him that in the past, and he could have said it again now. But he didn’t. He had expected for Goemon to say as much, so he wasn’t going to push it—that man wasn’t somebody who would simply speak his feelings, especially when put under pressure. At least he knew there was the option to talk about it—Jigen was just going to have to stay on his toes until that time. And with that, they each made their way to their designated sleeping bags.

Staring up at the black sky, seeing what little stars could be made out between the leaves, they soon became blurred as Goemon tried to remember the last time his eyes burned like this.
Goemon's eyes widened. Jigen had merely thrown his revolver back onto his sleeping bag. There was never any intention of killing him. It was all in his head.... And yet, even with a sword right at his throat, Jigen seemed completely trusting.
A New Direction

"Here it is," Fujiko said, handing over a file of paperwork to Lupin. He and the others were sitting on their sleeping bags, seeing the woman having just walked up in a bomber jacket over a tank top matching her rosy lips, and tight pair of jeans. How she could maneuver in the forest wearing those leather stiletto boots was a mystery. As usual, she looked ravishing.

And as usual, Goemon paid her no attention—until he began wondering…. She had done him wrong in the past plenty of times, but he had also been taken by her charm before…more than once, he was ashamed to admit. Did he avoid looking at her because he disliked Fujiko, or was it because of this “weakness” for attractive women? Unsure, he forced himself to keep his eyes on her.

The sun was just rising, streaming through the tree trunks, revealing their dead fire and the hard ground beneath all the dead leaves and pine needles. “How did you sleep out here?”

“I didn’t,” Jigen and Goemon answered in unison. They looked at each other, not quite surprised that the other hadn’t slept after their encounter.

“That explains why you look even scruffier than usual, Jigen,” Fujiko said with a quaint smile, however, she stopped when she realized Goemon looking at her defiantly. “What?”

“Are you going to say something rude to me as well, or just ignore my presence?” he asked her bluntly.

Jigen looked over at him, as typically Goemon wouldn’t give a damn about Fujiko’s opinion. Whatever Goemon was going through, it was bringing his insecurity to a whole different level. What would he consider worse, being disrespected or disregarded…?

“Geez, somebody’s grumpy…” Lupin said.

“Enough, already. Why are you here, Fujiko? And how’d you find us?” Jigen interrogated. He knew by Lupin’s goofy expression as he took the file from her that he had something to do with it.

“Lupin texted me,” she answered flatly, pushing her windswept hair back behind her.

Of course he did. “Why?”

“He wanted me to help you guys with the Pierre treasure,” she told them. Her lips curled up with amusement.

“Or were you just letting her join us as an unnecessary apology for her screw-up last night?” Jigen accused Lupin, who laughed nervously.

“‘Screw-up’?" Fujiko challenged. “You were the ones who foiled my heist!”

“Face it, you would’ve taken that transmitter whether we were there or not,” Jigen spat back, taking out his first cigarette of the day. He could tell he was going to need it. “How’d that go, by the way? Doesn’t seem like Pops treated you too badly if you’re here right now, unless you’re working for him.” Jigen lit up his cigarette and took a drag. “I doubt he’d go low enough to team up with the likes of you though.”
“Hey, now! Hey, now!” Lupin interrupted, standing up. It seemed like Jigen was a little grumpier than usual as well…

“Just be glad I’m helping you.”

“You’re not helping us, you’re just tagging along,” Jigen huffed. Lupin gave a sigh while Goemon sat silently with his arms crossed.

“Aaaaactuallyyyyy…” Lupin started.

Goemon and Jigen looked over at him. When he started talking like *that*—the “you-may-not-like-this-so-I-didn’t-tell-you-about-it” tone—it usually meant something was about to happen that they wouldn’t be particularly fond of.

“Lupin and I made a deal,” Fujiko stated.

“What kind of deal?” Goemon asked, directing his stare at Lupin.

“And what makes you think we’re taking part?” Jigen added.

“Well, I assumed Lupin would have discussed it with you two, since you’re his friends,” she told them with a sarcastic shrug.

Was making decisions together part of friendship? Goemon narrowed his eyes at Lupin, who was scratching the back of his neck with a nervous smile, then glanced over at Jigen, who seemed annoyed but not too concerned. If Jigen wasn’t particularly mad, perhaps this was more of a business decision as opposed to personal, so it didn’t tread on Jigen’s thoughts of he and Lupin’s friendship? Or was he just used to Lupin’s antics?

Or maybe, making decisions together was done on a friendship basis, but Jigen valued colleagueship over friendship, so he wasn’t bothered? Or MAYBE—

Goemon shut his eyes. Emotional context was so complex…

"What, are you mad at me?” Lupin said.

"That's right, we're furious,” Jigen replied. So Jigen *was* mad...? "Aren't we, Goemon?"

Well, if this was a situation a friend should be mad in... "Absolutely," Goemon agreed, keeping his tone and expression remained just as indifferent as Jigen's.

"What, are you two married?" Lupin said with exasperation.

“It’s just a little ‘I scratch your back, you scratch mine,” Fujiko explained.

Clearly the file in Lupin’s hand had info in it. Jigen stood up and approached them, taking the file. “What the hell? This isn’t even talking about Pierre’s treasure,” he said, flipping through the pages. “This isn’t even in France!”

“Nope, we're headed off to China,” Lupin said in a chipper tone.

“‘We’?"

“China?”

“You guys are going to help me get the Jade Dragons,” Fujiko said with a smirk.
“Like hell we are!” Jigen scoffed.

“May I see?” Goemon asked, and Jigen tossed the file over to him.

“You want us to help her,” he continued, “just so she’ll help us to do a job that we can already do ourselves?”

“Oh, come on,” Lupin said, pouting. “It’s not like she’s getting all the loot, we’ll get our fair share!”

Goemon continued to scan the pages. On the photos were six statues of carved pure jade of varying shades, each in a different serpentine pose, ranging in size from a few inches tall to eight feet. “Those are from the hidden temple outside of Tianjin.” He pursed his lips. “I stayed there while I was in China. I will not steal from them.”

“Good thing you won’t have to,” Lupin said with a grin. “Zhouran, the boss of the Ying triad, just received those from the temple as payment for protection.”

“Protection from what?” Goemon asked.

“From them.”

Goemon knew the Ying reputation well enough from when he lived in China. “The Ying triad is based in Hong Kong, that’s nowhere near Tianjin. Why would the temple be one of their targets?”

“They’re passing off the Dragons as ‘wedding gifts,’” Lupin explained nonchalantly. “Meaning, Zhouran is expanding territory by making his son Biming marry the daughter—and successor—of the biggest gang in Tianjin.”

Goemon looked concerned. “The She triad?”

“You know about them?”

“I do. The Ying are typical gangsters, but the She has been run by women for generations. They are respectful, but very ruthless…” he warned. “I would not advise this.”

“Women, huh?” Jigen said. “Sounds like extra trouble.”

“You’re not going because you don’t like women, and you’re not going because you’re afraid of women?” Lupin said with disbelief.

Goemon furrowed his brow. “I am completely serious when I say this has nothing to do with the fact that they are women. I have heard about what they do.”

“Ah, whatever…” Lupin waved them off, until he caught the disappointed look on Fujiko’s face. He turned back towards the others. “Pleeease? Be a pal, wouldja?” he pleaded with a smile.

“Pal”? Goemon thought to himself, raising his eyebrows. He really didn’t like the idea of this heist, but…

Jigen let out a heavy sigh, beginning to roll up his sleeping bag. “Well, somebody’s gotta save your ass every time Fujiko puts it on the line.” Lupin gave a little cheer.

“I…will participate as well,” Goemon agreed. It’s what a friend would do, right?
“Alright! We’ve got our expert on China too!”

Fujiko looked equally as happy as Lupin. “Good, because we’re leaving today,” she said.

“Wha—?” Lupin began, confused. “But the Pierre—”

“The Jade Dragons are in Hong Kong now,” Fujiko said. “It could take months to figure out where they’ll be kept once Biming stations himself in Tianjin.” Lupin looked at her dejectedly. “It’ll benefit you! Zenigata will be here looking for you, and by the time we get back he’ll either be looking for you in China or somewhere else—but not at Pierre’s.”

“That kinda takes the fun out of it…”

“Just give him one of your calling cards or something,” Fujiko argued. Lupin thought it over for a second, although Goemon and Jigen already knew he would submit.

“I guess that could work,” Lupin gave in with a sigh. Of course it would work, the Lupin gang always made things work.

Now that it seemed things were decided, Goemon continued reading the file. The Ying triad was going to be hosting a party at one of its locations in Hong Kong tomorrow night, and Biming had the statues at his house—both difficult areas of entry that would require their own phase.

Neither of which would go quite as planned.
Fujiko makes an appearance!
An Unexpected Inception

The Lupin gang had made it to China…and then it all fell apart.

“Are we really arguing about this now?” Lupin said with disbelief as they all sat in the hotel suite. Fujiko had her arms crossed, standing up to Lupin as they argued while Jigen and Goemon observed.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Jigen said lowly, taking a drink off his whiskey bottle. “You could’ve at least got a smoking room!” he commented, although neither of them heeded any notice.

“The deal was you help me get the Jade Dragons,” Fujiko laid it down. “That means the Dragons are mine.”

“But how would that be fair at all?!” Lupin tried to reason.

“Just take whatever else is in the house! I’m the one doing all the work, so I should get the main prize!”

“All the work’?!” he replied, flabbergasted. “I’ll switch jobs with you if you like!”

Fujiko gawked at him as if he wasn’t serious. “You think you could do my job? Are you insulting me?”

“I’ve outdone you before.” Lupin smirked. “Let’s make it a challenge then. If I win, we get the Dragons,” he said, gesturing to himself and the other two men. “If you win, keep the Dragons.”

“And you’ll still help me steal them if I win?” Fujiko asked, skeptical.

“Yup.”

“You’re shitting me, right?” Jigen interjected, but he honestly didn’t expect an answer.

“Alright, you’re on,” Fujiko accepted.

And so the bet was made.

“Lupin, why not just use Plan B if Plan A has a chance at failing?” Goemon asked, folding his arms in the backseat of the parked Fiat. He was dressed as the bartender, who they had scoped out earlier and put out of commission (non-fatally, of course, just a bit of drugging). Jigen was dressed in a crisp suit with cufflinks of an ivory crane that was the signature of the triad—stolen from a member the day before, along with his identity. Fujiko, on the other hand, had refused to wait for them and made her way into the party early to scope things out.

“Plan A is easier than breaking into Biming’s house.” Lupin explained, applying his mascara in the mirror. “And, if I win, Fujiko will be out of the picture, of course!”

“You really think you can out-seduce Fujiko?” Goemon asked. “That woman is treacherous. I am sure you stand no chance.”

Lupin looked offended. He was rather beautiful with a black bob framing his face (and hiding his magnificent sideburns) and smoky-eye makeup. His little black dress didn’t look so bad either. “Don’t sell me short!”
Goemon glared at them both as they got out of the car. “None of us would have to be dressed like this if we would just use Plan B.”

“Yes, but in Plan B,” Lupin said, opening Goemon’s door, “I don’t get to prove I’m better than Fujiko.”

The samurai glowered at him angrily, observing an unsheathed portion of Zantetsuken. “There’s an ominous shadow. Something unfortunate is bound to happen...”

“Come on—and leave that in the car.”

“C’mon, Goemon, you don’t look half-bad yourself.” Jigen chuckled as Goemon reluctantly got out of the car.

“Don’t you ever speak of this again.” He stood there, hair pulled back into a bun with a red ribbon, his body squeezed into a knee-length scarlet qipao that had two large cranes embroidered up the front. He appeared surprisingly professional in heels—at least, when he wasn’t stumbling around.

The answer as to why Goemon had to be dressed like a woman was quite simple, although they hadn’t known this when they first devised their plan: The Ying triad strictly had female bartenders and servants, unfortunately for Goemon.

“You’re acting like this is the first time you’ve cross-dressed,” Lupin said with disapproval. Goemon stiffened when Lupin grabbed his chest and began adjusting his fake breasts.

“Stop it!” Goemon slapped his hand away. He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth in embarrassment. If he thought he couldn’t face his ancestors when he had used apples for boobs that one time, he certainly couldn’t face them now.

“Then fix them yourself!” Lupin ordered. Goemon’s eye twitched, and he spitefully readjusted his chest, cheeks glowing. “Don’t hold your shoulders like that, it’s too manly! Shoulders back. No, move your shoulders back. No, don’t move your back—ugh.” He grabbed the confused Goemon’s shoulders and pushed them back, then straightened out his spine. “There. See? Now your butt looks better too.” Lupin took a step back and admired at his (uneasy) masterpiece. She was tall, pale, and professional. “Perfect—actually, hold on.”

Jigen watched, stifling his laughter as Lupin took his tube of mascara out of his cleavage and began to make Goemon’s lashes look fuller. If the deep red lipstick and eyeliner didn’t make him look feminine enough, then this certainly did.

“Then—what are you doing?!” Lupin shouted, grabbing Goemon’s hand.

“My eye is itchy—”

“No! No eye scratching!” Lupin said with all seriousness. “Beauty is pain! You have to deal with it!”

Jigen was howling with laughter at the two, leaning against the car. He was glad he knew it was them, because if he was one of the men at the party, he would’ve been fooled. “Alright, alright, let’s go.”

Regaining his composure, he pulled on his mask and wig.

They all wore small earpieces, unnoticeable, to communicate with each other; Jigen’s
microphone was placed in his gaudy watch, Lupin’s in his flashy necklace, while Goemon’s was placed as a bead on his bracelet. Along with that, each of them had a tiny camera sewn into their collars that could be tapped into using Lupin’s and Fujiko’s phones, so no matter what happened, they would have access to each other’s sights in real time.

“Alright, Fujiko, you’re our guide,” Lupin said in a praising tone, speaking into his necklace.

“It’s pretty busy,” she informed through the wireless receiver from the party. She sat at the bar, looking out onto the city from the top story. It was quite the penthouse. Fujiko leaned on her elbow, casually resting her chin on her wrist as she talked into her bugged ring. “You should have no problem slipping in unnoticed—there are several women guests, not part of the gang.” It didn’t look like there were any women as actual members. Typical, but that meant no She triad, which worked in their favor.

“Perfect,” Lupin said into his necklace. “Jigen and I are heading in. Wait a little while before coming up, okay, Goemon?” Lupin told him. “We want to attract as little attention as possible until we get there.” The samurai—or bartender, rather—nodded in agreement. Jigen and Lupin went on ahead. They walked down the sidewalk across from their destination, a tall building reflecting all the neon lights of the city surrounding. This was the posh section of Hong Kong, and they looked the part. Getting inside the building was no problem. There was a security officer at the front door, but he seemed to be employed by the structure than by the gang, and paid them no attention. “Ready, Jigen?” Lupin asked with a wink as they took the elevator to the penthouse, nobody questioning them at all. Jigen shook his head with exasperation; Lupin was too much a natural at this whole posing-as-a-woman thing.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a vast room full of LED lights’ soft, ever-changing glow. Instead of walls, it was all windows, a perfect view of the city from all sides. Like Fujiko had said, there were quite a few people. Some were standing, others lounging on couches (or another person in some obscene cases), seated around tables holding drinks, bongs, pipes, lines—occasionally a near-naked woman. The techno music reverberated around them as they stepped in, Lupin’s stride showcasing every ounce of confidence he possessed. Jigen kept his serious demeanor, taking in the surroundings. This certainly wasn’t his scene.

“There’s Fujiko,” Jigen alerted lowly. “She’s next to Biming at the bar.” Lupin scanned the area—there she was, wearing a short blue dress gathered at the sides to expose most of her thighs, the neckline low-hanging and her heels as towering as ever. If Lupin wasn’t on duty, he would be all over that.

“Shall I head in now?” Goemon asked over the communication device, hoping he was doing it right.

“You’re clear,” Lupin confirmed. He kept his voice quiet and tried to communicate as discreetly at possible, even if the place was so busy that no one would notice.

Lupin strutted over to the bar, smirking. Fujiko looked good, but Lupin was determined to make himself look even better…which didn’t seem it would be too difficult, considering how disinterested the sharply dressed man seemed in Fujiko. He leaned away in his tailored black suit as she tried to cling to his arm, disregarding whatever she was saying to him. However, there were several surrounding men’s eyes traveling all over her.

“Why don’t you introduce me to him?” Lupin said in a womanly voice to Jigen. Hopefully this wouldn’t go terribly. They doubted that Fujiko would sabotage them, as that would ruin her chances as well, but you could never tell with her…
Jigen rolled his shoulders, getting ready to play this off. He strolled over, Lupin by his side. Arriving at the bar, he ordered a shot of whiskey, “and a martini for the girl.” The bartender got to work, although she was obviously swamped with her help not having arrived yet.

“Oh, Jian,” Biming said, turning to him as he sat in his chair. “I was wondering if you were going to show up,” he went on, sounding rather bored. From his other side, Fujiko glared at them—even if she hadn’t been making much progress, they were stealing his attention now.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Jigen “Jian” replied, leaning against the bar. “Have you met…er…Liu?” That was the only Chinese name he could think of.

“No, I haven’t,” Biming answered simply, slumping back in his chair as he evaluated Lupin. “Friend of yours?”

“Yeah, I thought maybe you’d like to meet her,” Jigen told him with a smirk. However, he didn’t seem amused, his chiseled features remaining quite blank. “And who’s your friend over there?”

“Friend?” Biming raised an eyebrow, turning to look over his broad shoulder. “Oh, her. Eh…what was your name again?”

Lupin “Liu” did his best not to laugh. Fujiko hadn’t gotten very far with this one, despite how much cleavage she displayed.

“It’s Fu, remember?” she said sweetly. “I’m surprised such a responsible man would forget so quickly…” He seemed to completely ignore her comment. “You must have a lot on your mind.”

“I wonder what?” Lupin said with a tone of mischief. He leaned backwards onto the bar, taking the martini glass in hand and arching his back slightly, contouring the womanly shape of his disguised body.

There was no reply from Biming, just a look of indifference at him. Jigen felt a bead of sweat run down his temple. This wasn’t as easy as they had imagined.

That was when Goemon entered. The loud music was so disruptive he felt as if he might not even be able to think properly, and the lights were so artificial that he wondered if his brain could even function here. The scantily clad women didn’t help him. He did his best to ignore it all, making his way through the crowd and to the bar. There were Jigen, Lupin, and Fujiko, crowding the gang boss’s son.

“What took you so long?” the other bartender snapped at him as he took his place behind the bar.

“Er…traffic—ahem, traffic was not favorable,” he said, trying to make his voice as feminine as possible and hoping that was a reasonable excuse. This is humiliating…

The bartender didn’t seem to care. “Just get to work,” she ordered. “I need two Long Island iced teas.”

“R-right…” Goemon tried to take in all the alcohol under the bar and on the wall behind him. The other girl, in a matching uniform, was working quickly, pouring things and shaking them and dispensing them into cups with different garnishes.

“Things aren’t going the way we planned,” Jigen mumbled in Lupin’s ear.
“Yeah, he’s clearly not into either of us…” Lupin replied, eying Biming closely for a sign of anything that piqued his interest. “Maybe he’s into men.”

“Don’t look at me,” Jigen said bluntly.

“If he is then you’d blow it—and Goemon’s already blowing it,” Lupin said quietly, realizing that he was the wrong one to pick to make drinks. Goemon seemed so out of his element that he might have a breakdown.

“What are you doing?!” the other bartender scolded him, snatching a bottle from his hands. “That doesn’t go in a Long Island—never mind, just wash some cups!”

Goemon became rigid at her harassment, but did as he was told.

“Plan B?” Jigen suggested as Fujiko tried to keep Biming entertained.

“No, not yet…” Lupin said, watching the man suspiciously.

“You, I’ll take a rum and coke,” Biming ordered Goemon, seeing that the other bartender was down the bar serving others. Goemon stiffened, looking up from the cup he was cleaning.

“Uh…” He looked at all the lined-up bottles. He had no knowledge or interest concerning Western drinks, but he knew rum was brown…right?” Nervously, Goemon picked one up.

“It’s two named ingredients and he gets the important one wrong,” Jigen whispered hopelessly, seeing their comrade pick up a bottle of whiskey and examine it.

Biming watched him with amusement, leaving the other three bewildered. “Okay, that’s fine, I’ll take a shot of that,” he settled, handing Goemon a one-thousand Hong Kong dollar bill.

“Perhaps Goemon isn’t blowing it…” Lupin said interestedly.

Jigen paused. Goemon was certainly failing at the drinks, so Lupin surely didn’t mean…?

The samurai took the money and turned to the register. He had no idea how to work that thing—or how much anything costed, for that matter.

“Don’t bother putting it towards my tab,” Biming told him. “It’s a tip.”

“That’s quite the tip…” Jigen murmured. Although, with his experience concerning the underground, that “tip” could very well be the equivalent of a down-payment for other…things.

“R-right,” a clueless Goemon stuttered through his womanly voice as he put the bill down, grabbing a full-sized glass and beginning to fill it. Biming raised his eyebrows as a full cup of whiskey was placed in front of him. Lupin and the others’ gazes passed between the two, speechless. If that didn’t scream “fake bartender,” they didn’t know what did.

“You’re not really suited for this job,” Biming stated bluntly. “Get out from behind the bar.”

“Eh?” Goemon looked a bit stunned at first, but unsteadily walked out—he supposed it was better to be sent away than to blow their cover. “I apologize.” He let out a little sigh of relief, monitoring his feet as he carefully stepped. He had impeccable balance, and yet three-inch heels was enough to throw him off-kilter. Soon enough he would be out of them though, as well as the horrid dress and makeup.
“Hold on,” Biming said as he stood up. Goemon halted with an unsure look on his face. He really wasn’t in the mood to be lectured or questioned or…scrutinized, as that’s what he guessed the man was doing as he looked “her” up and down.

The qipao accentuated Goemon’s body so well, showing off that cinched waist and full bust, the collar complimenting his slim neck. It wasn’t just his body; the nervous flush in his cheeks was all too alluring. Fujiko’s jaw dropped as it became all too certain who this Ying triad member had become interested in.

“Yes?” Goemon asked awkwardly.

“Come here.” Biming beckoned Goemon over. The latter glanced over Biming’s shoulder at Lupin and Jigen, who were urging him on. Goemon kept careful watch on his feet, trying to walk steadily as he approached.

“Don’t mess this up!” Lupin said into his necklace quietly.

Mess what up? Goemon asked himself, a questioning look on his face as he glimpsed up.

Biming began, “And what might your name be—?”

“ACK!” As soon as Goemon had lifted his eyes, his feet betrayed him and he fell forward, tripping over himself. Almost instinctively, Biming caught him by the arms mid-fall. Goemon was still wobbling a bit—and quickly he tried to recover in as natural a manner as he could muster.

“Elegant,” Jigen said jokingly into his watch, making sure that Goemon heard him.

It took every fiber of Goemon’s being not to retaliate. Instead, he put on his best act. “Oh, s-sorry! I’m so clumsy! Haha…”

“Not at all,” Biming answered with an appealing smile, helping Goemon to his shaky feet—although he didn’t release him there. Lupin swirled his martini around with amusement. What a strange turn of events this was forming into—and quite humorous now that Goemon was beginning to realize his new role in their heist.

Fujiko slid over to Jigen and Lupin. “I guess he likes tall, awkward girls,” she huffed lowly to Jigen, who suppressed a laugh.

“I told you guys he doesn’t look bad in a dress.”

“So, what’s your name?” Biming asked.

“Huh? Goe—er—Gho. My name is Gho,” he said, forcing a smile and attempting to back away—without success, as Biming escorted him to his seat. Goemon glowered at the other three who were encouraging him, and he was getting particularly frustrated with Jigen’s grin and Lupin’s wink.

“Uh…are you sick?” Biming asked, helping him up into the barstool. Biming stood with his back to Fujiko, hardly seeming to realize she was there—either that or ignoring her, much to her dismay. “Your voice sounds a bit…” Androgynous was the word he wanted to say, but he couldn’t think of a polite version.

“Oh, no—I—uh…my throat is just a bit dry!” Goemon insisted. Sounding like a woman wasn’t exactly something he practiced.
“Well, then,” Biming said, “what will you have to drink?”

“O-oh, I don’t need anything,” Goemon assured, waving his hand dismissively.

“Nonsense,” he said, resting his sharp jawline in his palm and his elbow on the bar. “It’s on me.”

Goemon sat stiffly, trying to think from a woman’s perspective. Was Biming trying to get him tipsy? Or even drunk? In an attempt to take him...somewhere? Goemon’s stomach sank at realizing that making it happen now his goal. He furrowed his brow, thinking to himself. Why was this goal now bestowed upon him? He never agreed to this! He shouldn’t have to be dealing with it, once again putting up with things he never would have approved of…. And yet, he tried to think of some drink names to keep the heist in progress. “Whiskey.”

He had had whiskey before when Fujiko tricked him. He hated it because of that, but it was the first drink that came to mind.

“What?” Biming said with surprise. It wasn’t considered a very womanly drink, nor a thirst quencher—and judging by the huge glass Goemon had poured him, Biming guessed he wasn’t too familiar with it. “Bartender,” he continued without hesitation, snapping his fingers. She was occupied with other customers, but immediately came over—because of his rank in the Ying triad, no doubt. She stared at Goemon oddly, clearly wondering why he was no longer working. “Get this fine girl some whiskey.”

“Yes, sir,” the bartender obliged.

The Lupin gang wasn’t so sure about this. Goemon was a lightweight, and while he was indeed quite adorable when he drank, they needed him coherent enough to get them through the security system of Biming’s estate...a task that was already up in the air, considering how bad Goemon was with technology...

“You don’t seem like the type that goes out much,” Biming told Goemon as the shot glass was placed in front of him.

“Not really,” he answered, picking up the small cup and holding it like a traditional Japanese teacup (or as closely to it as he could). He couldn’t believe that Fujiko, Lupin, and Jigen were just standing there, making him go through all this.

“And you don’t usually wear heels, do you?” Biming added.

Goemon gave a short, nervous laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, I do find them rather impractical...” he admitted, not sure where this conversation was taking him, or what Biming wanted to hear.

“I agree,” Biming said. Well, that was good, he guessed.

“I prefer more traditional footwear,” Goemon told him, trying to think of anything, “but it seemed unsuitable for such a...place.”

“You think so?” he said to him, slipping a hand around his firm waist without warning. “I think comfort should come first.”
Goemon’s jaw clenched, his body becoming rigid. Biming’s lips turned up in an enticing smile at the edgy reaction, coaxing him to slightly tighten his hold on Goemon.

“You know,” Biming said in an alluring tone, “I know a place you can kick off those heels and get comfortable.”

Fujiko raised her eyebrows at how forward he was being—the girl (well, Goemon) hadn’t even finished a drink!

“I-is that so?” Goemon stuttered, doing his best to stay composed. He grabbed the man’s hand and pried it off from around his waist with a tad bit of a struggle. This guy was obstinate, and the intrigued look from Biming only tried Goemon’s patience further.

“Would you like to go?” he provocatively offered.

Goemon opened his mouth to deny angrily—what made that man think he wanted to go anywhere with him?!—but hesitated. His eyes drifted over to the others, their gazes ever-adamant. He felt sick to his stomach, his desire to give up this act burning in his chest. That plea for escape, for rescue, was something the rest of the Lupin gang didn’t share in.

“Do it,” Lupin said lowly, holding his necklace up to his painted lips as inconspicuously as possible. He furrowed his brow—was Goemon seriously going to blow this entire mission?

Goemon looked at Lupin spitefully, wondering why they all thought he should bear the brunt of the burden. He hadn’t wanted to do this stupid heist in the first place—in fact, he advised against it! Now they wanted him to comply, bend to their whim? Sacrifice his dignity? Goemon felt as if they were degrading him beyond belief.

Biming began to turn to look at what Goemon was staring at, so quickly he said to him, “Y-yes...”

With a satisfied smile, Biming began to help him off the barstool. The other three gave quiet sighs of relief. Lupin grinned and gave a thumbs-up to Goemon, who knitted his brows together and snapped his head in the other direction. Biming held Goemon’s arm, helping him walk steadily (despite Goemon trying to shake him off). Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko watched their friend glowering at the floor as the two disappeared into the mass of people.

“He’s such a terrible actor, I can’t believe he did it.” Fujiko said, unable to suppress an impressed smile. Even she had to admit that the unfurling change in plans was rather funny to behold.

“More like I can’t believe that guy bought it,” Jigen said with amusement. “You know, Goemon never would have agreed to this.”

“Which is why I’m glad things went down quickly,” Lupin replied to his companions. Things had happened so fast that Goemon hadn’t even had a chance to contemplate—and thankfully he sided with them instead of causing a scene. “Okay, let’s bail and walk him through this mess.”

Goemon was definitely going to need some guidance for this task.
Say hello to Gho and Liu!

Two good-looking guys, two good-looking gals!

(Where is Lupin's body hair, you ask? He's wearing microfiber tights like the kind he did when disguised as Fujiko, of course!)
It didn’t take long for Fujiko, Lupin, and Jigen to get back to the Fiat, ripping their disguises off with relief. Lupin pulled out his phone, tracking and tuning in to Goemon’s camera. He activated the mic in Goemon’s bracelet to speakerphone so they could listen in on their conversations to get intel without him being too obvious. Lupin started up the car and started to drive where they had a moving truck waiting. He, Jigen, and Fujiko listened from his phone, taking the earpieces out now that they were unneeded.

Goemon, finally able to detach that man from his waist, was led to a very sporty looking car.

“McLaren Senna. I just had it imported last week,” Biming said, as if it were nothing—which was exactly what the samurai thought of it, and his face showed it. With the click of a button, the butterfly doors lifted out and upwards. As the engine revved up, a green glow shown from underneath the car. “You’re a tough one to impress, aren’t you?”

“I am not one to be impressed with something as fruitless as automobiles.”

“Goemon, you could at least try to pretend you like this guy,” Lupin said from the other end of the line, pulling into a dark parking lot. There was the moving truck. “Pretend to be Fujiko, but better!”

“He’s going to have to aim a lot higher than just ‘better’ to get on my level,” Fujiko said with a slight smile. She stepped out, the other two following shortly after, and headed over to the truck. Lupin hopped in the front seat, Jigen and Fujiko entering in on the other side and they resumed watching the feed as Goemon sat in the front seat of the fancy car.

The McLaren rode so smoothly, it was eerily quiet within the car.

“You’re quite the mysterious lady,” Biming said, breaking the silence. “I keep trying to make conversation, but everything leads back to a question about you.” Goemon looked at him indifferently. “I can tell you’re not much of a talker, but how about you start?”

“Alright. How long until we reach wherever we are going?” he said—not the most intriguing conversation starter. However, Biming liked that Goemon kept things limited to necessity.

“A few minutes is all,” Biming replied. “You do know where we’re headed, don’t you?”

“No, you never said.”

“Oh, well, I thought you would make the assumption, at least,” he said with amusement, and a hint of intrigue that Goemon found quite unsettling. “I hope you were expecting my house.”

There was a pause, as Goemon was neither pleased nor disappointed, given the circumstances. “I see.”

“We left the party kind of early,” Biming pointed out, “so we’ll have plenty of time.”

Goemon resisted an expression of disgust. What a repulsive man…although, he imagined this is the same situation Lupin had girls in often. Did that make Lupin a repulsive man, or was Goemon just feeling that way because these...“affectionate” feelings were directed towards him? He wasn’t sure how to reply, leaving them in silence. He began to wonder if Biming was mistaking
his reserved attitude as shyness, countering the intrigued man's verbal advances.

“This is your house?” he finally piped up. Back in the moving truck, Lupin looked at the others.

“Time to go,” he said, eagerly starting up the truck. Soon they’d have six jade dragons worth a fortune right in the back. He switched apps and looked at the blinking green dot on the map of his phone screen, indicating where Goemon was. Lupin pulled out into the busy Hong Kong street, hoping there wouldn’t be too much traffic on the way there; he didn’t want Goemon to have to be in this uncomfortable situation for more than he needed to be.

The driveway was a huge circle around a fancy-looking fountain with tile inlay and lights to showcase its magnificence at night. The driveway was surrounded by groomed grass and metal fence with pointed spires that were twice as tall as Goemon. There was another branch of driveway going around to the back of the posh house, which looked like a Chinese palace found in history textbooks. It had several stories and tiers, and a wraparound porch with pillars all decoratively carved.

When parked in front, Goemon stepped out of the sportscar, still rather wobbly and making sure his qipao didn’t raise up in the back. While it wouldn’t be considered short to most, he felt like even the slightest bend would allow for a look up the dress. He looked back at the closing gate. Usually Lupin did his research before breaking into a place, but this heist was short-notice and Goemon didn’t remember reading about this in the file. He supposed it was time to get the Lupin gang some info.

“Is that an electronic gate?” Goemon asked. “What activates it?”

Biming stepped out, the butterfly doors closing as he locked the car. “The car itself, actually. There’s a recognition system at the gate that only allowed specific cars to enter, ones that I’ve programmed into the system.”

It sounded like he was bragging, most likely trying to finally impress Goemon, and probably the only reason he explained it at all. “Sounds efficient.”

“I suppose. Entering all of my cars was a bit tedious,” Biming admitted, walking over to him. He held his arm out for Goemon, who forced himself to play the part and take it while trying not to grimace.

“Tedious?” he said as he walked, trying not to rely on Biming for stability—although he seemed to want Goemon to. Now THAT was tedious. Ugh…

“Oh, yes. I’ve got quite a few cars,” he told him. “I can show you, if you’d like.”

*I already told him I do not like cars,* Goemon thought to himself with annoyance—but perhaps this would be a good way to postpone Biming’s inevitable…intentions. “I would,” he replied, mustering what he hoped was a cute smile.

*Cute.* That was something Goemon never thought he’d be trying to achieve.

“Then I’ll have to give you a tour…later,” Biming told him, implying that they would be…occupied for a bit of time as he proceeded to wrap his arm around Goemon’s waist.

Goemon became a bit rigid, fighting the burning urge to break this man’s arm. Who did he think he was, touching Goemon like this?!
Biming tossed the keys to a well-dressed female servant at the bottom of the stairs, where two men on either side of her—presumably guards—bowed to them as they passed. Biming helped Goemon up the steps, using this this opportunity to pull him closer. It was too difficult to remain expressionless, so Goemon had to force the corners of his grimace upwards into what appeared as a nervous smile.

“I suppose you have many nice things along with your cars—surely you have more security than just that gate?” Goemon asked him, trying to seem as if he was just making anxious small-talk and not actually prying for information.

“Oh of course,” he said with a charming laugh. “There’s the electric fence, guards, and infrared wires inside, but you don’t have to worry about that as long as you’re with me.”

*That should be enough to give Lupin an idea about what he is up against,* Goemon thought to himself.

“Speaking of which,” Biming said as they reached the top of the stairs where two more servants were waiting at the door. “Tell everyone they have the rest of the night off,” he ordered. “I’d like Gho to feel as comfortable as possible.”

Goemon looked at Biming from the corner of his eye, feeling his cheeks flush. Of course, he had no interest in this guy, but the implication was so forward—so openly vulgar—that he couldn’t help but feel his discomfort being pushed to its limits. Both servants bowed as they opened the large wooden doors for them. Goemon dreaded Lupin and the others hearing all this…but at least they knew that the guards wouldn’t be present.

“Th-thank you,” he said politely to Biming. Because of course, being alone with him was totally what Goemon wanted. He wished he had Zantetsuken to slice this gang member in half, maybe into quarters…but Goemon needed to deal with the security system for the others. How he was going to do that was a mystery to him.

They stepped into a little entrance room with cushioned benches against the wall. Biming offered for Goemon to sit, which he did, holding his dress down.

“Let’s take off these heels, shall we?” Biming said, kneeling in front of him. Goemon frowned at such an act, and more so when he went on to unstrap the clasps around his ankles.

“I am capable enough of removing my own shoes,” he blurted out, reaching down to take off the shoes himself. He did not want Biming touching any more skin of his—he felt violated enough.

However, Biming gained a perplexed expression. “I get the feeling that you don’t really want to be here.”

Goemon paused, his stomach sinking. If he wasn’t more…accepting, this whole thing was going to fail.

He really didn’t want to. He really, really didn’t want to. Goemon usually wouldn’t care what everyone else wanted and would just call it quits; this trouble wasn’t worth giving up his dignity. But the others were counting on him for this…so he sat back up and let Biming proceed with slipping his heels off. Clearly “Gho’s” disapproving pout was appealing to him now that he was getting his way. He then stood up, offering his arm to help a disgraced Goemon stand.

“You have nice feet,” he commented. “It’d be a shame for them to be ruined by awful shoes
like those."

Goemon shifted uneasily at his…compliment, not sure what to say. He looked down at his feet—yeah, unlike Lupin’s and Jigen’s, they were hairless, smooth, and vacant of any callouses, but other than that he figured they looked pretty manly. “Th-thank you, I will keep that in mind…” He scanned his surroundings tensely, then saw a screen on the wall that showed the gate. Below it was a monitor with some type of input system mounted in the wall. “Is that the recognition system?” he asked.

“Yes—I don’t usually have anyone managing it though; if someone shows up that I don’t know, I’d rather not deal with them, and anyone I’m expecting I just enter their vehicle’s information beforehand.”

“Resourceful,” Goemon managed an agreeing tone. Now it was Goemon who was trying to do the winning over, much to his dismay. With that, they walked on. Even though he could walk perfectly fine now, Biming insisted on keeping his arm around Goemon.

Inside the house was extremely modern, contrary to the traditional appearance outside. The floors and walls were white and sleek, displaying some traditional Chinese art every now and again, with a wiry black winding staircase reaching to the second floor. Straight ahead was the Jade Dragon collection.

“How gorgeous,” Goemon said with womanly admiration. Indeed, they were. The largest of them was placed in the center, the other five in a semi-circle around it. “A perfect setup for your guests to see right when they walk in.”

“You think so?” Biming asked, not sounding very impacted by them.

“Yes, it showcases their beauty,” he went on, smiling.

Biming tightened his grip on Goemon with an amused laugh. “Well, I’m glad you like them. That makes one of us.”

“You do not like them?” Goemon asked. Then why the hell did he even force the monks to give them up in the first place?

“Not really. I prefer beauty that’s a little more multipurpose—has a function, if you will. Beauty that can be experienced,” he explained, reaching over stroking the curl in front of Goemon’s ear.

Goemon gripped Biming’s wrist to hold his hand away, staring daggers at him as his cheeks flushed with perturbation. He was not about to let this guy get too frisky. Biming raised his eyebrows curiously, seeming even more drawn to Goemon.

Does he think I am playing some game?!

Goemon thought in exasperation.

“You’ve got some good muscle tone—I like that in a lady. I don’t have to worry about breaking you,” Biming said mischievously.

“You joke too much,” Goemon said in his girlish voice, an angry simper taking over his face. Either Biming thought he was teasing or just didn’t care what Goemon felt, but the words gave him some mirth.

As Biming took an advancing step, Goemon let go of his wrist and backed up warily. “I’ve never met a woman like you.”
Maybe because I am NOT A WOMAN! Goemon wanted to shout at him.

Back in the moving truck, Jigen and Fujiko were watching the feed as Lupin drove, all of them hearing the conversation.

“Well, that Biming guy sure is persistent,” Jigen said dully.

Lupin lifted his necklace up to speak into the transmitter. “You’re doing great, Goemon. I’m going to need you to get away from him at some point and enter in this moving truck’s information so we can get inside.” It might turn out to be a complicated task, but he was sure Goemon could handle it. Him being with Biming, Lupin didn’t expect an answer. He said to the others, “It shouldn’t be too hard to get in.”

Jigen added, “Or to get the dragons out if they’re right in the front room.” He seemed looking forward to pulling off this heist so smoothly.

“Goemon, we just need to make sure after you get us in, you keep him busy somewhere away from the dragons.”

Back at the house, Goemon’s breath got caught in his throat at Lupin’s words, and he began hacking. “What?” he said angrily to Lupin, then paused with a simper at Biming’s confused expression. “I-I mean…what direction is your bathroom in?” he said in his most innocent feminine voice.

“Uh, there’s one down that hall, third door on the right.”

“Thank you!” And with that Goemon wrenched himself away from Biming and dashed down the hall, trying not to pay attention to how annoying his jiggly fake boobs were. He slammed the bathroom door behind him. “‘Busy’? Goemon said into his bracelet, glaring at it as if his menacing look could get through to Lupin. “What exactly are you implying?”

Lupin sounded a bit unsure when he replied, “I dunno, whatever it takes.”

“I am NOT some devil-woman like Fujiko, using her body to get what she wants!” he argued. Back in the truck, Fujiko smirked at his comment, Jigen rather taken aback by how mad Goemon sounded. “I am not even a woman!”

“Hey, hey, calm down, you’re gonna alert the whole world!”

Goemon narrowed his eyes and collected himself as best he could. He shut them, trying to close out any distractions. “I never wanted to play such a part.”

Lupin laughed. “Who knows, maybe you’ll hit it off with this guy. He seems to like you enough.”

The samurai gritted his teeth. “Lupin, I am not in the mood for your jokes.”

“You could become his secret girlfriend, convince him to give the Jade Dragons back, there’s no telling.”

“Lupin, give it a rest,” Jigen warned. Goemon was usually very level-headed, but he got scary when he was angry, and that usually happened when someone started messing with his ego. And for some reason, the fragility of his ego was rather unpredictable lately.

“Alright, alright, you don’t have to do things our way,” Lupin told him. “You can do things
Goemon paused, thinking. “‘My way’?”

“Sure, get creative,” Lupin said, shrugging to himself. “You did things our way to get in, now do things your way to get us in. And fix your hair, we can see you in the mirror.”

Goemon looked up, startling himself. He had forgotten he was wearing makeup, let alone he hadn’t even seen himself after Lupin had given him a makeover. He was hardly recognizable, and he blushed at knowing that this was what he looked like. Ishikawa Goemon XIII, a samurai legendary in his own right, was now Gho the beautiful Chinese bartender, and a married triad successor's love interest. How wonderful.

But not for long. Goemon pulled the ribbon from his bun, letting his hair fall back down into its natural bushy state. It was time to do things his way.

Goemon is fed up with this shit! And here's just a REALLY rough sketch of the Jade Dragons. Just picture these but more reformed, haha.
Perhaps the guards and servants were gone, but there was no doubt Biming had a gun on his person. Goemon didn’t have Zantetsuken, as there was no way to hide it in his tight qipao, but his skills weren’t limited to just swordsmanship.

After washing his makeup off his face with a hand towel, he scanned the bathroom and set his eyes on a metal piece hanging on the wall. It was a shiny flat disc with twisted rods spiraling up and down in no particular pattern, a piece of what he guessed was contemporary artwork. Upon tapping it with his lacquered nails, he could tell it was steel. Its looks weren’t to his liking, but he was sure he could find a use for it, and pried it off the wall.

It was rather heavy, being about four feet long, but it would have to do. Goemon walked out of the bathroom, gripping the piece. Biming raised an eyebrow upon his return.

“I…take it you like that?” he asked, looking at Goemon oddly. “You can have it if you like —”

“Drop your weapons so you do not waste any more of my time,” Goemon said, his voice no longer matching his female disguise.

Biming blinked, stunned. Finally finding words, he sputtered, “You’re a guy?!?”

“And you are trying my patience,” Goemon said, narrowing his eyes.

“More like, ‘you just got played.’” Lupin snickered back in the moving truck, maneuvering through the traffic as they neared the estate. Jigen was unable to stop himself from joining in the humor, and even Fujiko seemed amused. Man, Goemon was the best when you needed some ironic comedy.

Ignoring them, Goemon continued, “I said, drop your weapons.”

Biming scoffed. “What makes you think I’d do that?” There was no hesitation as he pulled out an automatic pistol from the inside of his suit jacket—and no hesitation in Goemon’s reaction to it. Perhaps he didn’t have his katana, but his reflexes were just as fast. A sharp noise echoed through the spacious room as rounds ricocheted off the steel sculpture, Goemon nimbly turning it as he dashed towards Biming.

However, being in the top rank of a gang wasn’t merely due to hierarchy; Biming had skills of his own. He ducked as Goemon swung the art piece, dodging the twisted metal spindles. The samurai found himself leaping aside as Biming turned at the waist and directed the gun at him—but Goemon also found himself impeded by his disguise. The qipao and prosthetics restricted his mobility beyond adaptability after wearing such roomy clothes his whole life, ones allowing him to achieve his full physical capability without hindrance. But now, jumping backwards mid-swing, he found his motion very limited, and felt a ripple against his chest as a bullet dug down into his flesh.

Luckily, it was fake flesh only; the bullet hit him at an angle that only pierced his false breasts before shooting out the other side and becoming lodged in the wall. That was too close, even for Goemon who was used to close calls. He darted behind Biming and drove his heel into the crouched man’s back, knocking him to the floor before sprinting around the corner of a hallway. As Goemon did so, another bullet narrowly missed him, chipping the corner of the wall. There was no time to waste, so starting with the collar, Goemon broke the fastenings of the dress and
shrugged it off, ripped the prosthetics from his chest, and tossed it all aside along with the bracelet.

Once again, he was down to just his fundoshi—that hope of self-consciousness Lupin had hoped for him was out the window. Anything was better than that inhibiting garment. How could Fujiko work in clothes even tighter?

Back in the truck, which would be soon approaching the gate, Fujiko and the others were wondering what just happened as the screen went black. “Goemon, what are you doing?!” she said. They couldn’t hear anything either, most likely from the bracelet being muffled underneath the dress tossed upon the floor.

They were completely left in the dark, but it didn’t really matter to Goemon—the specifics of “his way” weren’t needed. Picking up his makeshift weapon, he prepared himself for a refreshing battle. As expected, Biming had gotten up and made his way against the wall, ready to fire as soon as Goemon came into his sights. Goemon was too seasoned to fall prey to such a tactic, and turned on his heel the instant he stepped forth, blocking several bullets fired at him. This artwork wasn’t very aerodynamic, but it was getting the job done, and he was quickly becoming attuned to its shape. He held it at just the right angle at the next shot, positioning it so the metal plate centerpiece would redirect the shot straight back at Biming.

Almost a success—Biming was no fool, and knew to keep moving, the round missing his face by just inches before hitting the wall behind him. Such skill was almost as startling as seeing a woman’s face on a near-naked Edo man wielding contemporary artwork as a weapon.

No time to gander at the scene. Goemon was upon him in mere moments, cutting the air with the metal piece. Biming was able to dodge accordingly, retaliating with gunfire that any normal person would not have even seen coming, but Goemon deflected the bullets with ease. Whether aimed high or low, maneuverability was no longer an issue. Goemon lunged the points of the spindles towards the other man, who leaned aside and lifted his equipped hand towards Goemon’s head. The latter fluidly side-stepped forward along the outstretched arm, placing himself behind Biming as he continued to turn to get Goemon back in his sights. It was one of the oldest tactics in the book when facing a ranged opponent: Keeping at their back to allow for a melee strike. Goemon spun around, swinging the metal straight into Biming’s side—or at least, he would’ve, but Biming had countered the direction he was turning in, bringing himself to face Goemon in that instant.

The artwork was blunt on the sides and it hurt, but had no game-changing effect when it smashed into Biming’s blocking forearm. In that time, he raised the gun once more, straight for Goemon’s face.

He was left disappointed when Goemon swiftly twisted the metal piece around, the other end of spindles digging straight into Biming’s wrist and knocking the pistol out of his grip. He grimaced, crossing his forearms to stop the steel artwork Goemon was aiming to swing down on his head.

Did Biming really think Goemon was going to limit himself to just weaponry? Blocking that left Biming’s midriff wide open, which Goemon plunged his foot into without warning, sending the other flying across the floor. Biming quickly got to his feet, holding his gut for a few moments while Goemon tossed the artwork aside with a loud twanging noise reverberating against the walls. He wouldn’t be needing that anymore. Biming’s gun was on the other side of the room, and there was no doubt in Goemon’s mind about his own martial arts proficiencies. The real question was whether or not Biming was going to put up a good fight.

Back in the moving truck, Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko were a bit flustered in their own ways.
Lupin wanted an update from Goemon on anything, Jigen was contemplating whether or not they were going to have to just resort to Plan B and forget about disabling the security, and Fujiko… well, she was really just getting impatient.

“She’s here and we have no idea if we can get in!” she said with annoyance.

Jigen chuckled. “He never really was an ace at cooperation—but then again, neither are you.”

“Goemon! HEY, GOEMON!” Lupin shouted.

“Yes, stop yelling!” Goemon’s voice finally came through, although it sounded distant. The feed on Lupin’s phone finally showed some sort of picture again—Goemon was picking up the dress and attempting to find the camera, the bugged bracelet in his other hand. They blinked, seeing Goemon’s nearly-nude upside-down body. Lupin sighed.

“It’s in the collar of the dress,” he reminded. Goemon shifted the cloth around until he was holding the dress upright and they could see his rather unsure face. “Yup, you got it.”

“Biming has been taken care of,” Goemon assured.

“You killed him?” they asked with surprise.

“No. I could have, but there was no need.” Goemon told them. “He is unconscious. But this security system is…”

“Beyond your comprehension, we get it,” Lupin finished for him. Not the most flattering way to put it, but it would have to do. Goemon carried the dress over to the monitor near the entrance. He could see the moving truck in the screen above it, and they walked him through entering the truck’s model and year—although the touch screen didn’t make it any easier for Goemon. “Go down two, left one…” Lupin tried to walk him through using the keyboard by viewing everything over the camera, but he was so slow. “It’s the ‘B,’ Goemon! Down two, left one, come on!”

Finally, Goemon was finished with this troublesome task. Finally. He tossed the dress and bracelet aside, taking the earpiece out and throwing it along with them. The cool air in his ear canal reassured him that he was unbound from anything electronic, and he gave a sigh of relief. He turned, figuring he could probably get a move on with transporting the Jade Dragons outside—but he went rigid.

“It seems you have done all the work yourself.” The image of Goemon’s past self stood before him. “Of course, after belittling yourself to some wanton wench. I…suppose you have no objections to representing yourself in such a way?” he said cynically.

Goemon stood, glaring. “That was not my preferred course of action.”

“Oh? Are you saying this choice was not yours?”
“Of course not!”

“I see. So, Lupin is dictating all your decisions now.”

“No, in the end, I did things my way,” Goemon reminded.

“You have limits to how far you will bend. But you do bend,” the other said starkly. “And yet, what would you have done if Lupin had not given you his permission to do as you pleased?”

Goemon paused. What if Lupin had told him to continue with the whole seduction act? “Lupin would not have done so. He did not press the matter because he kept my opinion in mind.”

“Your opinion?” the copy said with a contemptuous laugh. “But clearly not your dignity. There was a time when you never would have tarnished your image with a woman’s likeness.”

Goemon pursed his lips. He was right; in the beginning, he’d refused to join Lupin in his crossdressing escapades, and their heists turned out just as well. Seeing Goemon didn’t have a retort, the clone continued to criticize. “You do not even have your own ‘way’ anymore; you have become some adaptation of Lupin’s bidding.” He frowned and looked over at the unconscious Biming. “I remember when you would eliminate simpletons like him without hesitation. I wonder what happened to make you change?”

Goemon turned his eyes down to the floor as the thought. Perhaps his morals have been altered a bit…. His gaze traveled over to Biming, the qipao cast on the ground, his own hands. Originally, he’d taken some sort of fulfillment in killing any fool that confronted him, like a mark of honor. He still felt that pride deep down inside, but knowing that he was able to effortlessly take someone’s life simply didn’t have the same merit—the glory—that committing the act did. It was what he’d trained his entire life to do: Kill without any remorse.

Lupin, on the other hand, had taught him that there’s really no need to kill anyone unless you utterly have to; there are ways of getting out of tight situations without taking someone’s life. “There is nothing weak about the discipline of valuing life.”

“Is that one of Lupin’s Ten Commandments?” the specter jeered, making Goemon scowl. “He convinced you that killing is needless. You forget that it was your intention to dispose of him; what better way to avoid death than manipulating your assassin to believe killing is wrong?”

Goemon’s jaw fell, feeling dumbfounded.

“Ha! Such a simple concept surprises you? Your mind really has become muddled with Lupin’s puppetry.” The copy made his way to stand beside him, putting a hand on Goemon’s shoulder reassuringly…although his sardonic smirk suggested otherwise. “You thought you defeated Lupin back at Shake Hanz. But over all this time, he has convinced you to let him live, even in that last moment. So, who is the real victor, Goemon…?”

Goemon gritted his teeth and clenched the clone’s hand in his own, crushing it in his grip and pulling him face-to-face. “I have had—”

“Ouch—hey, what the hell?!?”

Goemon released Lupin’s hand and blinked. “But—he—” He looked stunned, seeing the others standing at the Jade Dragons.

“Who?” Lupin asked, rubbing his hand. “Biming?”

“No—never mind,” Goemon said grimly. He saw Jigen pull his hat down and turn towards
the Dragons in some kind of barrier to stay out of things, keeping his suspicions to himself for Goemon’s sake.

“You’re crazy Goemon,” Lupin giggled. “I can’t believe you knocked Biming out.”

“Don’t act so surprised,” Jigen said with amusedly as he grabbed the base of the Dragon that was about three-and-a-half feet. “Goemon’d do anything just to get this over as quick as possible—he’s not exactly the romantic type.”

“I just wish we could’ve seen your face when Biming was coming on to you like that,” Fujiko said with a smirk. Goemon stared at her, unamused. “Aw, don’t look so upset. I’m not going to make any moves on you just to see your expression—even if you are stripped down like that.” Goemon looked away, gritting his teeth at her jeering; he’d completely forgotten.

“Where are my clothes?”

“Er, they’re back in the Fiat,” Lupin said with a nervous laugh. “But Zantetsuken is in the truck.”

“Good.”

Alright, let’s get started!” Lupin said eagerly. “Hey, Goemon, come help me with this big one!” He rubbed his hands together, rushing up to the tallest figure.

Fujiko picked up the two smallest Dragons from their pedestals and tucked them away in the backpack she was carrying, then went to pick up the third, which was about two feet tall.

“Don’t even think about keeping those for yourself, Fujiko,” Jigen said, watching her closely, carrying his figure to the doorway.

“Hmph. What’s wrong, Jigen? You’ve ruined every encounter you’ve ever had with a woman so you’re taking it out on me?” she derided.

“Nah. I’ve had enough encounters with you and your conniving self to know that when it comes to double-crossing, you take the cake,” he spat. “Don’t worry, even if it is in backstabbing, at least you’re the best at something,” he added.

“Then I’d advise you not to turn your back on me,” she countered as Jigen walked out the door, “but I’m afraid your old-man body wouldn’t be able to handle the fall if you tripped.”

“Man, cut it out, you two, wasn’t the car ride enough?” Lupin said with exasperation, then returned his attention back to the Dragon. “Goemon…come…on…!” Lupin said through gritted teeth, failing to budge it. However, looking around, he saw that Goemon was nowhere in sight.

Jigen heaved the heavy sculpture into the back of the moving truck, then turned to head back up the steps—only to almost walk smack into Goemon. “Dammit, Goemon, what are you doing?!?” he said, trying to catch his breath. A stealthy man in just his undergarments isn’t exactly something you want to appear right behind you in the middle of the night.

“What?” Goemon asked, not seeing what the problem was.

“Nothing, nothing,” Jigen assured, taking a step back as it seemed Goemon had no intention of doing so. Judging by the expression, Jigen was sure Goemon had something important to say, so he waited for the samurai to say it.
It took a few moments as Goemon pieced together what he thought was the best way to approach the subject. “You are used to killing people.”

*Er...good observation, Goemon...* Jigen thought himself sarcastically, not really sure where this was going. “Yeah, that’s a hitman’s trade. I didn’t get this good practicin’ on tin cans.”

“I assume the number of people you kill grew smaller after beginning to work with Lupin,” Goemon continued. Jigen stood with his casual-yet-attentive composure. It was something that always created an earnest air, erasing anything that would make you doubt what he had to say, which was reassuring…and intimidating.

“I s’pose…” Jigen had never really given much thought to it. Before Goemon could try to further establish a bridge between Lupin and death, Jigen went on, “Listen, killing to me was just a contract. I started working with Lupin, so no contracts, no killin’.”

“Do you miss it?”

Jigen paused, curious—and a bit concerned—if Goemon did. He gave a little chuckle. “Like I said, it was just a stack of money. I get enough of that doing heists. But asking me this isn’t gonna help you, Goemon,” he said, making the samurai a bit surprised, as if he hadn’t been expecting Jigen to take this as more than a casual conversation. Jigen almost sighed at Goemon’s lack of social insight. “What does ending someone’s life mean to you?”

Goemon searched his thoughts. “I do not know anymore,” he admitted. “In my past, they are victories. Now killing no longer gives me that feeling.” He couldn’t tell Jigen he wanted that feeling again—he didn’t even want to tell himself that.

“Superiority,” Jigen said.

“What?”

“It made you feel superior,” he explained simply.

From the beginning, Goemon had been concerned with being “better.” Showing off, making derogatory comments—his arrogance had died down since then, but that didn’t necessarily mean the insecurity did. Goemon felt the need to constantly prove himself superior.

It was because he couldn’t read people well. He couldn’t tell what they thought of him, so he had to make it where no one could deny his greatness. That also explained his fear of women; they didn’t judge you based off whether or not you could kill them. They judged off charisma, personality, and things of the like—things Goemon didn’t quite grasp, so how was he supposed to prove himself superior to other men in that respect?

Jigen had pieced this together over the years and adventures, but telling Goemon certainly wouldn’t help. “You got outta that Edo place you were in and you’ve been around the world. You don’t need to kill people anymore for you—and everyone else—to know you’re the best swordsman there is.”

“Why are you guys just standing around?!” Lupin yelled as he and Fujiko side-stepped, every muscle in their body taught as they carried the gigantic Dragon to the edge of the steps.

“Dammit, do you wanna break the damn thing?!” Jigen yelled running up the steps to help them.

“I am going in the truck,” Goemon said apathetically.
Goemon stepped inside the cab and sat down, grabbing Zantetsuken. With his sword in his hand, he no longer felt naked, even if he didn’t have his clothes. He closed his eyes, meditating, trying to clear his mind since his talk with Jigen wasn’t very helpful.

It would have been, if there wasn’t the one person he’d tried to kill and failed.

_Such skill was almost as startling as seeing a woman’s face on a near-naked Edo man wielding contemporary artwork as a weapon._

(Listen, I don’t draw bodies or contemporary artwork or foreshortening know how to draw, so try to cut me a tiny bit of slack!)
I hope everyone had a great holiday and New Year's! :D I also hope you read some good holiday/New Year fanfics~ ^w^

Thank you for sticking around all the way to Chapter 10, it means a lot to me. As we delve further into the plot, I hope I can keep things as interesting and exciting for you—and with any luck, even more so. :)

I do have to add that while I will try to keep posting twice a week, I may have to limit it to just Monday for a while since I've been a bit busy lately!

"Neither of us won, so it's a draw," Fujiko said stubbornly, stuck between Goemon and Jigen while Lupin drove on Goemon’s other side. “That means we compromise our deal: I get half, you three split the other half amongst yourselves.”

“No way!” Lupin said, racing down the road in the moving truck—no one was chasing them, but it was the best plan to get out of the premises as quickly as possible. The neon lights were zooming past the windows, and even though it was past midnight, the streets of Hong Kong were no less packed than during the day. “If we did compromise, we’d split the six between the four of us; you wouldn’t just get a whole half!”

“And how do you suppose we’d split six Dragons between four people?” Fujiko said condescendingly, questioning his intelligence. Goemon sat with his arms crossed, Lupin’s words bombarding one ear, Fujiko’s assaulting the other.

“We’d split them up by value, of course!” Lupin argued, then gave a heavy sigh. Jigen planted his cigarette butt into the ashtray and went to light a fresh one. He wasn’t sure if he actually smoked less when Fujiko wasn’t around, but he certainly felt like he needed them more when she was. At this point he really didn’t care about the Dragons—he would’ve rather done the Pierre heist anyways—he just wanted some peace. Meaning no Fujiko.

“Let Goemon decide what to do with the damn things,” Jigen interjected, ready to end things. “He beat both you, didn’t he?”

“Well…yeah…” Lupin admitted reluctantly. “But, Goemon, you just want to give them back to the monks, don’t you?”

Goemon blinked. He hadn’t been expecting to dictate anything. “Yes, they belong at Yin Si, the hidden temple,” he answered.

Lupin sighed halfheartedly, but then laughed. “I knew you were a stud, Goemon, but who knew you were such a vixen?”

He squinted at him bitterly. "Are you calling me a woman?" he asked bluntly, suspecting mockery.

"I'm calling you a foxy lady..." Goemon looked at him oddly as Lupin leaned in, waggling
his eyebrows.

“Please, just…stop,” Goemon said with deep embarrassment. “Never say that to me again.”

“And the man was married! You homewrecker, you!” Lupin teased, then digressed. “But alright then. The victor gets the spoils.”

“No!” Fujiko protested. “You can’t just give them back!”

“It’s up to Goemon!” Lupin said, standing fast with the decision.

Fujiko narrowed her eyes at Lupin, then looked up at Goemon, pouting. He raised an eyebrow peculiarly. “Come on, Goemon,” she said, putting a hand on his arm gently. “For me?”

Goemon grimaced as he tried to squirm into the few inches between he and Lupin, bowing away from her. He turned his blushing face in the opposite direction. “No.”

“Leave the poor man alone, ya tramp,” Jigen said to Fujiko, making her glare at him.

“Poor’?” Goemon questioned defensively. Fujiko’s lips curled up as his attention was diverted. She pushed her chest up against him and slid her hand down his muscular side and to his bare thigh.

“Pleeeease?”

Needless to say, for the rest of that car ride Fujiko and Goemon were separated, because in less than an instant the samurai had jumped up with a yelp of alarm, squishing Lupin right up against the window and nearly running them off the road.

Goemon now sat staring out the window, not looking at the others. Next to him was Jigen, unenthusiastic to give up his window seat (but also refusing to give up his cigarette—if they suffocated from the smoke, they had brought it upon themselves), then Fujiko, and then a rather annoyed Lupin who had now joined Jigen in his never-ending cigarette escapade.

They had stopped at the Fiat and grabbed their packings, as well as Goemon’s clothes, and after a quick bit of research to modify their plan to get the Dragons back to Yin Si instead of France, they got a move on to hide out the rest of the night at a rural place Goemon knew of.

Now that they had gotten to the outskirts of the city, it was silent.

Too silent.

Lupin put out his cigarette with a yielding breath, then turned on the high-tech international radio within the truck in an attempt to lighten the mood. There were three columns on the touch screen: One for selecting the country, one for selecting the station, one displaying the song title and artist. Japanese music was something they could all get along with, right? Lupin tuned in and some good ol’ rock ‘n’ roll filled the cab.

“You’re still listenin’ to this crap, Lupin?” Jigen said with disapproval.

“Whaddya mean, ‘still’?” Lupin looked at him as if he were absurd. “I’m keeping up to date! You’re the one whose taste got stuck back in the eighteen-hundreds.”

“Lupin,” Fujiko said, sounding sympathetic, “I’m sorry, but Jigen’s right, your taste died out a few decades ago.” She reached forward and selected a station, replacing the electric guitar
and energetic drums to something with a heavy base and rhythmic layers.

“Please,” Jigen said sarcastically, reaching over and changing the station from Fujiko’s pop music. Bach’s “Little Fugue in G Minor” came on, the organ’s overlapping octaves and dynamic melody overtaking the speakers.

“What’s with you and classical music?” Lupin said, rolling his eyes.

“Bach isn’t classical. It’s Baroque,” Jigen corrected, enjoying his music. Lupin shook his head.

“Whatever it is, we’re not listening to it,” Fujiko said with a slight laugh, picking a station that was playing some classy-sounding swing tunes.

“If we can’t decide then we’ll just let the radio decide for us,” Lupin interjected, pressing the randomize button. There was a slow twanging noise accompanying a very melodramatic voice.

“Aw, hell, not country!”

“Lupin, please change it!”

“Alright, fine! But this is the last time! Nobody touch it!” Lupin snapped, randomizing the station again. A song with a quick tempo and repetitive beat came on.

“Rap?”

“It’s none of our first choices, but the radio has spoken,” Lupin concluded, beginning to wish he hadn’t put out his cigarette. This was becoming more of a hassle than it needed to be.

Goemon blinked, looking rather serious. “I am not in the mood to listen to a song about killing people.”

The others looked at him. “What?”

“Goemon, that’s just stereotypical.”

“I do not know about stereotypes, but he said he was going to smash someone,” Goemon pointed out, crossing his arms into his sleeves. “I assume being smashed repeatedly would ultimately be fatal.”

There was a short moment of silence for Goemon as his innocence dug his grave.

“Well, depends on the guy—or girl,” Lupin giggled to himself, while Fujiko rolled her eyes.

“What is so funny?” Goemon asked, getting flustered as he wondered if they were making fun of him.

“Goemon, I wish I had the heart to tell you,” Jigen said wearily, shaking his head.

Goemon glared at the others. “Is it because I assumed the smashing was fatal?”

“Sure, Goemon, that’s it,” Lupin said, trying to stifle his sniggering.

“Lupin, you’re so immature…” Fujiko commented, although…she couldn’t deny that the samurai’s naivety was entertaining, and had to bite her lips in order to keep from laughing.
Eyes narrowed, Goemon was bound to prove that they had nothing to make fun of him. He stared at the radio, waiting for the right lyrics. “There, hear that? Receiving a head clearly means decapitation; in other words, fatality,” he said, sounding triumphant as he proved his point. Fujiko looked at Goemon as if he couldn’t be serious.

A howl of laughter sounded from Lupin. “Now that’s a death I can accept!”

“That’s it.” Jigen began scrolling through the stations before Goemon could find any more slang to make assumptions about.

Doing the angry pout that he so often displayed when he couldn’t have his way, Goemon aggressively pushed Jigen’s hand out of the way and tapped one of the stations on the mechanism in the awkward way he dealt with all touch screens.

“This is music,” he said, leaving it on an enka station.

“Yeah, elevator music,” Jigen scoffed, going to change it.

“I’m not letting you put on your old man crap,” Fujiko argued, also going for the radio—but Goemon pulled out Zantetsuken and had the blade in front of the device in a flash, making the other two flinch back.

Goemon had made it clear that no one was going to touch the radio anymore.

“You just cut something, didn’t you?” Lupin said with suspicion, then suddenly an entire longwise section of the dashboard fell to their feet. “Was that necessary?” Lupin grumbled. As a response, there was swift flick of Goemon’s wrist and the touch screen of the radio went black, a thin cut going straight across it…just enough to destroy the display, but not the actual electronics inside. Now they really couldn’t change the music. “Alright, looks like we’re listening to enka…”

Content, Goemon sheathed Zantetsuken and sat back, letting his music play with a pleased smile on his face. Lupin chuckled; at least they were all agreeing on something now.

Thankfully they were able to stretch their limbs soon, arriving at the area Goemon had specified. It was only a few miles outside the city, but other than the tiny overgrown dirt road (which the moving truck just barely made it through), it looked like they were hundreds of miles from civilization. They were in the middle of a bamboo forest at what appeared to be a small stable that hadn’t been used in centuries. The wooden planks were only kept from caving in by the vines solidifying the structure, and any exposed surface was overrun with moss. Goemon meditated among their sleeping bags set up beneath the hitching post of the tiny stable, while the others sat outside the deteriorating structure around a little fire over which they had boiled some water.

“Hey, Goemon!” Lupin called, interrupting his conquest to let his mind experience some peace. As the samurai emerged from the shadows, Lupin held up a cardboard cup of instant ramen with a pair of disposable chopsticks in them. Goemon looked a bit surprised at the gesture of kindness. “Don’t tell me you seriously forgot about eating?”

Sometimes it seemed like the type of food was more of a priority for Goemon than actually eating…. If there was a good sushi or soba joint in town, Goemon would remind them breakfast, lunch, and dinner where they should eat. Otherwise, it was Lupin and Jigen that were doing the reminding to eat. There were often times when Goemon got caught up in his life and unintentionally skipped meals, but the other two were always there to make sure he didn’t starve himself.
“Thank you.” Goemon sat down, taking the cup as the others ate their own.

“Okay, so, just to refresh everyone’s minds, we’re going to the Hong Kong International Airport tomorrow,” Lupin explained again now that they were able to relax and actually absorb information. “It’s a huge cargo gateway, so we’ll have no problem sneaking the Dragons in and getting them on the plane.”

“Did you figure out which plane?” Jigen asked before slurping some more stringy noodles.

“Yup. It’s leaving at three in the afternoon tomorrow and headed to Tianjin Binhai International Airport. That’s a huge cargo port too, so there won’t be any suspicion on that end either. We can slip on and off the plane undetected as flight attendants; no stealing the jet necessary.”

“Good, because the last thing we need if for the She triad to figure out we’re in town,” Fujiko commented.

“Then we’ll drive the Dragons to the temple, simple as that,” Lupin said in an upbeat tone.

“Drive?” Goemon asked.

“Well, yeah,” Lupin replied.

“You cannot drive to Yin Si,” he said shortly.

“What?”

“Yin Si, the hidden temple. The forest is too dense,” Goemon explained.

“Looks like we’ll be stealing a helicopter then,” Jigen said dismissively.

“A little less inconspicuous,” Lupin debated, “but it’ll be faster in the long run.”

“You cannot see the temple from the air,” Goemon commented.

“Eh?!” Lupin said in disbelief while Jigen tried to hack up the ramen he had just accidentally inhaled.

“That is why Yin Si is called the hidden temple,” Goemon said, as if it should be obvious.

Lupin looked at Goemon, exasperated. “Then…how do you expect us to get the statues back there?”

“The only way to get there is by foot,” he clarified.

“You’re expecting us to carry the Dragons there?!” Fujiko said with incredulity.

Goemon raised an eyebrow, not seeing any complications. “Yes.”

Jigen let out a heavy sigh as Lupin cradled his head in his hand.

“This is way more trouble than it’s worth,” Fujiko protested.

“Listen, we’ll just walk up to the temple and tell the monks to come get their statues.” Lupin said optimistically.
“I did not think there would be any problem since we would have taken the Dragons so far already. Not completing the task seems inefficient,” Goemon remarked.

“It wouldn’t be inefficient—it’s kinda the fact that we’ve taken them at all that sort of gives us the right to stop whenever we want,” Lupin pointed out.

“That sounds inconsiderate.”

“‘Inconsiderate’?” Fujiko said doubtfully. “Were you even considering us when you came up with the bright idea to return the Dragons?”

Goemon paused. He hadn’t really considered them at all. This whole time, he was only thinking about what he wanted. Staring into his cup of ramen, he realized that they had been willing to give up as much as he did when getting the Jade Dragons, and he had the chance to give them at least part of what they wanted.

Just when he was getting the inkling that they were taking him into account, he turned around and treated them just the opposite, even though he didn’t mean to. He really didn’t understand friendship.

“If we’d known we would just be bringing the Dragons back to the temple, we could’ve just waited to see if they were going to be shipped to Tianjin and then stolen them from there,” Fujiko continued, irately finishing off her noodles.

“Give it a rest,” Jigen said gruffly. “Is complaining all you know how to do?”

“Hey, Goemon, where’re you going?” Lupin asked, glancing down at the untouched cup ramen that the samurai had left on the ground. It wasn’t unusual for Goemon not to answer things he deemed needless for others to know, and his location right now was one of those things. Lupin sighed through his nose as Goemon continued past the stable and into the forest, then looked at Fujiko with disappointment. “See? You made him mad.”

“He’s mad? You guys were supposed to help me with this heist and now we’re all going to get absolutely nothing for it. Sorry if Goeman-baby is having a tantrum because I’m upset with his piss-poor planning,” Fujiko said sarcastically. Lupin blinked—she hadn’t lost her temper, but she had lost her cool.

“Listen,” Jigen finally said sternly, “cut him some slack. I dunno what it is, but he’s having a difficult time lately.” Lupin and Fujiko looked at him with a bit of surprise.

“Whaddya mean?”

“I’m not sure, he’s just been acting…different,” Jigen said. He was uncertain if he wanted to tell the other two, because confronting Goemon upfront about this problem wouldn’t have a good outcome if Jigen’s gut told him anything. Goemon would most likely get defensive and start becoming skeptical—paranoid even—about everyone’s intentions towards him. Overly self-conscious.

“Well, yeah, but Goemon acts different all the time,” Lupin said, not seeing where the peculiarity entered. Jigen knew that Lupin saw it. It was in Lupin’s nature to act oblivious in order to not be tied down, but he knew everything that operated around him so he could always jump in if he was needed, just in case. It was like a precaution that he could be sneaky about, a little heist in his head where the ultimate goal was retrieving his friends’ happiness from the clutches of their distress.
But even with that intuition, that attentiveness, aware that Goemon was acting a little strange, Jigen knew that Lupin never really bothered to look for any threats from the gang, not even Fujiko—as proven by the countless times she’d screwed them over after heists—and Goemon was no exception. The occasions he had assaulted Lupin with no repercussions showed that. But he wasn’t a rogue seductress like Fujiko; he was a samurai bred through a long lineage to be an ultimate killer with no remorse.

It wasn’t Goemon’s fault that’s who he was shaped to be…but that didn’t mean Jigen was going to forget it.

“Something’s bothering him,” Jigen tried to elaborate. “Something’s on his mind that’s making him ask too many questions.”

“Too many questions?”

“He didn’t seem too talkative to me.”

“No, I mean himself—asking himself too many questions,” Jigen explained. Were they dense?

“What kind of questions…?” Fujiko enquired cautiously.

“The kind only he can answer,” Jigen told them simply, tossing his chopsticks into the fire. The other two exchanged glances. Jigen didn’t plan on telling Fujiko and Lupin about what Goemon had said to him personally; it was Goemon’s issue, and Jigen wasn’t about to go around advertising it.

“Jigen, you sound like a fortune cookie,” Lupin said, taking the final bites of his ramen. “You’re looking too hard into things.”

“Am I?” Jigen asked, though his rough tone made it sound more a like a warning. Even with half his face shadowed, it wasn’t hard for Lupin to read Jigen. Fujiko’s sights drifted between them, not sure what to make of the conversation, but getting all the details just the same.

“What did he tell you?” Lupin asked with a more crucial tone.

“He didn’t tell me anything,” Jigen replied. “But I told him he could when he’s ready.”

“So, you don’t know why he’s feeling…whatever he is?” Lupin questioned.

“All I know is that whether they’re aware of it or not, people are afraid of what they don’t understand,” Jigen said bluntly. “How they react when they’re afraid depends on the person.”

That was most certainly a warning. Lupin knitted his brows together, lips parted—although he didn’t manage to say anything. He could only think how Goemon acted in the past when he was confused or conflicted—most recently at Shake Hanz—and it usually wasn’t docile…towards others or himself.
Grumpy bunch...
Jigen had tried to talk Lupin out of looking for Goemon, but it hadn’t worked.

“I’m gonna go find him,” Lupin said, standing up. Goemon had attempted suicide too many times in the past for Lupin to need an exact reason to suspect he’d do it.

“Lupin, don’t go prying into things you shouldn’t,” Jigen advised against it. “He needs some time to sort things out.” Next thing they know, Lupin could be sliced in two.

“Yeah, and he can sort them out with me,” he replied coolly.

“You’re too overbearing,” Jigen cautioned. “He’s not gonna tell you anything.”

“Heh, you just think that because he didn’t tell you anything,” Lupin said with a grin. “But I’m his best bud.”

Jigen looked at him, unamused. Did he forget that Goemon nearly killed him just a couple weeks ago, or was he playing dumb so Jigen would leave him alone? “Fine, go ahead, but rushing him isn’t gonna do any good.”

“Since when did you become a therapist?” Lupin asked frankly. “What’s with this beatin’ around the bush crap?”

“I’ll go with you,” Fujiko added, picking up on Jigen’s tone. He was trying to talk Lupin out of it not just for Goemon, but because he was worried about Lupin’s wellbeing too.

“Nah, then Goemon’ll just feel like we’re ganging up on him,” Lupin said, rolling his shoulders before picking Goemon’s ramen cup off the ground. “He’s gotta still be hungry,” Lupin said with a bubbly face before walking off.

“Just don’t do anything to provoke him, Lupin,” Jigen threw in.

“Yeah, yeah, if he’s got a problem with me, we’ll settle it,” Lupin called back glibly.

Fujiko watched him disappear among the tall shoots of bamboo. Jigen had never once gotten in between them when Lupin and Goemon needed to settle a tiff, and she had learned that sometimes men just resolved things in their own way. For Jigen to protest Lupin’s going, clearly there was another variable present—one that had nothing to do with the thief.

No doubt, Jigen would be in the shadows watching out for Lupin with his revolver ready.

“It’s not the same, is it?” Fujiko said to Jigen as he made sure his gun was loaded. He waited for her to elaborate, not willing to say anything to get caught in whatever conversational web she was spinning. Perhaps she had gotten better over the years, but she was still Fujiko. “I
There was a click as Jigen pushed the loaded cylinder back into place. “Whaddya mean?”

Fujiko looked after where Lupin had left with a wistful smile. “Thieving just lacks a certain something now.”

“You can say that again, but I have a feeling you and me don’t have the same reasons for saying so,” Jigen said to her. It was odd for Fujiko to be talking to him like this—unless this was some sort of prank to pull the wool over his eyes. Maybe she was going to run off with the Dragons after Jigen went to scout for Lupin…

“You’re probably right. But things just don’t seem as fun as when we started,” Fujiko said thoughtfully. She was more mature now, and so was Lupin…in his own way. He no longer had those puppy-dog eyes for her, begging her to marry him every other day. At the same time, Fujiko had stopped taking advantage of them as much. In a way, it seemed the tables had turned; while he was still pretty yielding to her, she no longer had him wrapped around her finger, and there was no way to tie him down. “Lupin’s grown up.”

“Is that what you call it?” Jigen said with a huff, but he knew what she meant. “Maybe him 'growing up' makes things less fun for you, but it makes my life easier.”

Of course, Jigen would be heartless like that. “You know,” Fujiko said, resting back on her hands, ankles crossed, “I thought for a little while after Shake Hanz, things would go back to the way they used to be.”

“That explains why you took our helicopter and left us in the dust during our escape,” Jigen reminded grimly.

“Even then, it wasn’t as much fun,” Fujiko admitted. “It seems like we’ve all grown up a bit.”

Jigen paused. There was no doubt her feelings for Lupin brought this on (and Jigen didn’t want to bear the brunt of it), but it seemed that overall she was referring to the whole group—their whole career even. “Yeah, I think we’ve all made some changes, but not necessarily grown up.”

“You’re right,” she agreed, looking up at him. “You still act like an old man, and Goemon still acts like a kid.”

“Yeah,” Jigen said with a bit of hesitation, ignoring her jab at him. “Goemon's changed a lot—he's less of a brat, but that childish nature’s something that stayed the same." Although my gut tells me not for long, he added silently. Whatever Goemon was going through, he was going to have to do some self-discovery and maturing to do it.

“And what exactly is thievery missing for you, Jigen?” Fujiko asked, watching him stand up.

However, she stopped attentively as Jigen looked over his shoulder, and grabbed the pistol from the holster on her thigh.
Goemon walked down the side of a stream, letting the water whisk away his thoughts. It didn’t take away the sinking feeling in his chest, but at least his thoughts weren’t adding weight to it anymore. The shallow water looked so crystalline in the moonlight, he could see right through it. Goemon wished his mind could be that clear, that free.

Instead, his head was more like the damned-up channel that he came across, branching out from the stream. Its huge boulders were covered in moist moss and lichen; water hadn’t flown through there in ages. All that remained was the slight trickle downhill through the cracks in the stone. Like him, at one point it probably had been completely unrestricted, flowing with a strong current like it was meant to do. Full of purpose. But over time the land changed and the accumulated rocks were failed to be removed, and time caught up with the stream, reducing it to a fraction of what it once was.

Goemon hopped up on one of the green-coated rocks and sat down, looking out upon the main stream that the dribbling water was straining to reach. He closed his eyes, hoping the rustling of the wind in the bamboo leaves and the babbling water would be of better assistance to unclouding his mind than the chatter of his… comrades.

He had a faint desire to hear their voices though. He felt so alone…. Why couldn’t he figure out how to be a friend? If they were his friends? If they considered him a friend?

“Feeling lonely?” his specter asked him, standing among the bamboo stalks surrounding the riverbank. Goemon didn’t bother opening his eyes. “It makes sense.”

“Meaning?” Goemon asked, his blood already starting to simmer.

“Well, you are here by yourself, while these imbeciles you want to consider ‘friends’ are enjoying their time without you,” the clone said, “most likely talking about you. Probably complaining of your faults—which will provide a long discussion, I can assure.”

Goemon pursed his lips. “And why would you assume that?”

The copy snickered and stepped onto the rock next to Goemon. “If that hurts your feelings, another possible option is that they do not care enough to bring you up in conversation at all.”

Goemon opened his eyes at those words, gazing down at the trickling water resentfully. “Stop looking so pathetic. It makes me sick how you have gotten so weak to this friendship nonsense and what you mean to other people.”

Goemon wanted to talk to someone, but not him. He couldn’t talk to Lupin or Jigen or Fujiko about this though…. In other words, he had no one to talk to but him.

“That’s right, you are all alone,” the fake confirmed. “Do not be surprised; your display concerning your ‘plan’ should have reminded you of your ineptitude for consideration.”

“There must be something about me that makes me a good friend,” Goemon said, mostly to himself, shaking his head. “Why else would they keep me in their company?”

“Did you really just ask that question?” the clone asked, raising an eyebrow with boredom. “I think we have established enough times, they are using you, whether it be for heists or just to keep tabs on you. Keeping you around is keeping you in their control.”

“That cannot be the case,” Goemon refused to accept. “And do not say they have no concern about how I feel. Perhaps during the heist I had to do things that I rather would not have done, but they recognized my work and let me make the decision of what to do with the Jade
“And they regretted it,” his doppelganger added. “Even if you make yourself believe that they are considering you, that does not change the fact of how horrible a friend you would make.” Goemon swallowed. He felt like it was useless against this double: When Goemon tried to defend himself, it was only brought to light why not to trust the others; when Goemon tried defending them, he was made out to be worthless. “Would you like to know why?”

“Any explanation you have, I do not want to hear,” Goemon said, keeping focused on the ground as the lookalike crouched closer to him, smirking in a jeering manner.

“Superiority.”

Goemon’s jaw went slack. “Jigen's words...?”

“Correct. Heh, for once that cretin was actually useful,” the other chuckled. “Although I am sure it was more of a hint to yet another reason why people do not like you.”

“What were you saying about superiority?” Goemon demanded, turning to look at his mirror image.

“Killing people made you feel superior—because you were superior. You like feeling superior…and that is why you cannot make friends.” He gave a quiet sardonic laugh at Goemon’s expression of mild revulsion.

But he was right. Superiority was such a sure sensation. It was invigorating, and Goemon enjoyed it. Friendship was supposedly a great feeling as well, but it was so obscure in Goemon’s mind…

“You know, we can feel that way again,” the copy tried to coax, gesturing towards Zantetsuken.

Goemon glared at him. “You are out of your mind. Stay away from me.”

“I am the only one thinking rationally here,” he retorted, narrowing his eyes. “Superiority or friendship. Gratification or uselessness. You can have one or the other, but not both. And…” the copy laughed, “…if you choose friendship without being able to understand it…then you will have neither.”

“I can understand it,” Goemon argued. “I told you that I will.”

“And yet, here you are, secluding yourself because you feel outcast,” the specter reminded in a mocking tone, standing up to look down on Goemon.

He glared up at the mirror image, but it felt empty, as if there was no drive to fight him. “It is not real. You make me feel alone,” he murmured with despise.

“Do not be so foolish,” the double said condescendingly. “When are you going to start taking me seriously? Do you think I am here to take part in turning your life into this pitiful parody?!” Goemon stayed silent, glowering at him until the copy reached down and grabbed Goemon’s collar, pulling him up slightly. “You have so much doubt in yourself, just put your trust in me.”

“No!” Goemon spat as he grabbed the lookalike’s wrist. How much he detested that smirk on his clone’s face was beyond gauging. The copy yanked him up to his feet.
“I am telling you how to resolve this doubt, this illness!” the specter hissed, grabbing Zantetsuken and staring daggers at Goemon, and yet a grin came over his face. “If you would just let me—”

“NO!” Goemon shouted, immediately pulling away. But there was only himself, standing there with his katana half-unsheathed. He stood stiffly. To kill that reflection, cease his torment, was all Goemon wanted. But he wondered—if the clone was gone, would the struggle still remain? He was willing to end that copy, but if Lupin was the real source of this anguish like was said, would he be willing to commit the same act?

It didn’t matter. Goemon felt helpless, like there was no way for him to be happy no matter what path he chose. Some people just didn’t deserve happiness, Goemon supposed…and he was sure he’d done enough terrible things to be one of those people. He felt numb.

“I am so tired…” he whispered to himself, holding his head in his hand, as if any sort of voice would help console him.

“Tired?” Lupin’s upbeat voice sounded, making Goemon jump. “What’re you doing here?”

He was standing at the mouth of the diminished stream, hand in his pocket and exuberant smile on his face. It was as if he were mocking Goemon by making an expression the samurai couldn’t dream of, a feeling he could never experience. Goemon looked at him, an unpleasant, sour burning in his core.

Why could he be happy? What was Lupin that Goemon wasn’t?

*Dead could be one of those things.*

Goemon squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. He couldn’t be spiteful, but it was so difficult to release his grip on Zantetsuken, his feet itching to just rush at Lupin and get it over with. All the doubt—friendship, superiority, any questions about it—would vanish with him.

Goemon didn’t dare move, too afraid of what would happen if he gave leeway to even just a single step. He looked up at the thief wearing his iconic carefree beam as he walked over to the rock.

No, Goemon’s doubt wouldn’t vanish if he killed Lupin. It would still haunt him, along with questioning of regret if he did so. But Goemon had to try something. He felt like he was stranded, treading water in a rough ocean, and soon one last wave would be too much. He would be too tired to fight it, and he would no longer have the motivation to keep himself afloat—to find another solution. His only choice would be to sink, to revert back to his old self, where Lupin’s life didn’t matter to him. It was the only thought right now that countered this draining feeling which was leaving him with only numbness.

Goemon couldn’t escape it. He saw no tangible future for who he was now—he didn’t know who he was now.

Lupin hopped up a couple stones to reach the one Goemon was on, and the samurai was exhausting his self-control to not act. His fingers trembled, face stony, wanting to end it on the spot. Lupin saw the intense, cold look in Goemon’s eyes, but Lupin never was one to walk on the safe side.

“You forgot your ramen,” he said cheerily, holding up the cup. Goemon hadn’t even noticed Lupin had been carrying it, and he wasn’t going to acknowledge it now; his attention was undivided, focused solely on restraining himself. “The noodles might be kinda soggy, but I think
“It’s still warm—”

Lupin’s voice was suddenly cut off by the sharp echo of a gunshot traveling through the bamboo stalks, making them both look in the direction of the camp.

That couldn’t be good.

“Shit!” Lupin hissed under his breath, taking no time to rush back into the bamboo, closely followed by Goemon. He kept his hand on the hilt of his sword, trying to ignore the instinctive drive of a predator chasing its prey and consider just the business at hand. Several more shots were fired—were Jigen and Fujiko getting in a fight? No, Lupin thought; there were too many shots, and the sound of an automatic rifle only confirmed that there was a third party. But who? The Ying triad?

Lupin and Goemon weaved their way through the bamboo stalks, the firing ceasing. They slowed their pace as the clearing lit by the flames of the campfire came into sight, and Lupin and Goemon hid among the shadows in the bamboo—it would be careless to rush in.

Lupin narrowed his eyes. They were about ten yards away from the stable, and a few more beyond that Jigen and Fujiko had their ankles and wrists tied, plopped down by the dimming fire. All around, the bamboo had been shredded with bullets. There were three figures standing with their backs facing Lupin and Goemon, and two others behind Jigen and Fujiko, keeping them surrounded. And, of course, they were all armed.

*How did this happen?!* Lupin thought to himself.

“The She triad,” Goemon whispered, almost silent. Lupin raised his eyebrows, stunned, before returning his attention to the captors. Indeed, they were all women. But Jigen and Fujiko were never this careless; even if they couldn’t defeat five adversaries, they should have at least been able to make a run for it…

Suddenly some enka music started playing, accompanied by the sound of the moving truck being started a couple yards down the road.

“What is this shit?” a woman’s voice said from the driver’s seat.

*So, there are more of them…*

Apparently seeing that the screen was broken, a gunshot was fired and the music stopped. No more radio…

“ Enough, enough, we’re not driving off yet,” a tall and skinny young woman said, appearing out of the stable. Her sleek black hair was knotted into a thick bun, the rest hanging all the way down to the tops of her black thigh-high boots, and its glossiness captured the light from the flames. She seemed to be higher-up in ranks, as she was wearing leather pants and a tank-top, unlike the other girls clad in flattering pantsuits. “Not until we find the other two. Those are the ones that Jianya really wants.”

Goemon furrowed his brow. Jianya was second-in-command and next in line of the She. As Goemon warned and Zantetsuken had predicted, stealing the Jade Dragons had been a bad idea…

“Alright, where are they?” another girl said with a smirk, stepping forward. She had blonde hair slicked back into a ponytail and a pink-adorned AK47—matching her track suit—pointed at the hostages. So, there were eight now. That was a reasonable quantity for even Jigen and Fujiko to be cornered by, especially if the She was as threatening as Goemon claimed.
Fujiko smiled, unperturbed, and huffed through her nose, staying silent. Jigen looked at little more displeased. “Like we’d tell you—ACK!”

Several rounds were fired at Jigen’s feet, making him jump—which amused the She members quite a bit, judging from their snickering and giggles.

“Heh, he makes funny noises, let’s take him back,” Blondie—as Lupin had nicknamed her in his head—said eagerly.

“Ugh, you and your weird sound obsession,” the long-haired tall girl—now dubbed as Boots—said, putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head. “You have enough instruments back at the base, you don’t need a screaming man added to your concerto or whatever.”

Jigen felt a tiny drop of sweat inching its way down his temple. Something told him that these women were a bit psycho…

“I like his beard,” a ninth announced, jumping out from the shadows and squatting next to him, making him start unexpectedly. She had umber shoulder-length hair and straight bangs hanging above her green goggles, and she seemed to be the only one unarmed—but who knew what she was hiding in that baggy hoodie…

“No you too…” Boots said with exasperation. “Did you get any readings on Monkey Face and Miss Man?”

“Monkey Face” was no new insult to Lupin, but he had to bite his lip, realizing “Miss Man” was apparently Goemon—who did not look very happy about his new title.

Goggles lifted up Jigen’s hat, ignoring his loud protest. Her grin was like a mischievous kitten as she pushed his bangs out of his face. “You do have eyes!”

“Of course I have eyes, y’crazy harlot!” Jigen spat, leaning away from her.

“That’s right, she’s crazy. And she likes older men, so watch your tongue before she decides to make it her own,” Boots interrupted heatedly, clearly having a short temper. Jigen’s face showed great discomfort at her words, and even Fujiko looked a bit disturbed as Goggles grinned with amusement. “Now, I said, DID YOU GET ANY READINGS?!!”

Goggles must’ve been used to the yelling because she seemed completely aloof—either that, or she was just too absorbed in studying Jigen.

“Nope. Lupin’s made sure all their signals are untraceable. They’re run on an inside circuit; I wouldn’t be able to hack it from any equipment here. And besides, I found their phones in the sleeping bags,” Goggles answered, pulling them from her hoodie’s pockets but not diverting her attention from Jigen. It was really creeping him out…. Goemon watched, once again amazed at the distasteful disposition of such an innocent-looking girl. She put the hat back on Jigen’s head, deciding she’d rather take his cigarette. “So how old are you?”

Jigen grimaced—he had been hoping Boots was joking about the older men thing, but apparently not…. While the other two looked to be in their mid-twenties, this sprightly one could hardly be over twenty. “Too old for you, now get outta my face!” he yelled, unable to lean away from her any more without falling over. She giggled.

“You sure? I don’t think so…” She pushed the cigarette back in his mouth, which he promptly spit onto the ground.
“No, no, NO. If you guys wanna fight over him, do it when we get back—if they talk.” The tall one walked over and held an automatic pistol up to Jigen’s head.

“Well, Jigen, we see what type of girls you attract,” Fujiko jibed—then suddenly a knife was at her throat from behind.

“Maybe we should deal with her first,” Goggles said with a playful grin.

“Yeah, I don’t like her tone…” Blondie agreed threateningly, adjusting the aim of her rifle. Fujiko was unmoved—she’d been put in more compromising situations than a young girl with a blade to her neck. Jigen gritted his teeth, his stomach turning as he looked at the nine armed women surrounding them.

_Damn women, they’re all fuckin’ crazy…_

However, the tall girl didn’t budge, keeping her sights on Jigen. “I don’t care what happens to you; I’ve got enough boy-toys back home to keep me entertained, so TALK!” she shouted, teeth bared as the pointed toe of her boot dug into his stomach.

Jigen snickered after sucking in a painful breath. “I’d rather have you blow my brains out here than be at the mercy of those two,” he chuckled grimly, being completely serious. Fujiko couldn’t blame him.

“Smart man,” Boots commended with annoyance, then cocked the gun and a deafening shot sounded—but not from her hand. The pistol was shot from her grip, making her turn on her heel.

“Alright, alright,” Lupin said in his sultry voice as he walked out from the forest, all guns other than Blondie’s now pointed on him. Lupin kept his eyes and aim on Boots—who gave him a sarcastic smile. “I’m here, now what do you want from me?”

“So, you’re the infamous Lupin?” she said, scrutiny exhibited on her flawless face. “You looked better in your pictures, but maybe this is just bad lighting.”

“Aw, you could at least gimme a chance…” he pouted. She gave a silent scoff in reply. “Eh, I guess you can’t win ‘em all…. I’m sorry to disappoint a classy lady such as yourself,” Lupin told her smoothly, “but I’d like my friends back now.” In an instant he shot at the knot between Jigen’s feet, making him flinch. However, the rope was unaffected.

“Those ropes are made of steel fiber,” Boots said, unimpressed. “Sorry, but your skills aren’t going to help you this time.”

“Now drop your gun or they get it!” Blondie demanded, the barrel of her rifle at Jigen’s temple.

“I get it,” Lupin said with a smirk. “Jianya wants me alive, so you’ve gotta use those two to put the pressure on me, huh?”

“Stop stalling,” Boots retorted, yanking an automatic rifle from one of the other member’s hands, “and tell us where the samurai is.”

Suddenly a sharp yell burst through Fujiko’s lips and she toppled over, glaring as her body went through a few short convulsions.

“Oops,” Goggles said, grinning at Lupin and holding what seemed to be a cattle prod in her other hand. So, the knife was a more or less a decoy for whatever tricks that girl had up her
hoodie…. Lupin glowered, seeing that even though they were having fun, these girls weren’t here to play around…

“How good is a hitman without any fingers?” the blonde asked, planting a foot against Jigen’s back to hold him still and her gun against his knuckles.

“Why don’t we find out on your own hands?” Jigen grunted to her, looking over his shoulder.

There was piercing zap noise and a yelp—but not from Fujiko. Goemon had kicked the goggles-wearing girl away, quartering the cattle prod and slicing through Fujiko’s metal bindings in what seemed less than a second. Next was Blondie’s AK47. Her reaction time was quick, able to get a few shots at Goemon before he sliced through the bullets—along with the rifle itself, and its pieces fell from her hands, scattered across the ground. Right as Goemon slashed through the ropes holding Jigen, Fujiko tackled Goggles, grabbing her wrist with the knife and kneeling her in the gut, stunning her. With Goemon blocking any fire, that was enough time for Fujiko the rummage through the hoodie.

“Jigen!” she yelled, tossing him his pistol and wielding her own. Meanwhile, Lupin had had to keep moving—even if they weren’t out to kill him, that didn’t mean they wouldn’t wound him or ultimately change their minds. Getting behind the stable wall, he shot two firearms out of the She members’ hands, leaving just four women armed.

Jigen could take care of that—or at least, he thought he could. When he went to shoot the handgun out of one of the suit-wearing girl’s hands, she just…toppled over, a pool of her own blood making its way from underneath her. Next to her were two women in similar shape, and by the time Jigen shifted his eyes, the fourth’s intestines were spilling from her midriff before she collapsed forward on top of them. It had all happened so fast that none of them had a chance to make a sound.

During that, Lupin had come forth, holding the long-haired woman at gunpoint, who had her backup pistol aimed at Fujiko—who had the two (still standing) disarmed She members in her aim to keep them in line. Blondie and Goggles seemed to have backup guns as well, one also targeting Fujiko while the other had her aim on Jigen.

However, suddenly the three higher-ups stiffened, and Jigen pointed his magnum at Goemon. The samurai stood mid-lunge with Zantetsuken extended across Lupin's jugular, no more than a centimeter from his skin. Fujiko’s eyes widened, finally seeing what Jigen had been getting at. The bearded man could see Goemon’s arm muscles taught, as if pulling back against some invisible force, and his eyes were unsteady. Jigen didn’t need to glance back at the mutilated girls’ corpses for confirmation; he could tell that Goemon was blood-crazed, his mind on the brink of uncontrollable.

Goemon hadn’t killed like that in a long time, and it felt refreshing…yet frightening, judging by the sporadic alternation between a pleased grin and struggling grimace as he held Zantetsuken as still as his quivering body could manage. Lupin gave him a sideways glance, but clearly had no concern as he smirked back at the She members.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Boots hissed, not buying that the samurai would kill a member of his own team, especially when Lupin seemed so calm. Her expression was wiped clean when Goemon shifted his eyes towards her. That unpredictable—no, unstable stare struck something in her, and she in turn looked at Jigen. He was still aiming at Goemon. “I see what’s going on here,” she said darkly, but she managed a short, amused chuckle before scowling and dropping her gun. Surprised, but compliant, Blondie and Goggles dropped their weapons as well. “Alright, you win.”
They needed Lupin and Goemon alive. No questions. Fujiko and Lupin escorted them with a mere look over to the other two remaining ladies. Lupin turned to Goemon, who hadn’t moved an inch.

“Nicely done, Goemon,” he said with a confident smile, then walked over to confiscate the firearms off the ground. Goemon stood frozen, his eyes still locked onto Lupin, just as Jigen’s aim was locked onto the samurai.

“Goemon,” Jigen said to get his attention, but all he received was piercing glance.

Jigen couldn’t risk it. Goemon was stuck in this mode, and there was no telling if he was going to come out of it—or where it would take him. Jigen pulled the trigger.

Instantly Goemon reacted, twisting around and pulling Zantetsuken through the air to split the bullet—only there was none.

“Gotcha,” Jigen said with a convincing smile, popping the cylinder out of the magnum. “Outta ammo,” he pointed out, then reached in his suit jacket and began reloading it. The samurai’s face fell, and his muscles finally unwound, his impenetrable initiative for annihilation interrupted by the need to protect himself.

Goemon let out a weary breath, trying to seem as composed as possible as he lowered his katana. Then he noticed something odd: The surplus of blood dripping off the blade. He turned to Jigen with confusion and came to a realization that made his eyes widen and his jaw go slack. Just beyond the gunman lay four bodies in a condition that no gun could have fashioned.

Lupin tied each of the She members to the stable’s rundown hitching post and made the goggles-girl remove her oversized jacket to assure she wasn’t carrying any more weapons—which she was, actually—while Fujiko used her pistol to make sure none of them tried anything funny. Once that was done, the two headed for the moving truck.

“Was that last part planned…?” Fujiko asked, obviously referring to Goemon’s threat to murder Lupin.

“Nope, he came up with that all by himself—who woulda known his improv skill was so handy?” Lupin said with a buoyant attitude, starting the truck.

Fujiko knew the answer: It wasn’t handy, because Goemon didn’t have any improvisation skills. She looked at Lupin pensively, knowing he was aware of the jeopardy he was just put in—that he put himself in by allowing it—but still wondering just how seriously he took it. Jigen got in the truck, followed by Goemon. No words had been exchanged; Goemon didn’t want to ask, and the sharpshooter didn’t need to explain the evident. He also wasn’t about to explain that his gun had indeed been loaded the entire time Goemon had Lupin at the edge of his sword; Jigen had simply turned the cylinder to an empty chamber before firing that mock shot to break Goemon of his...trance.

“Well, that was enough fun in China for me,” Jigen said, pulling out his box of cigarettes and fitting one between his lips before holding them out to Lupin, who graciously picked one out before starting down the bumpy road. “Those mental whackjobs were fucked in the head.”

“Jigen, you’re just not used to women hitting on you,” Lupin told him in a loving tone.

“No, Jigen’s right,” Fujiko defended. “Any woman must be mental to be interested in a deadbeat like him.”
“Must be into necrophilia,” Lupin said slyly.

“I'm not even that much older than you! That’s it!” Jigen threw his hands up. “Let me outta the truck!”

“I was talking about 'deadbeat,' not your age! Besides, they were just a coupla cute crazies wantin’ to have some fun with ya!” Lupin teased, resulting in an angry gripe from Jigen. Lupin laughed. “And, Goemon, what took you so long?” he asked, yanking the samurai from his deep brooding as he stared into the floor. “I was starting to think you weren’t going to show up until after Jigen and Fujiko bit the dust!”

“The She's vehicle was located quite a ways down the road, undoubtedly to avoid alerting us of their presence,” he said curtly, as they would soon pass—well, at least, what used to be a vehicle, before Goemon destroyed it and then had come back around to release Jigen and Fujiko. “Do not take my skills for granted. When dealing with such trained assassins, quietness takes stealth, which takes diligence, which takes time.”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” Lupin said, waving his hand. “Either way, great going with how you pulled it off!”

“Th-thank you…” Goemon grumbled lowly, very well knowing he didn’t pull anything off—for a few minutes after it all went down, he didn’t even know what he had supposedly pulled off. It was all just black and red until it finally came rushing back to him. Although the campfire was now out, he could see the lifeless bodies in the rearview mirror, slowly shrinking from sight.

It left a heavy sickness swelling in Goemon’s chest—not just the bodies, but the fact that he relished doing it.
How did this happen?!
A Drink to Refreshen

Just because it wasn’t mentioned didn’t mean Goemon’s outburst went unnoticed. Lupin, Fujiko, and Jigen had seen it all…but confronting Goemon about it didn’t seem like the right way to go. What were they supposed to say? Were they supposed to ask what he was thinking? His reasoning for slaughtering those women? How serious he was about killing Lupin? Tell him he was wrong for taking things so far? With the four of them in such tight quarters, there was no way that he would feel comfortable talking in front of them all, if he ever would feel comfortable at all…so they didn’t bring it up.

Which only made Goemon more anxious. He had no idea what they were thinking. They were acting normally, but what had just happened wasn’t normal…. When Goemon had seen what he’d done to those girls, he was mortified. Jigen hadn’t said a word to him; he simply just walked away. Jigen thought that was what would be best; if he stood there, no doubt that would put pressure on Goemon—he would probably feel accused just with the silence. However, Jigen heading to the truck only made Goemon feel even more empty, looking upon his error by his lonesome.

In reality, either way, Goemon would feel the judgement coming from Jigen, and he knew it was in the others as well…despite the possibility it was only his imagination. Lupin hated killing to the point where he didn’t even want to help when Jigen’s old hitman mentor was in trouble, and yet there was no protest to what Goemon did. No scolding, no reprimanding. He wondered why. Was it being overlooked because they just wanted to keep him around? Why were they pulling this façade? Because they wanted Goemon to feel comfortable?

He wasn’t. In fact, as the others went through their usual jokes and jeers as if nothing had changed, every reason why they should be disturbed kept running through his mind. The smell of blood invading his nostrils had stirred something within him, almost like the aroma of your favorite dish that you haven’t had in months. He knew ways of cutting that would minimize making a mess, but he hadn’t taken that route: Slicing people in two was simple; using several strokes to portion someone’s insides and leave them with a gaping hole in their body was not and took intention. Then there was the feeling of Zantetsuken slicing through flesh—the sword could cut through anything unhindered, but with a mastery of it, Goemon could feel every vibration as if the blade were a part of his body: Cutting bullets was like popping bubbles, cutting stone was like cake…but flesh was like passing a knife through smooth butter. It was fluid and silky, no friction. It was satisfying.

And that is why Goemon was uncomfortable. No one was questioning him. No one was stopping him from committing this horrible act again. It made him disconcerted about himself…and about their intentions.

“Finally, a break!” Lupin cheered, throwing himself down on Fujiko’s couch and stretching his legs over Jigen’s lap, who eyed him with annoyance. They had arrived at Fujiko’s posh villa apartment in Paris, and her residence never failed to impress. The floors were rich tigerwood and the walls a deep red, and of course every area was spacious. An antique French carpet was underneath the large old-fashioned sofa sporting hand-carved mahogany and a matching loveseat and table. On the wall was mounted a huge television, and across from that was a small bar. While the place was undeniably regal, it had a certain coziness.

Even so, the most impressive thing in the house was the set of Jade Dragons. Yes, after their escape, the Lupin gang hitched a ride on the first cargo plane to Paris (to the expense of a few
flight line employees, but they would get over it, surely). After their encounter with the She triad, there was no way they were going to attempt a trip to Tianjin. Thankfully, everything with their reverted plan went smoothly; they got in and out of the airports undetected, and—for now—the Jade Dragons were secure in Fujiko’s home.

The flight had not been kind to Goemon though. Though he appeared fine, he was on edge, never seeing the copy of himself, but the encompassing feeling was always there. He sat on the floor of the apartment now that they had finished moving the statues, while Jigen and Lupin lounged on the couch.

“Get your feet off me,” Jigen grunted, pushing Lupin’s legs off the sofa.

Lupin frowned, crossing a leg over his knee as he laced his fingers behind his head, leaning back on the cushiony arm. “You’re just mad ‘cause you ran out of scotch.”

Jigen grumbled. “I’m tired. It’s been forever since we’ve slept, and yeah, I could use a bit of whiskey to calm my nerves after dealing with psychopaths.”

Goemon glanced up from his meditative state. Surely Jigen wasn’t hinting at him, right…?

“If you are tired, then you should sleep,” Goemon said, wondering to himself, Or is my presence here making you too nervous?

“You need whiskey to calm your nerves?” Fujiko said, appearing through the wide mahogany door of her room. Her hair was wrapped up in a towel and she was wearing a soft cottony robe that could’ve been pulled a little tighter to hide her cleavage, but why on Earth would she do that? Ignoring Lupin’s enticed gaze, she strode over behind the bar and pulled out a few glasses. “I doubt this is the brand you like, Jigen; I prefer quality alcohol.”

Jigen scoffed. “What’s whiskey without a little bite to it?” However, he couldn’t complain as Fujiko placed the stout glasses on the table and filled them accordingly. There were some times when he’d been more thankful for a drink, but that didn’t mean this sequence of events wasn’t crucial enough to demand one.

“Alright!” Lupin said, sitting up excitedly.

“Goemon, I'm afraid I don't have any sake, but are you having some scotch?” Fujiko asked, sitting down in the loveseat. Goemon looked at her, a glare able to make its way through his tired eyes. “Oh, come on, it’s not like I’m going to steal Zantetsuken again!”

Jigen took an uplifting swig and let out a relaxed breath, finally at ease enough to lean back. That was smooth whiskey right there. “I wish you would,” he chuckled. “It’d make my day to see Goemon stuff a yam in your mouth again.”

Lupin grinned. “C’mon, don’t be ungrateful!” he said to Jigen, then turned to Goemon. “You look exhausted,” he commented, and that was the most polite way to put it; the samurai really looked like all the life had been drained out of him. He was pale and gaunt, working his way towards being able to put the Grim Reaper out of commission. “Have a glass, it’ll help you unwind.”

Goemon looked at the fourth glass, which was empty, debating. He suspected Jigen of being afraid to sleep, but he himself was too uneasy to do so as well. Whiskey didn’t particularly strike his fancy, but as he recalled, it did knock him out pretty well. “I suppose…”

The others brightened up, Lupin giving another little whoop. “To our never-ending
success!"

“Chee—”

“And to having the best pals ever!”

“Cheers—”

“And to our other friends Blondie and Goggles, for restoring Jigen’s confidence and his faith in good-natured women—"

“Lupin, shut the HELL up!”

Goemon held the drink Fujiko had given him and took a small taste, prepared to resist the urge to cringe—but it wasn’t as bad as he remembered. The other three looked in awe as he downed the glass, eagerly holding out the cup for Fujiko to fill again.

“That’s my boy, Goemon,” Lupin giggled, taking a hearty gulp himself.

“Well, let’s just see how long he can keep that up,” Jigen said, grinning ear to ear. They all knew Goemon was a lightweight, never drinking anything but sake—and he certainly never did so to get drunk.

“Oh, you know what we need?!” Lupin shouted. “Let’s get some delivery!”

“So you can just throw it back up?” Fujiko said, knitting her brows together. “I do not need you ruining my nice carpets.”

“Aww, c’mon, Fujiko, you know I’m more responsible than that,” he replied, seeming a bit hurt. “Besides, I can hold my liquor!” Without further questions he pulled out his smartphone to order online. “What do we want? Chinese?”

“NO,” Jigen immediately declined. “I’ve had enough of anything Chinese to last me the rest of my life.”

Fujiko smirked. “Those girls still bothering you?”

Jigen grimaced and drained his glass in response, making Lupin snigger. “Goemon, you like pizza good enough, right? How about it—?” He paused, raising his eyebrows, and they looked over at the samurai pouring another glass contentedly.

“I see no reason why not,” he answered after filling it to the brim. They watched him lean over and slurp up enough whiskey that it wouldn’t spill when he picked the cup up, the other three amused at his enthusiasm.

“Pizza it is!” Lupin decided cheerily, putting in the order.

Fujiko raised an eyebrow and shook her head. “Glenlivet Winchester paired with cheap pizza. There’s something I never thought I’d allow,” she said, although smiling pleasantly. “That pizza had better be hot when it gets here.”

“How about some wings too? Buffalo or spicy barbecue?”

“Dairy, spicy food, and alcohol. My carpets are as good as gone…” Fujiko said with exasperation, although that certainly didn’t stop Lupin from adding both wings to the order.
“What about those things you dip in the icing?” Jigen suggested—he wasn't one for sweets, but those things he had to admit were pretty tasty.

“Oh yeah, good idea!” Lupin agreed, putting an order of cinnamon sticks down. “That should do it.” He pondered for a moment. “You know, if Zenigata wasn’t up our ass, I’d say we should be out drinking instead.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? I’m spent,” Jigen disagreed. “You just wanna pick up some chicks.”

“You got me there,” he replied with a crooked smile. “But you know I’d hook you two up too, if you’d just let me—”

“No way, Lupin,” Jigen cut him off.

“Well, maybe you’re not interested, but I know Goemon is!” Lupin said.

Goemon looked up from his drink at Lupin, then at Jigen. “Am I?”

“No, you’re not,” the sharpshooter confirmed—although he honestly couldn't believe the alcohol was hitting Goemon so fast that the samurai had to ask Jigen.

“Of course you’re interested,” Lupin tried to persuade.

“What am I interested in?”

“Cute, innocent, motherly girls,” he reminded. Goemon grimaced—he hadn’t meant that, he just hadn’t been sure of the topic of conversation! Even with the drinks kicking in, he did not want to go through the derogatory comments again.

“Are you really talking about picking up girls when I’m right here, Lupin?” Fujiko said.

“Tch. Romance is a waste of time; love is disruptive and irrelevant to life—as seen with your endeavors,” Goemon said shortly, hoping that jab would be enough to make the thief back off.

“Aw, c’mon, Goemon,” Lupin whined. “I need a wingman since Jigen doesn’t have my back, and you need to meet more girls!”

“And why is that?” the samurai asked, returning to his glass, uninterested in anything Lupin had to say anymore.

“How else are you gonna make a little Goemon XIV?”

Whiskey spewed from Goemon’s mouth, and even the other two looked a bit taken aback.

“Don’t act like you haven’t thought about it,” Lupin accused the blushing man, knowing his cheeks weren’t scarlet from the whiskey—yet.

“I have not!” Goemon objected. “What about you? Are you not planning on having a child to bear your namesake?”

“Oh, please, I can have Lupin IV whenever I want,” Lupin said nonchalantly. Fujiko raised an eyebrow. First talking about picking up girls when she was right there, and now talking about having kids? “It’s Goemon we gotta worry about.”

“Lupin, seriously?” Fujiko said, sounding as if in Goemon’s defense before she added, “He’s afraid of women. And, Goemon, when was the last time you were even interested in a
woman?”

“With all that ‘it’s what your ancestors would want’ crap, I know you wouldn’t let the line end with you,” Lupin said to Goemon. “Even if you had a daughter, you’d name her ‘Goemon XIV’—hold on…” Lupin narrowed his eyes, and Goemon looked back at him uneasily. “You do know it takes a man and a woman to have a baby, right?”

“Of course I know that!” Goemon snapped back embarrassedly, draining his glass before slamming it down on the table for Fujiko to fill again. However, he had no retort, closing his eyes irately. “I—I could get a girlfriend if I wished.”

“Goemon, you had a chance to get married and got cold feet,” Fujiko reminded, pouring him another drink.

“My feet did not get cold!” he denied—in the wrong form of the phrase, but close enough. The other three exchanged glances, agreeing that he had indeed “gotten cold feet.” Goemon’s eye twitched before taking a swig of his new whiskey.

“Then why haven’t you gone back?” Fujiko pressed, smirking. He stiffened.

“I—I have not atoned for my weaknesses yet,” he answered simply—a reasonable response, but not making the topic any less embarrassing for him.

“So what if the guy doesn’t wanna be tied down?” Jigen spoke up. “Lupin, you saw how upset he was when you married Rebecca and told him you were settling down. You think he’d do the same and ditch us?”

That was a better excuse, much to Goemon’s relief.

“Okay, okay,” Lupin allowed, sitting back. “Maybe you could get over your fear and manage to settle down on your own time…but could you deal with a naked woman?”

“Lupin, you’re gonna give this man an aneurism if you don’t leave him alone,” Jigen said with exasperation—and from Goemon’s face, he might not be wrong.

Although, it was something they had all wondered, if Goemon had ever been laid. Even when Fujiko had somehow managed to make herself his girlfriend, seduction hadn’t gotten her much more than the label.

“Alright, fine!” Lupin said, throwing his hands up. “But babies don’t just pop out of the wedding cake, and having a wingman would be nice!” Suddenly there was a ringing, interrupting their spat. “Oooo, the food!” Lupin said, dashing away as if the talk never happened.

Fujiko sighed. “None of you are ever going to have kids…”

One trip to the exit of the building and a generous tip to the delivery boy later, the coffee table was packed with food that the tipsy group would never be able to finish.

Goemon hadn’t realized how hungry he was—what was the last thing he’d had to eat? Half cheese, half super supreme. Pizza would never be a food he would request, but he could tolerate it. He grabbed a piece, and greasy cheese never looked so enticing before.

“Goemon, you’re so cute!” Lupin said merrily, watching Goemon’s flushed cheeks puff out
as he took a gigantic mouthful of pizza, appearing quite pleased. He looked over at Lupin, seeming a bit incognizant.

“Lupin!” Fujiko scolded as marinera sauce spilled down the side of his pants in an attempt to reach Fujiko’s antique sofa. He sputtered out a panicked noise, quickly grabbing a napkin.

“My pants…”

“Hey, Fujiko, hit me up with another glass,” Jigen said graciously. “This is the perfect conclusion to a good heist,” he added, in a roundabout way complimenting Fujiko. He took a bite of pizza, washing it down with his drink.

“Poor Pops though,” Lupin said, showing them an article he’d found earlier on his phone. “Looks like he was waitin’ all night and day for us…”

“He will be mad at you for tarnishing his good name, Lupin,” Goemon said. If a smirk could seem innocent, it was certainly the one he was making.

“It’s not the first time you haven’t showed up—is it?” Jigen asked, reflecting back through the years.

“Hey, now,” Lupin said defensively, “I never announced we were gonna be stealing the treasure the next day, so that’s all on him.” Leaning back and taking another swallow he added, “They might’ve moved the goods by now. I’ll get some intel and send out my calling card. Shouldn’t take too long; we can probably get to it tomorrow.”

“So soon?” Fujiko inquired. “Don’t you want to at least rest a little?”

“No way,” Lupin told her in a self-assured tone. “We’re gettin’ outta France as soon as possible and gonna start claiming some new land.”

“And just where would that be?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Jigen teased gruffly. “No way we’re letting you rat us out and put the cops back on our trail.” The seductress looked at him unappreciatively.

“What makes you think I’d do that?” she asked simply, making Jigen cackle.

“You would not ‘rat us out’?” Goemon asked inquisitively.

“I don’t plan on it.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully, although in his current state, there wasn’t much thinking going on at all. “Our new hideout is in Spain.”

“Goemon, what the hell!?” Jigen said, making the other look at him befuddled. “She’s not even showin’ anything and you just give right in?”

Goemon gained a flabbergasted look—had he just been double-crossed?—and turned to Fujiko, who was looking at him with an wry smile. She crossed one leg over the other, her short robe riding a tad bit higher up her thigh, making Goemon immediately avert his eyes as his cheeks turned redder.

“Oh please, Jigen,” she said as Lupin gave an entertained giggle and ogled, “you act like I was actually trying.” Jigen pulled his hat down to block her from his view and fished in his suit
pocket for his cigarette and lighter. Fujiko frowned at him. “If you’re going to smoke, go do it on the balcony.”

Jigen took a long inhale and snickered, blowing a stream of smoke her way. “How about we ‘compromise’? I’ll smoke, and you go out onto the balcony.”

Fujiko scowled at him, unamused. Jigen was usually in a good mood when they all drank together—sometimes that meant being nicer to her, sometimes that just meant he took more pleasure in being insolent towards her. Goemon put down the crust of his third piece of pizza stood up to lean over the table, finding a clear area to place his hand and hold himself steady. Lupin raised his eyebrows as he watched the samurai pluck the cigarette straight from Jigen’s hand—leaving he and Fujiko staggered.

“If Fujiko says not to smoke in her house, you should not do so,” Goemon said courteously, sitting back down. Fujiko sneered at Jigen, folding her arms in triumph until Goemon actually put the cigarette to his own lips and took a drag.

It was Jigen’s turn to sneer now.

“You can’t be serious!” Fujiko exclaimed, shoulders slumping and watching the smoke waft above their food.

Lupin howled as Goemon quietly giggled through a toothy smile. “Goemon, you’re too wild when you drink!” he teased—Goemon was far from “wild,” but it was certainly outlandish behavior for his character.

“You hold a cigarette like a woman,” Jigen commented, beyond entertained. Taking no offense like he usually would, Goemon grinned with him and went to take another drag—only for Fujiko to snatch it the cigarette from his hand and chuck it into his glass of whiskey. His face fell as he watched the clump of ash separate from the roll, the little trail of smoke dying out and his drink ruined.

Looking up, Goemon pouted angrily at the woman, who shrugged with a spiteful, satisfied smile. Jigen and Lupin watched the samurai’s eyes narrow, and while Fujiko had her nose to the air, he grabbed her whiskey and began to chug it down.

“Hey!” she protested irately, baring her teeth and going to take it back—but he turned away from her, keeping the glass out of her reach as he drained it. Fujiko grabbed his arm and yanked, the few sips remaining spilling out over the table. That was going to add an odd flavor to the cinnamon sticks…. She wrenched the cup from his hand, and as he laughed, she pursed her lips. “No more whiskey for you.”

That wiped the jeering look off his face—but not for long. Before she could react, he grabbed the bottle of Glenlivet and—rather unsteadily—ran to the other side of the table so she couldn’t reach him. Then, putting it to his lips, he began to greedily down the whiskey straight from the bottle. A fuming Fujiko started towards him.

“Run, Goemon, RUN!” Lupin and Jigen lifted their feet up so he could get by, but Jigen promptly put his feet up against the table as Fujiko came around, tripping her. Trying to stop herself from falling, she grabbed his legs to hold herself up—until he lowered them.

“OOF!” she huffed as Jigen watched her plop onto the floor, and he began roaring with laughter.
“It’s okay, Fuji-cakes!” Lupin comforted, swiftly swooping her off the ground and pulling her into his lap. She glared at him, his giggling never seeming so obnoxious.

“Get your hands off me!” Fujiko spat, using his head as a platform to lift herself to her feet, much to his painful displeasure. She turned her sights to Goemon, back on his side of the table where he had been sitting. His flushed, beaming face was more annoying than Jigen’s and Lupin’s put together as he tipped the bottle up and finished it with a refreshing gasp at the end.

“You know, sometimes I wonder if he even feels pain,” Jigen said, impressed.

“Well, he’s definitely gonna feel it tomorrow,” Lupin spoke, voice full of mirth as he watched the samurai wobble down into a sitting position. He blinked a few times, his eyes becoming heavily lidded, and Fujiko frowned as he cradled the bottle and his head lowered to the table sleepily—right onto his paper plate holding his fourth piece of pizza. Jigen and Lupin were snickering.

“Wait, Fujiko, what’re you doing?” Jigen growled suspiciously as she walked over to Goemon. She pried Zantetsuken from underneath his arm.

“You’re not really gonna steal it, are you?” Lupin said with disbelief.

“No, I’m not,” Fujiko assured, but gave a snarky grin. “I’m just going to hide it and enjoy myself tomorrow when he panics.”

“Fujiko, you are one coldhearted woman,” Jigen commented, shaking his head. But none of them could deny it; this was a fun time.
“Hey!” she protested irately, baring her teeth and going to take it back...

And, yes, those are supposed to be chicken wings, haha.
An Illusory Dissension

Ugh...

Goemon couldn’t think, and his head resting on the table felt just as heavy as his seemingly sealed eyelids. He could hear what were either whispers or his mind muffling someone’s talking, but there was no chance of making out what they were saying.

There was one voice that was clear though.

“You thought drinking could eliminate the numbness you have been feeling?” his copy questioned. Goemon didn’t bother to hold back a miserable groan. He felt awful, and that guy was going to make it even worse. “Why? Killing those women seemed to provide quite the sensation…” Goemon knitted his brows together, unable to move much else. Why did he have to bring that up? “There really is no reason to feel bad; they were attacking you, were they not?”

“It was needless…” Goemon replied breathlessly. His head hurt so badly, he could confidently attest that there was a metal wedge in his skull and someone was repeatedly hurling a hammer down on it. “There were…other solutions…”

“Ah, so maybe you were hoping a drink could help you forget what you did…?”

“Or maybe I was…trying to get away…from you,” Goemon answered rancorously. As if his stomach wasn’t already churning enough, when he forced his eyes open a sliver, the light made him feel like he was spinning into oblivion. But there was the clone, clear as day, laughing while he sat beside him.

“I have a tip,” the specter informed. “Do not drink to forget. And do not ever think you can forget about me.” With a wry smile that made Goemon’s blood rush and intensify his headache, he continued, “You should probably get up now. They might be talking about you.”

As much as Goemon hated doing what the doppelganger told him, he couldn’t deny that’s what he’d be attempting. He put his hand on the table’s surface and pushed up to lift his head. Everything was left as it was the night before—save for the pizza beneath his face. The others had been kind enough to replace that with a few napkins. Speaking of which, there the three were, seated on the couch and loveseat, and as Goemon was able to focus, their voices became more clear.

“Ah, Goemon, you’re up,” Lupin said brightly. “We were waiting for you to wake up.”

Goemon looked between them groggily. Outside the window, it appeared as if it must already be noon. “Why?” he asked, his pulsing headache preventing him from processing a sentence any bigger.

“Jigen told us about what you’re going through, Goemon,” Fujiko said kindly. Those words jolted him to his senses. He moved his sights over to Jigen.

“What?” Goemon asked, confused. Why would Jigen do that?

Clearly Goemon’s expression conveyed the question enough. “I thought they should know,” Jigen explained, much to Goemon’s dismay. “We’re a bit concerned.”

“Why…” the samurai inquired, suddenly feeling very small as they stared him down.
“You’ve been acting weird, that’s all,” Lupin said, pursing his lips. “We’re kinda wondering what was up with you killing those girls…and the whole thing with threatening to kill me.”

“Why?” Goemon asked nervously. How was he supposed to answer?

“Is that all you know how to say?” his copy said from next to him, making Goemon start a bit. He hadn’t disappeared? “Why, why, why. Can you not stand up for yourself?” he scoffed.

Goemon gawked at him, then narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he demanded lowly.

“Goemon, did you hear me?” Lupin said, gaining his attention again. “What’re you looking at?” he asked, all their eyes searching for something that Goemon could’ve been focused on.

“N-nothing...”

They didn’t press the matter, but Jigen moved the conversation on, “How serious were you about killing Lupin?”

Goemon’s jaw went slack, but he quickly gained a stern expression. “I was not.”

“Are you really going to lie to your ‘friends’?” his reflection asked him.

“Stay out of this,” Goemon hissed under his breath with a sideways glance.

“That’s another thing,” Lupin started. “You’ve been mumbling all the time, like just now.”

“Goemon, just tell us what’s going on. What’s wrong?” Fujiko inquired, trying to make things as simple as possible for him.

“How nice of them to conclude something is wrong with you,” the copy said with a sardonic smirk.

“They did not say anything is wrong with me,” Goemon told him defensively.

“But that is how you feel, is it not?” he pointed out.

“What?” Lupin questioned confusedly. He scanned the space next to Goemon, where he had been staring before quickly reverting his eyes back to the others. “Are you…talking to someone...?”

“N-no.” Goemon glanced between the copy and the others, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

“Goemon, you know you’re a terrible liar,” Jigen told him outright, making Goemon’s heartrate quicken. “You can just tell us.”

“We’re your friends, you can trust us, okay?”

The samurai hesitated, not sure what to do.

He swallowed hard, his gut doing somersaults. “I...”

“What makes you think you should trust them over me, your own self?” the copy interrupted him heatedly.
No, Goemon said in his head, not making the mistake of addressing the clone out loud again. *He is not real. He is just in my head. He is not real…*

“Who’s not real?” Fujiko asked hesitantly.

Goemon’s heart skipped a beat. They heard that? Had he said that aloud without realizing it?

“No one,” Goemon assured, trying to maintain a calm appearance. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Lupin, Fujiko, and Jigen exchanged glimpses, seeming to silently agree on something.

“Listen,” Lupin started, getting Goemon to take his paranoid eyes off Fujiko as she went to answer the door. “You know we want the best for you, right?”

“We’re your friends,” Jigen told him earnestly when he saw Goemon’s unsure look. “We wanna make sure you’re okay.”

“‘Okay’?” he asked timidly.

“Yeah, clearly something’s up,” Lupin told him in a comforting tone. “If something’s wrong, we’re gonna do anything to take care of it.”

“I am quite sure they would not kill themselves right now,” the specter said with amusement, “because that is the only thing to ‘take care of.’”

Goemon shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the lookalike’s words. He thought for a moment. It was *him* that was the problem. If he just told the others, maybe they could help… “I am not sure if you will understand, but there is…something…”

“What ‘something’?” Lupin inquired tentatively.

“You think it is *me* that is the problem? Go on,” the clone encouraged, the corner of his lips twisting upwards. “Tell them about me. I am curious to see what happens.”

“It is me—but not me. I know it sounds strange—I do not know why it is happening, or how, but it…tells me things,” he admitted awkwardly. There was no easy way to explain this, especially when he didn’t want to…but he felt like he had no choice anymore. It was the only alternative than to give in to that specter.

Jigen and Lupin looked at each other oddly, before Lupin turned back to him. “Well, you don’t need to explain more than that. Whatever this…other you is saying, it’s not true. Okay?” he said with a tentative smile.

Goemon felt a bit of relief. “You…you don’t mind helping me?”

“Of course not,” Jigen told him reassuringly. “In fact, we talked about a way to help you already.”

Goemon couldn’t help but smile. They weren’t being judgmental at all. They were willing to help him—they had started without even a request from him. They did keep him in consideration and care about him, and they were going to get rid of this horrible shade.

*This—is what friendship must feel like…* he thought to himself, ignoring the disapproving expression his copy was giving him. He wished he had told the others sooner.
Goemon turned at the sound of a heavy set of footsteps accompanying Fujiko’s. He peered up in bewilderment, immediately jumping to his feet. “Zenigata!” He reached for Zantetsuken—but it wasn’t there. His eyes widened, becoming anxious. “Where—is Zantetsuken?” he said angrily.

“Goemon, calm down,” Lupin said reassuringly, he and Jigen standing up as well. Why were they doing that? Goemon took a step back. “It’s just a precaution—we just didn’t want another incident.”

“Incident?” he questioned, baffled.

“Goemon, it’s okay,” Zenigata told him. “They called me here.”

Goemon’s eyes flashed around—he was distinctly the center of everyone’s attention. Clearly Zenigata wasn’t here for Lupin.

“What do you want?” Goemon said, furrowing his brow and taking another step back. His question wasn’t directed at just the inspector.

Goemon’s mirror image stood up along with them. “Well then, this is an interesting turn of events…” he remarked.

“We don’t want you to hurt any more people,” Fujiko said in a calming voice, “or yourself.”

“You just haven’t been in your right mind lately,” Lupin told him. Goemon’s jaw dropped, eyes widening to their limit. He saw the handcuffs at Zenigata’s hand. “We didn’t want to jump to conclusions, so we decided we would talk to make sure you were actually going through something…difficult before doing this.”

“No…” Goemon said in incredulity. They had done this before, calling Zenigata to take him in, when Fujiko stole Zantetsuken and he had tried to commit suicide. They had locked him up. “I have been perfectly in my right mind! I am not crazy!”

“Stop struggling, Goemon!” Lupin said sternly, he and Jigen keeping Goemon’s arms tight
in their grasps. Goemon gritted his teeth, pulling against him and kicking Lupin in the knee. It made the thief stagger a bit, but Goemon remained in his clutches. Fujiko rushed forward, helping Lupin hold Goemon’s right arm still before he could elbow Lupin in the gut. If that was the case, Goemon had no problem with delivering another kick. As Goemon lifted his foot off the ground, Jigen hooked his own leg around Goemon’s standing one and swept it out from underneath him. The three of them held Goemon forward against the floor, stretching his arms behind him to prevent him from rolling over and someone resting their entire weight on their foreleg across his knees so he couldn’t stand or kick—he couldn’t do anything.

Goemon’s blood was racing. He could hear his heart beating in his ears as someone’s knee dug into his back to immobilize him further. No matter how he struggled, he couldn’t break their hold. True, Lupin and Jigen could hold their own in a fight, and probably Fujiko, but was Goemon weak from drinking too much…?

Did they plan that?

Zenigata looked rather sympathetic, but Goemon felt nowhere near appreciative of it, and the cold metal of the handcuffs was synonymous with defeat as they were clamped around his wrists—and then another around his ankles.

“LET GO OF ME!” Goemon shouted, but no one granted his request. “I thought you said you would help me!” he blurted out, his dread and regret getting the best of him.

“Goemon, we are!” Fujiko tried to convince, standing in front of him with a sympathetic look on her face. “That’s why we’re doing this!”

“No! You did not even try to understand! Do you not care?!” he said desperately.

“Goemon, you don’t even understand it yourself!” Lupin told him, continuing to grip Goemon’s bicep straight behind him as he and Jigen controlled him to his feet. The samurai was panting through his bared teeth as they forced him to stand upright. With the chain connecting his ankles, he could walk, but there was no chance of kicking—unless he used both legs.

Goemon used the two’s grips on him to hold himself up and lifted his knees to his chest, then twisted to project his feet straight into Jigen’s gut.

“God—DAMN it, Goemon!” the gunman wheezed, doubled over. The force of the kick pushed Goemon into Lupin, throwing the latter off balance to be fallen upon. As Lupin was crushed, Goemon rolled off him and used the momentum along with his skill in balance to bring himself to his feet.

“I am not crazy!” he yelled at them, but it seemed to be no use trying to convince. They were watching him like he was some…some monster. There was an emptiness his chest, somehow having an intense weight. It was nothing like he’d ever felt before. It was swelling, expanding that hollowness, like being swallowed by a storm of misery. He met their gazes despairingly. Why weren’t they saying anything?

“Did I not tell you?” the copy said from behind him, making Goemon look at him. “I am the only solution.”

“No…. That cannot be—” Goemon was cut off as he was seized again. He struggled against Jigen and Lupin as the other two stood by with grievant expressions.

“I’m sorry things turned out like this,” Zenigata told him wholeheartedly. “But I made sure
you’ll have a good solitary cell…although I’m afraid there won’t be any visiting hours.”

“Ha! He speaks as if you would ever want to see them again!” Gomeon’s lookalike chortled.

Goemon continued to writhe, fighting against them, but it was over. Jigen and Lupin had him, and Zenigata was going to cart him away soon. As the three pushed him forward towards the door, the specter walked alongside them, still watching with calculating interest.

“I—I thought you were my friends!” Goemon shouted, devastation evident in his voice and his face as he used any strength to face them.

“Goemon, when you get by this problem, you’ll understand,” Jigen told him sincerely.

“Interesting that they think I am the problem…and that you can rid yourself of me…” the clone discerned.

“If this is what friendship means, then I want no part in it!” Goemon screamed at them, writhing around in their grasps. “I—I trusted you!”

“Listen to us!” Lupin tried to reason. “If we weren’t your friends, we wouldn’t be doing this!”

“Hm, sending you away against your will to deal with your problems; only keeping you around when it is convenient for them…” his clone noted in a contemplative manner. “If you cannot break out, it looks like you are going to be locked up for…well…until you die.”

“No!” Goemon rejected, pushing his feet against the floor. He squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his teeth. “How can you just send me away?! How could you do this to me?! WHY?!”

Goemon yelled out despairingly, trying one last time to break free. He wanted out of the cuffs, out of their hands, out of the pressure of this so called “friendship.” His wild, distraught gaze passed back and forth between Jigen and Lupin.

Except they weren’t there.

Goemon was breathless, his face blank. He was at Fujiko’s coffee table, which was now cleaned, someone having put a small cushion under his head. He gawked at Jigen’s impassive face, peering over the top of his newspaper.

“Are you…okay…?” he said, clearly concerned about the loud scream Goemon made as he woke up.

Goemon wasn’t sure. Was he okay…? It was just a dream, but he certainly didn’t feel okay…. He stiffened at realizing Zantetsuken was gone. No—so they were planning something. Goemon glared at Jigen, standing up, making the latter eye him questioningly.

“Oh, Goemon,” Fujiko’s chipper voice sounded as she walked out of the kitchen in a blouse and cute skirt, smirking mischievously. “Hm…you look…different. Is something missing from your outfit?”

Goemon glowered at her, stalking forward. “Where is it?”

“Where is what?” she said turning away and shrugging—however, her face quickly changed at seeing how menacing he looked. She blinked. “You sure are grumpy when you have a
“WHERE IS IT?” Goemon demanded, clearly an indirect threat. Fujiko kept herself composed, although she couldn’t tell if she was standing her ground or if she was plain petrified on the spot. “Maybe if you tell me now, I will limit Zantetsuken’s use to a limb instead of your life when I find it,” he snarled, making her take a step back as he loomed over her. “NOW.”

“Goemon, take it easy—”

“Do not touch me!” Goemon barked, smacking Jigen’s hand away before he could put it on his shoulder. Goemon sneered. “I will not fall for whatever tricks you are trying to play.”

Jigen seemed taken aback. “What the hell’re you—”

“Hey, Goemon!” Lupin’s cheerful voice sounded, closing the bathroom door behind him. “That’s weird, where’s Zantetsu—ken…?” he stopped when Goemon turned on his heel and grabbed Lupin’s jacket. “Okay, okay, the jig’s up,” Lupin yielded, raising his hands in defeat. “We didn’t mean to make you that mad…” he added, then began reaching behind him.

Goemon grabbed his wrist to stop him. “Do not try anything,” he hissed, eyes smoldering.

“H-hey!” Lupin stuttered as Goemon spun Lupin around and went to reach for whatever weapon Lupin was planning on using on him—only, Zantetsuken’s handle was sticking up out of his collar, the other end from the bottom of his jacket. Narrowing his eyes, Goemon pulled it up and out from against Lupin’s back, then pushed him away. “What the—?!?”

“You really thought you could deceive me?” he said darkly, tilting his head down with revulsion, eyeing each of them.

“Geez, Goemon, it was just a prank,” Lupin told him, not understanding why the samurai was so hostile. “It was just a joke to get back at you for makin’ Fujiko look like an ass last night.”

“A joke…?” Goemon straightened up with realization. In the past, all of Lupin’s jokes were harmless. Was this really a harmless joke? They weren’t plotting anything? Was it…all in his head? “Of course, a joke…I knew that. This was a joke.”

“Terrorizing us is your form of a joke?” Jigen said flatly. Gomeon raised his eyebrows—he hadn’t meant that his own actions were a joke, he had been referring to stealing Zantetsuken, but if it was a liable excuse for his behavior…

“Yes. This was a joke…of payback,” he confirmed. He shifted his attention to Fujiko, who was staring at him intently.

“Goemon, you really need to work on your sense of humor…” Lupin said with exasperation.

“Yes, you do,” Fujiko said bluntly, her gaze unwavering. Goemon turned away to avoid holding eye contact with her.

“Yeesh, Goemon, that whiskey didn’t treat you well. You look beat…” Lupin commented. “I set up the Pierre heist for tonight, but if you need a break you can skip it.”

“No,” Goemon insisted. “I will be fine. I just…need some fresh air,” he told them, making his way to the balcony. He had to do this heist without any hiccups to prove to them that what occurred at their encounter with the She triad—and just now—was not going to happen again.
Fujiko cheekily flipped her hair over her shoulder, walking away coolly. “While you do that, I’m going to take a shower,” she said, strutting off to her room.

“Ooooo, Fujiko, I’ll join you!” Lupin said eagerly.

“I don’t think so,” she said, slamming her door in his face. He frowned.

“Aw, c’mon, Fuji-cakes…”

Jigen sat back down with his paper, but he didn’t take his eyes off Goemon as the samurai walked out onto the balcony.

Goemon shut the door behind him, the crisp air caressing his skin and soothing the tiredness around his eyes. He gazed out over the city despondently, although he took in none of the scenery.

What’s wrong with me?

“So—”

“I do not want to—oh,” Goemon paused—it wasn’t his horrible clone, who seemed to be haunting him more and more often. “Jigen…”

“A joke, huh?” the gunner said, sticking his hands in his pockets and leaning against the stone railing of the balcony. “You’re terrible at lying.”

Goemon resisted cringing at those words, having heard them so recently in that atrocious dream. He had no words to say.

“You lost your temper pretty bad, huh?” Jigen said, revealing the truth…somewhat.

“Yes…I suppose I did…”

“What happened back there?” he asked simply, lighting a cigarette. He didn’t need an answer if Goemon wasn’t willing to give one, but he was willing to provide a nudge if the samurai needed to get anything off his chest—which he suspected there was, considering the terrified yell Goemon had woken himself up with.

“Nothing—” Goemon stopped upon Jigen looking at him quite seriously.

“Nightmare?” he suggested.

Goemon raised his eyebrows in surprise, wondering how Jigen could even talk to him—let alone so calmly—after the sickening behavior he had just displayed. “Yes,” he answered simply, unsure what would come of saying more.

“Well, there’s a reason they’re called dreams,” Jigen said. Goemon listened intently. “They’re not real. So, don’t go draggin’ ‘em into reality.”

Goemon paused. The dream wasn’t real. Perhaps it was something that he feared would happen if he opened up, but it hadn’t really happened. It wasn’t the only outcome.

Even so, he knew he couldn’t bring himself to tell anyone what was happening and how he felt. Knowing it was a possibility, he was too…scared.

“So, you know what you did wrong,” Jigen continued, blowing out some smoke. “You
As Jigen talked to Goemon on the balcony, Fujiko let out her pent-up breath as quietly as she could, leaning back against her bedroom door. She’d seen a lot in her life, and not too much left her shaken anymore. However…while she had seen a merciless Goemon in the past, he had never put it towards her. Sure, he’d held a sword to her throat a few times, but shoving that yam in her mouth was about as violent as he ever had gotten. This time…the look in his eye, his whole demeanor for those few seconds…. It was jarring. That was not a mere joke. For once in her life, she was glad Jigen had been in the same room.

She quickly covered her mouth to stifle a gasp as a startling knock on the door broke the silence. “Go away, Lupin,” she ordered with annoyance.

“Er…” a muffled voice sounded. “It is Goemon…”

“Oh, great. What do you want?” Fujiko huffed to hide how unnerved she was. Goemon was the last person in her home that she wanted to talk to.

There was a few seconds’ pause. “May I speak with you?”

Just as expected, her wish was NOT fate’s command today. Fujiko debated it, thinking of what Jigen had said of him. “Fine,” she decided, turning around and opening her door. “Come in,” she told him, making Goemon show a face of surprise.

“Er—thank you,” he said, stepping past her awkwardly.

“What?!” Lupin yelled from the couch. “You’re gonna let him in?! You better not try anything, Goemon—”

Fujiko shut the door, unamused.

“Let ‘em be, Lupin,” Jigen grumbled. As much as he didn’t like Fujiko, after seeing how uncomfortable Goemon had made her—and how it stuck—he believed she deserved an apology and urged Goemon to do so. For both of them.

Fujiko walked over to her giant bed canopy bed, which was dressed in maroon and gold matelassé comforters and pillows. In the damask-wallpapered room, there was a thick wooden desk, dressers, vanity, and a cushioned bench at the end of her bed, which she took a seat on.

Goemon watched at her adamantly, waiting until she sat back imperturbably and looked at him with mild contempt. He was staggered that she would even talk to him, not to mention alone—and in all honesty, she didn’t want him there. But no one ever said friendship didn’t have its fair share of sacrifice.

There was an expectant appearance on her face as Goemon stood there steadfast while she waited for him to speak.

“I came to apologize,” Goemon said truthfully. It wasn’t something he usually did. It was something that transpired so rarely he couldn’t even remember the last time it happened. But, as mentioned, no one said friendship didn’t come with sacrifice—even if Goemon didn’t understand yet. Plus, this circumstance was different. The man who had threatened her wasn’t who he wanted to be, and he needed to prove that to her—and himself.

She gave a quiet sardonic exhale, an endurant smile playing on her lips. “Oh really?”
“Yes,” Goemon asserted.

“For what?”

He furrowed his brow. Why was Fujiko making this so difficult? Then again, it would be better for him to really reflect on things and address them directly… “For threatening you unnecessarily.”

Fujiko raised an eyebrow. “Is there ever a necessary time to threaten me?”

“Yes.”

She sighed in defeat; no fooling him this time. “Fair enough. Is that it?” Goemon wasn’t sure what she meant. Is that what…? Seeing the perplexed expression on his face, she moved on. “Alright, go ahead and say your apology.”

“I am sorry for… acting out of line. It was not my intention to make you feel… bad—well, it was at the time, but… not now.”

“‘Bad’?” Fujiko asked, unimpressed. “Do you even know how I felt, Goemon?”

He paused. “No,” he admitted.

Fujiko stared at him, dissatisfied. “Then if you have no morals against threatening me, and you’re blindly throwing your apology at a feeling you’re not even aware of, are you even actually sorry?” she asked. It was quite the demanding inquiry, and the others would probably think it was harsh, but, while normally she wouldn’t care enough to address it and would use the act-in-question against them later, she did care this time. She wanted Goemon to realize all there was to realize from this—and she doubted insensitive men like Lupin and Jigen could do such things.

Goemon stared at the carpet unsurely. “I… I am sorry for… the circumstance.”

“And what would that ‘circumstance’ be?”

His lips became a straight line as he tried to think of what to say. Why did all this happen? “I was upset.”

Fujiko gave an empathetic, defeated smile. As much as she loved showing no compassion, she knew occasionally she had to make some exceptions…

“Goemon, it’s okay to be upset,” Fujiko corrected him. He turned his eyes back to her contemplatively. “What’s not okay is taking that out on someone, especially those who haven’t caused it—unless I did cause it?” she asked, just to make sure.

“No, you did not,” Goemon assured her. He made sure to keep eye contact with her, so she would know his sincerity as he said, “I… I am sorry for making you suffer on behalf of my strife.”

Well, that was one way to put it…

“Goemon, it’s really mature of you to face the facts and say you’re sorry,” Fujiko commended—even though she was sure he didn’t do so on his own, but he had to learn somewhere. “Thank you for that.”

Saying “you’re welcome” didn’t exactly seem to fit Goemon’s current position, as he felt like he should be thanking her for forgiving him… if that’s even what she was doing. She hadn’t
directly said so. He stayed silent.

“And we’re here to help you deal with that ‘strife,’ just so long as you don’t take it out on us,” she told him wholeheartedly, which provoked the most subtle of wistful looks on his otherwise expressionless face.

He wasn’t wistful to tell them. No, he was wistful to get over the fear that held him back from telling them. Goemon had no idea how they would react, and the tormented feeling of being dragged away to confinement, forced by them, still sat with him.

There was nothing saying they would do that to him…but there was nothing saying they wouldn’t.

Goemon nodded. He felt as if Fujiko just bombarded him with a quiz, but her words really made him think…and the ones at the end were encouraging. Not enough to get him to speak now, especially after that alcohol-induced dream made him even less sure what friendship entailed, but encouraging nonetheless.

“Oh, now get out,” Fujiko ordered, standing up. “I’m going to take a shower.” And without hesitation, she began unbuttoning the (few fastened) buttons to her blouse. Goemon went rigid as she did so, turning his blushing face away as he briskly walked over to the door and stepped out—although not without Fujiko throwing an article of clothing at him before he shut it.

He stiffened, hesitantly grabbing whatever was draping over his shoulder—and quickly retracting his hold at the sight of her lacy black bra. Lupin leered over at him, mouth agape as it fell to the floor.

“What did you guys do in there?!”

“Nothing!”

“Then what’re you doing with her bra?!” Lupin demanded, climbing over the arm of the couch to make his way over to him.

“She threw it on me!”

“Uh-huh, and what’d you do to deserve THAT token of gratitude?!”

“H-how dare you accuse me of anything!”

“Oh please,” Lupin huffed, swiping the bra up off the ground. “I can at least do that much after you nearly chopped my dick off because some sketchy girl got naked in front of you and claimed I ‘did bad things’!”

“W-well, I—”

Goemon looked away, abashed; it was hard to live that down.

“Ah, I’m just messin’ with you, Goemon,” Lupin drawled, throwing his other arm around him and walking him towards the couch.

“Are you really going to keep that?” the samurai questioned dubiously, pointing at the bra.

“Yeah,” Lupin said as if it were obvious. “You know how hard it is to find point d’esprit lace on underwire?”
“The real question is why do you know, Lupin?” Jigen remarked with amusement, although he was nowhere near surprised.

“I am a connoisseur of many fine things, my dear fellow,” the thief said mysteriously, waving the bra back and forth.

“What is ‘underwire’…?” Goemon asked, timidly curious.

Jigen chuckled behind his newspaper, Fujiko silently laughing to herself as she heard their exchange. Part of what thieving was missing nowadays were these carefree moments where the most grave of questions was that of bra anatomy.

---

He stiffened, hesitantly grabbing whatever was draping over his shoulder...
“Oh, c’mon, Goemon, you’re not still mad at me, are you?”

“You brought Zantetsuken in the bathroom with you,” Goemon replied with annoyance.

“I told you, it was already there! We hid it under the sink so you wouldn’t find it, and when I heard you getting angry I thought I’d bring it out and surprise you!” Lupin argued, although the samurai gave a meager huff. “It’s not like I didn’t wash my hands!”

“Ugh, enough. Lupin, you’d better be right about this,” Fujiko said dully as they drove through the night streets of Paris. After a long argument and a game of rock-paper-scissors, she was in the back seat of the Fiat with Goemon while Jigen enjoyed his usual passenger seat.

“Have I ever steered you wrong?” the thief asked in a spritely tone. “Trust me, Zenigata claimed the goods were moved to the bank to lure us away from where they actually are—meaning, they’re still at the Pierre mansion. He’ll have people waiting at both areas, I’m sure.”

“Where will Zenigata be though?” Goemon asked.

“Hopefully at the mansion ‘cause I wanna say hi,” Lupin commented. So, he didn’t know exactly where Zenigata would be (which is why he sent his calling card straight to the police station), but it didn’t matter too much, because the Lupin gang always got away, right? They pulled up a couple blocks away from the mansion. It was quite the home, a luscious green yard surrounded by a cement wall and spired gate, a fountain placed right in the center. The front of the house had a tall overhang above the porch supported by four regal-looking white pillars, and off in the distance the Eiffel Tower could be spotted. “Okay, Fujiko, you got everything?”

The seductress held up a metal briefcase. “Yup.”

Honestly, Jigen wished Lupin didn’t trust her to hold all their tools for this heist, because that made it way too easy for her to just run off with everything. But hey, what did he know?

She unlocked the case while Lupin opened the sunroof to the car, and he took out a wide controller. With the flip of a switch, a drone sprung live from it and he steered it out of the car and towards the mansion, paying close attention to the screen located on the controller.

“Weird…” Lupin pondered aloud. “Looks like nobody’s home.” Front, back, over at the garage, behind the hedges; there was nobody, and no cars either.

“So, it really is at the bank then?” Jigen said.

“Nah,” Lupin assured, beginning to fly the drone back to the car. “Zenigata purposefully has no one outside to make it seem like it’s unguarded and hopefully drive us to the bank instead, or catch us off-guard when we go in. All the blinds and curtains are closed, and the lights are off, so I bet he’s got guards all on the inside.”

“If you say so,” Jigen said. He didn’t mean that lightly though; if Lupin said something confidently when it came to heists, it was usually true. The drone dropped through the sunroof and Lupin stowed it away in the briefcase with the controller. They all exited the vehicle and stealthily made their way down the street until they came upon the cement wall surrounding the property.

“Okay, everybody know your jobs?” Lupin questioned. “And got your keys?”
“Sure thing.”

“Mmhm.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Fujiko and I will get through the first round of security, then we’ll call you guys in.” Lupin tapped the earpiece he had in, identical ones fitted into everyone else’s ears as well. Instead of the mics being disguised as accessories this time, they were wearing much more accessible digital wristbands. “Here we go!”

Jigen laced his fingers together and gave Fujiko a step up over the wall, followed by Lupin. They knew the basics of the security system and layout of the mansion; now all they had to do was execute their plan. The treasure was in some sort of vault below the house—like a basement—and the only way through to it was the secret passageway classically located in the library, in the north wing of the mansion. However, the entire passage was rigged with security cameras and traps.

The surveillance room was positioned on the second floor in the north wing. Then there was the security control room on the third and topmost floor in the south wing, as far away from the treasure as could possibly be, which operated all the traps and security throughout the house. That was the only place to disable them, and the only way to do so was with the Pierre family key—hence why Lupin made one for each of the gang. The key was going to be needed to bypass everything: The cameras (which would be Jigen’s job), the traps (Fujiko’s job), and the vault (Lupin’s job). Goemon was going to be their ultimate bodyguard and versatile handyman while accompanying Lupin.

However, none of the mentioned would be accepted by the computer system unless there was proof that someone with authority of the key was present at the house—that’s where Fujiko’s deal of helping them had been unable to be turned down. A few days before the initial Pierre heist for the key, she had disguised herself as Mrs. Pierre’s nurse. Checking the woman’s pupil dilation allowed for a perfect snap of her irises, and getting a scan of each of her fingerprints was easy when Fujiko moved the fake pulse oximeter to each fingertip to “confirm the reading.”

Fujiko and Lupin made their way across the yard and to the front door—it wasn’t their usual go-to entrance for thieving, but it had to be done in this circumstance. Standing on the porch, Fujiko opened the briefcase, allowing for Lupin to take the contact case holding replicas of Mrs. Pierre’s irises and paper-thin gloves bearing her fingerprints. The scanners were embedded into the wall right next to the door—it was time to get to business.

Meanwhile, Jigen and Goemon were patiently waiting at the wall. Goemon tried not to think about that dream he’d had earlier, about what events would ensue should he consider them friends and the meaning of friendship, but that only made more room for him to wonder if he was really considered a friend at all.

“Jigen,” Goemon said lowly, crouched down with the tip of Zantetsuken planted firmly on the ground. Jigen, kneeling against the wall, looked over at him. Hopefully whatever was crossing the samurai’s mind wasn’t going to make Jigen question the success rate of this heist more than he already did. “Enzo said Lupin collects people, and PeopleLog said that I was just part of his collection…but I have come to the conclusion that PeopleLog must be wrong.”

Oh boy, Jigen thought to himself. He knew where Goemon was going with this, and the samurai wasn’t going to be happy with the results, but Jigen wasn’t about to lie to him. “No, they were right. He collects people.”
Goemon paused, stunned. That wasn’t what he expected—or wanted—to hear…but he was at least glad it was Jigen saying it, someone whose words he didn’t have to question. “Then…I am merely part of Lupin’s collection?”

“In a nutshell,” Jigen answered simply, putting his cigarette out on the wall.

“I see….” Goemon said, sounding a little…darker than disappointed.

“And so am I. So is Fujiko,” Jigen went on. Goemon looked at him with a baffled expression.

“And…you are content with that?” he asked, not understanding and honestly feeling quite downhearted. He thought it was a fact that Jigen and Lupin were friends, but if Jigen was just part of Lupin’s people collection…there was no chance Goemon was seen as a friend.

“Lupin collects people—the best people,” Jigen elaborated. “The best adversaries, the best allies. I’m the best gunman, Fujiko…well, he thinks she’s the best-looking woman on the planet, but she’s the number one manipulative cheat in my book. And you’re the best swordsman there is.”

“So, it is true…” That was the reason he was kept around. Goemon almost felt crestfallen, but it was as if something inside him was forcing him not to care enough to feel bad.

“But that’s not what we are in his collection,” Jigen clarified, making Goemon look at him with uncertainty. “He collected us as best friends.”

Goemon’s face went blank. “Me—? I am a…’best friend’…?”

“Sure thing. And don’t just limit that to Lupin,” Jigen told him with an encouraging grin.

“But…why?” Goemon couldn’t guess of anything about him that was considerable in terms of friendship.

“Do you ask yourself why you’re the best swordsman?” Jigen asked. “It’s just how things played out for who you are.”

Goemon blinked, bewildered. Just for who he was? That couldn’t be right…

“Okay, you guys, meet me at the side of the house!” Lupin’s voice sounded from their earpieces.

Alright, let’s get going,” Jigen said, standing up and waiting to boost Goemon over the wall, but the samurai turned away from him. “Suit your—self…” Goemon had cut through the wall in a flash, making a hole big enough for them to walk though. Of course he couldn’t do things the conventional way…

They snuck into the yard and walked over to meet Lupin and Fujiko. They had “logged” Mrs. Pierre into the house, so now their keys would be able to override anything they wanted. They stood close together, reviewing the blueprint of the house Lupin had.

“Lupin, please take out those contacts,” Goemon requested.

“What? I think I look good with hazel eyes!”

“No, you look creepy, take ‘em out.”

“Sorry, but I need them for later, heh. Now, let’s give this thing fifteen minutes, sound
good? Just let me know if things get dicey on your end. Jigen, this is the room you’re headed to. There’s a balcony here on the same floor that you can get in through,” Lupin said, tracing the lines with his finger.

“Got it,” Jigen answered, taking the grappling gun from the metal briefcase.

“Fujiko—”

“I know where I’m going,” she said haughtily, taking a pair of black rubber gloves from the case. “I’ll see you guys later,” Fujiko said in a honeyed tone, waving before she ran off in her black bodysuit and disappearing behind the back corner of the house.

“Okay, Goemon, you’re with me,” Lupin said with a confident grin. It was much more confident than Jigen and Fujiko felt about Goemon’s role; the gunman had tried to talk Lupin into sending Goemon with him or Fujiko, but he wouldn’t have it.

Goemon nodded, and they went their separate ways.

Jigen saw Fujiko round the next corner of the house as he appeared at the back. Everything was dark; it really did look like nobody was home. The moonlight was enough for him to make out the balconies of the bedrooms on the second floor though, and he aimed his grappling gun for the one nearest him—the one closest to the surveillance room. The cord made a zipping noise as it shot out, and Jigen pulled the trigger a second time once the grapnel passed between two stone bars of the balcony railing. The grapnel opened up, its four hooks reaching out as the line was reeled back, catching on to the stone and heaving Jigen up. It looked easier than it really was—there were several times when Jigen was first starting out as a hitman where the gun either yanked itself out of his hand or he hadn’t judged the trajectory right and ended up slamming himself into a wall.

Good times, but not missed.

Pulling himself over the railing, he released the grapnel and retracted it back into the gun. Now it was time to get into the bedroom…. As Lupin had said, all the curtains were drawn, so the tall windows of the balcony doors were no exception. There was no light coming from the room either. Jigen pressed his back against the wall of the house, reaching over and quietly testing the doorknob.

It was oddly unlocked…and highly suggestive that someone had come in this way or was waiting for someone to.

He carefully pulled the door open, being sure not for any part of him to be in line with doorway should someone decide to shoot.

Nothing. There was a little bit of a breeze, but not enough to move the heavy curtains to allow a peek inside.

So be it.

Jigen had his magnum locked and loaded. Pushing his hat down to assure its safety, he turned into the doorway, shoving the curtain aside and quickly moving himself against the bedroom wall, arm outstretched and ready to shift on a dime to aim at anyone there.

However, it was noiseless, and the moonlight revealed no one—although that didn’t ease Jigen off his guard. The floor was a fluffy white carpet, the large room occupied with expensive-looking but very plain furniture. Probably a guest room. He made his way over to the door of the bedroom, sure to never let the closet or bathroom doors out of his sight should anyone appear from
there, but there was no movement, and no sign that anyone had even been there.

Perhaps the door being unlocked was just a fluke, or maybe some luck on his part—the latter being very doubtful, as Jigen’s life had an incredible deficiency of luck. He put his ear to the door to listen for any guards out in the hall.

❖ ❖ ❖

Fujiko, using her nimbleness, had put on her gloves and was making her way up the side of the house. The gloves, toes of her boots, and knees of her suit used the same technology as a spider’s feet, coated in artificial microscopic hooked hairs. With each reach and step, the grip was like the equivalent of a tiny ledge to grab on a rock wall.

The security control room didn’t have a window, of course, so the closest thing to it was the office, and that’s exactly where she was climbing. Three stories up was quite enough to make someone nauseous, especially when standing on nothing, but Fujiko had been in much, much more frightening settings than this.

Finally, she had silently made it to the window. Latched on to the wall next to it, she reached a hand over—her knees, feet, and other hand keeping her steadily in place—and placed her palm and fingers flat against the window. With a bit of pressure to keep it attached to the glass, she slowly lifted upwards, quietly opening the window.

Perfect.

Fujiko couldn’t hear anyone inside, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t. With caution, she leaned over and pushed a single blade of the blinds aside. In front of the window was a desk facing away from her towards the door, and there were filing cabinets against the wall, along with a few hanging decorations. Otherwise, the room was wide open. The only place someone would be was if they were out of sight and against the wall the window was set in, or hiding behind the desk…

No problem. Fujiko silently put her feet in the corners of the window, placing one hand on the frame to hold her steady, the other on the edge of the blinds…

She ripped the blinds aside and projected herself forward, rolling across the desk and ripping her pistol out. In not even a second, she was on her feet facing the window—she hadn’t landed on anyone, so no one hiding at the desk, and no one hiding against the wall. She took off her gloves and tucked them in her belt, then, keeping her gun drawn, she stepped towards the office door to see if she could detect anyone in the halls.

❖ ❖ ❖

Meanwhile, Lupin and Goemon walked the length of the north wing until they came upon the library window. It looked extraordinarily ordinary for such a fancy house, save for the fact it wasn’t the type that opened.

That was no problem with Goemon around. He cut it at its four edges, and Lupin let it fall
back against his hands with care so he could quietly set it down on the grass. He parted the intricate, heavy curtains to give inside a once-over, but the darkness was beyond abysmal. Well, concerning guards, it would be pretty reckless for Lupin to throw himself into their sights by opening the curtains to get a better view, so that was a no.

“Alright, Goemon,” Lupin said in a hushed voice as they crouched below the window. “I’m gonna jump in, and you come in right after me, okay? Be ready to cover each other’s backs.” Goemon nodded, tensing and set to follow Lupin. The thief put a hand on the sill of the window, and with a few seconds’ preparation he lifted his feet through the curtains and let go, ready to draw his gun as he rolled across the floor—only, there was no floor.

Quickly, Goemon grabbed Lupin’s hand before he plummeted down. The samurai’s body was arched over the sill, holding on to Lupin tightly as he stared down. No wonder everything had been dark; there wasn’t anything to see. The floor—including the door—was a whole level down, the only thing reaching past the first-floor plane being the tops of bookshelves and the various items displayed atop them.

“No guards…” Goemon observed.

“Yeah…” Lupin said with the same amount of scrutiny.

“There is a bookcase below you,” Goemon pointed out, it being about five feet wide and not far beneath Lupin’s feet. “I will let you down—”

“No, wait,” Lupin objected. He squinted down. With the moonlight, he could ever so slightly see a rivet in the wall at either edge of the bookshelf just below him. “That one’s a weight trigger,” he concluded. It seemed the Pierre family had expected people to try and sneak through the window, as—now that Lupin could see the door was not located on the first floor but the floor below it—it was most likely a difficult place to find if you were not a member of the household. Even Lupin would have to reevaluate the blueprints to figure out the exact path to get down to that entrance. Well played, Pierres… Lupin thought to himself with a grin. “Swing me over to the bookcase beside it, Goemon.”

Lupin used his feet against the wall to help Goemon sway him to the next bookshelf over. Once he landed, Goemon jumped from the window alongside him. The room was a huge octagon, the walls completely lined with the shelves and separated with spaces that each held a bright lamp. Down below on the floor were several desks and tables and couches for lounging.

“What is next?” Goemon asked him.

“This…might be harder than I thought,” Lupin admitted. They needed to find six specific books that acted as levers, and now that the room was twice as tall as he anticipated…well, there were twice as many titles to search through. “Goemon…I’m gonna need your help looking for these.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Jigen didn’t hear anything. Not a single footstep, and he wasn’t going to wait forever to hear one either. He opened the door a crack, and thankfully it wasn’t squeaky—another thing to be thankful for was that the hallways had built-in lanterns arching out from the walls, so, although dimly lit,
He glanced down. Wooden floorboards…hopefully quiet ones. Opening the door all the way, he swiftly stepped out, ready to react should he see someone. But there was no one for the entire length of the hall. Maybe Lupin had been wrong and there were no guards…?

There was only eerie silence as he stepped in the direction of the surveillance room. Jigen counted the doors as he went, and made sure not to assume there was no one in them after he passed.

Well, this is the one… Jigen thought to himself. He really wanted to light a cigarette with all this dead air making him more anxious than if there were actually people attacking him, but now wasn’t the time for smoking. Once upon the surveillance room, he suspiciously tapped the handle. No electric shock or alarm went off. On the doorknob was the keyhole, the only way to open the door other than from the inside. Jigen dug the key out of his inside suit pocket, inserted it into the lock, and gave it a good turn. There was a heavy click as it unlocked, and after stuffing the key back in his pocket, he kept his magnum handy as he opened the door.

And good thing he did.
A Failed Connection

The room was lit from the static-filled monitors mounted on the wall, about twelve of them over a control panel and table, and in front of that was a chair with the back facing him—but he didn’t need to see their face to know who it was; that baggy hoodie was quite enough.

“Eh?” the goggles-wearing girl sounded, lifting her head up from her laptop and behind her at the noise from the door. Jigen pointed the gun at her face without hesitation, watching her spin the chair around to face him, her legs crossed in the seat and computer in her lap. “Oh, it’s you, Jiji.”

Jiji? What kind of a nickname was that? Was it supposed to be an insult? Was she calling him an old man? Because it sounded like a pet’s name.

Jigen resisted a shudder. No. Not a pet name. He wasn’t going to have it.

“What’re you doing here?” Jigen demanded gruffly. If she was here, that meant there were probably others, and he didn’t need any of them sneaking up on him, so he shut the door. The girl spun around in her chair again, seeming unconcerned with him as she typed away with her tip-less gloves. “Lupin,” Jigen said into his wristband. “Lupin? Fujiko! Goemon!”

No answer.

Jigen clenched his teeth as the young woman stared at him through her neon-green goggles, her lips curled up into a smile as she tapped her laptop. So, another techy like Ami. It was these types that Jigen didn’t understand, so much threat with so little strength or physical dexterity.

“Communications are officially jammed,” she alerted him with a pleasant tone.

“Yeah, I kinda figured,” Jigen said sardonically, although it seemed like she was speaking in a more literal sense instead of jeeringly. Another thing about those techy types. All facts. Although this one wasn’t like Ami; Ami had been rather apathetic about most things, the facts being all they were: Proof. This one seemed to see the facts as some sort of tool for her entertainment. “Now answer my question.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Alright, fine. Then put down the gadgets and any sorta weapons you’re hiding,” Jigen said sternly, stepping forward until the barrel was only a few inches from her face. The act brought an unexpectant look on her face.

“You’re here to disable the security cameras so Lupin can get the Pierre treasure, right?” Goggles asked, leaning to the side so she could look at Jigen without the gun barrel blocking her view. She took Jigen’s serious silence as a yes. “It’s already done.”

Jigen assumed the girl must’ve done some weird computer hack to get the cameras offline, because there wasn’t a key sticking out of the control panel. “You’re obviously not here on Zenigata’s night shift, so if there aren’t any guards here, why did you disable them?”

Jigen hated questions, but this was just too fishy to get rid of her with no information gained.

“Oh, there were guards here,” she said, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder. In the
shadowy corner of the room, he saw a body lumped against the wall. Jigen wasn’t sure if he was
dead or if that girl was the one who did it, but apparently this place had been guarded…and now it
wasn’t. “I’ve been checking in with Zenigata to tell him things are going as planned.” Goggles
picked up a smartphone—which Jigen guessed was the guard’s—and then pointed to her computer.
With the push of a few buttons, a ringing sound came from its speakers—so, she had hacked into
the phone.

“Hello?” Zenigata’s voice sounded.

“Just checking in. Everything is going smoothly; no sign of Lupin yet,” Goggles’ voice
sounded very professional for someone spinning around in her chair.

“Alright, but don’t let your guard down. We’re gonna catch Lupin this time!”

“You got it, sir!” There was a click as the call ended. “Voice disguiser program,” she
enlightened, then gave a bored sigh. “I know I’m supposed to kill you and all, but I really don’t
wanna.”

“You really think you could kill me?” If that was true, she was more insane than he had
given her credit for.

“Well, it seems to me you don’t kill unless you really need to. That’s what I think after
seeing you with your crazy samurai friend.” She tilted her head sideways as if asking for
confirmation. “You don’t like killing, do you?”

She winced as the bang of a shot bombarded her ear, the bullet whizzing straight by her.

“I certainly don’t mind it,” Jigen corrected her.

“You should just go help your friends.” Goggles leaned back, side-eyeing him. “They’re
going to need it.”

*Shit.* Jigen stiffened, his mouth becoming a straight line. He couldn’t warn anyone—
and this was the girl who he assumed was the weakest of the three members they’d met before, so
the others of the Lupin gang weren’t going to have it as easy. Jigen didn’t trust her enough to simply
leave her there. He could shoot her, but he’d rather not have to…even if she was psycho. “Take off
the jacket and any weapons you have,” he told her, keeping his aim on her, but taking out the
grappling gun with his other hand—he was going to have to tie her up with something.

Goggles’ smile remained as she sat up and put her laptop on the table. “I said, I don’t want
to kill you, so I won’t, but if you don’t go help your friends,” she went on, eyes brightening, “I’m
going to have to at least knock you out so we can bring you back.”

Like hell Jigen was going to let that happen.

“Then let’s get this over with,” Jigen said grimly. With the barrel at her head, he wasted no
time pulling the trigger—but apparently there was a reason she seemed so unconcerned with a
death threat. In the time it had taken him to squeeze the trigger, she had simultaneously pushed his
hand away and leaned aside.

She was faster than Jigen would’ve ever expected, the bullet only having scratched the
surface of her cheek. Goggles kicked the table, sliding the rolling chair across the room. Just as he
took another shot, she jumped to the tiled floor, the screens’ static illuminating something shiny
popping out of her sleeve and into her hand.
The room was hardly twelve-by-twelve feet; it wasn’t going to take her long to reach Jigen as she dashed towards him. He jumped aside just as she took a stab at him, but her advances didn’t stop there. Goggles continued running at him, making Jigen take a step back. Instantly he took a shot for her head.

It wasn’t often he met someone with the speed to block a bullet. She lifted the knife up before her face, stopping the shot right in the air—but she wasn’t strong enough to keep the knife in her grip, and it was knocked out of her hand.

Good, she was unarmed now.

Well, she was, but just as Jigen fired a second round, she had pressed herself against the floor, reaching down the collar of her hoodie and pulling something out as she darted towards him.

Years of honing his reflexes didn’t fail him as he shot a throwing knife dead out of the air. He had one remaining shot, and it was going to go straight through her head.

Or not.

Suddenly his aim was yanked aside, one of the metal ropes he’d become acquainted with before wrapping around his wrist. With another rapid sequence of steps, Goggles had reached down her hoodie in a flash and now was holding—nunchucks? What was with this kid?

Goggles was resourceful, that was for sure, but two could play at that game. Jigen knew he had the upper hand when it came to strength. He jumped back and wrenched his roped arm, yanking her forward unexpectedly. Before she could reach the floor to pull some kind of fancy recovery move, he plunged his knee straight forward, making full contact with her face. Goggles let out a shriek of pain as she was knocked backwards, somersaulting a few times before the back of her head hit the wall.

Now Jigen had a clear shot. He fired—only for the bullet to shatter a wooden handle of the nunchucks as she tactfully whipped them aside. Goggles’ nose was spouting blood, the drops filing around her feisty toothy grin.

Jigen cursed under his breath, rushing to reload as the girl sprang up and scurried towards him. He grabbed the bullets from his jacket pocket, making his way towards the door—if he could run out to the hall and gain some distance, he’d have the advantage. However, she was abruptly standing in his path, forcing him to move back as a glint of metal was repeatedly being shoved towards him.

Jigen found himself being knocked back as Goggles planted a foot onto his thigh—but she wasn’t kicking him away. She grabbed his armed wrist with her empty hand and held it down just as she put her other foot on his stomach: She was literally climbing him, her weight pushing him over until his upper back was against the wall. Her other hand came down to stab him in the neck—but it wasn’t a knife like he expected; it was a needle.

And it was fixed to a syringe with some kind of clear liquid in it.

Oh, FUCK that!

Jigen seized her wrist, forcing him to drop his ammo.

Shit!

While she wasn’t strong enough to overpower him, if he tried to kick her or push her back,
he would inevitably fall and she would no doubt use that short instant to heave that needle into any part of his body she could reach.

Goggles had his wrist in a hold where he couldn’t turn it.

He would have to make do.

There was a click as he jolted his hand sideways, popping the revolver’s cylinder into place.

Then the handle left his palm, out of his grip. Using his fingertips, he swiftly pushed the handle around and curled them back around it, leaving him to hold the gun in reverse, the barrel pointed towards the ceiling.

Just as planned. He slipped his thumb over the trigger and squeezed.

A hair-raising scream filled his ears as Goggles toppled backwards off of him, her back slamming against the floor. Her hand was in a shaking gnarled state, wanting to clutch her left eye, but too afraid to do so with bits of the goggle lens now lodged within it. Blood gushed from her eye, the shattered green glass slivers piercing it every which way.

Jigen picked up his bullets from the floor as she writhed around in agony. Clearly Goggles had thought that he hadn’t been able to reload, but she underestimated him. He was the best gunman there was; of course he was going to get at least one bullet loaded in the two second margin her attack allowed.

Maybe she was blind in one eye now, but Jigen wasn’t about to take any more chances…

❖  ❖  ❖

During that commotion, Lupin and Goemon were scanning through all the book titles.

“Whatever you do, Goemon, don’t touch the book when you find it. We hafta pull all of them in the right order within two minutes for the door to open.”

They were standing on the stepladders, looking around. The six books were all written by “Pierre …” with last names starting with letters that would spell “Pierre.” Original. The two e’s and two r’s were set in order by year. It had taken Lupin a little bit to figure out all the possible titles, but before they’d left he’d made the list of about fifty or so possible books, and they were looking for any of them.

So far they had found one—which was fine, considering neither Fujiko nor Jigen had alerted them that their part was completed.

❖  ❖  ❖

Back on the third floor, Fujiko thought it was very odd that there were no guards patrolling the halls, or even posted anywhere. While that did make her job easier, it didn’t make her any more relaxed. Maybe Zenigata had taken the treasure elsewhere and left this place abandoned, but Lupin
was never wrong. Perhaps there was an ambush waiting at the vault?

“Lupin,” she whispered into her wristband. “Lupin? Jigen? Goemon?” Fujiko looked at the transmitter oddly. The communication was cut—that wasn’t good. She swallowed pensively—she wanted to get to the others as quickly as possible because she was certain some sort of plot was in place. However, Fujiko was already at the end of the hall at the security control room; it would be idiotic to not take care of it now before going to find them. Browning in hand, she took the key from around her neck and turned it into the keyhole of the doorknob.

Fujiko instantly retracted her hand as bullets began shattering through the metal door.

Someone’s in there?! Fujiko had thought she hadn’t let her guard down, but she realized that she’d gotten too comfortable. The gun shooting through was definitely an automatic rifle—but what kind of security shoots with no idea who was there?!

Fujiko ran down the hall, hearing the metal door of the control room swing open behind her, and she kicked the nearest door open for cover. Just in time, too; bullets shredded the frame she had just been in front of a millisecond earlier.

She was in some sort of entertainment room with a television and couches and game consoles. Fujiko dashed behind the leather sofa, just as a silhouette appeared.

“Come on out!” a woman’s voice jeered.

Blondie? What was she doing there? Fujiko knew that meant there were other members of the She triad at the mansion.

Bullets pelleted the walls, destroying the electronics in sight as some sort of threat. “I hate silence, and this AK47 needs some melodic accompaniment!”

Fujiko leaned out from behind the couch, jumping to her feet and firing two rounds—but Blondie was more skilled than Fujiko had expected. As soon as Fujiko had revealed herself, Blondie was diving towards the ground, rolling over and avoiding the shots. As she came to a halt, she planted her rifle against the ground and fired off a stream at Fujiko, narrowly missing her as she ran for cover behind one of the cushiony chairs, the couch blocking Blondie’s sight.

Blondie sniggered. “This furniture isn’t going to help you!” Fluff went flying everywhere as she pulled the trigger and pelted through the seats. Fujiko watched, timing herself carefully and darted while the rifle was aimed away. That gave her enough time to take a shot—but Blondie ducked down behind the couch, resulting in a miss.

The She member leaned out, taking aim where she thought Fujiko would be rounding—but Fujiko was just running out the door, much to her surprise.

Fujiko needed to disable the traps for Lupin, but the control room was behind her at the end of the hall, where she would have no escape from Blondie.

Sorry, Lupin, Fujiko thought to herself, knowing that she had no way to warn him that the security system was still active.

That entertainment room didn’t provide enough cover for dealing with an automatic rifle—she wracked her brains, trying to think of the blueprints and what room could give her the advantage. Fujiko gained a confident grin; she knew just the one, and it was on this floor.

One bad thing about big mansions was that the hallways were ridiculously long. Each time
Fujiko took a turn, she could practically feel the blast of wind from the bullets missing her by just a hair’s width. She couldn’t deny her heart was racing, but she was sure that her experience of exploiting others’ personal quirks was serving her right.

Fujiko knew it was this hall…. She kicked the first door open, but that wasn’t it. Hastily she ran to the next, knowing that Blondie was soon to round the hall’s corner at any moment. She burst through the door to avoid the fire—and luckily, this was what she had been looking for.

Without wasting any time, just as Blondie entered the room and flicked the lights on, Fujiko concealed herself behind the nearest bulky item. It was an upright harpsichord—yes, this was a music room with fine instruments of all kinds lined up around the area. There were stands next to each holding music, and even the woodwinds and brass instruments were out of their cases and standing on display, everything ready to be played.

Fujiko, kneeling behind the harpsichord, could see Blondie’s distorted reflection in the polished tuba close by. As expected, the She member was stopped in her tracks, not daring to recklessly fire and risk damaging such beautiful music making instruments.

Fujiko jumped out from behind the harpsichord and took aim, firing several rounds from her semi-automatic. Blondie ducked down and began running parallel to Fujiko, aiming carefully and only holding down the trigger for about a second before ceasing as the seductress arrived behind a wide string base. Fujiko crouched behind it, completely hidden by the wooden body, and speedily took aim by peering through the C-bout of its hourglass shape. Blondie had continued running—Fujiko couldn’t see her from this side, so she leaned to the other and fired from there.

It seemed Blondie didn’t wear track suits for nothing. She was pretty athletic, sprinting across the room and around until Fujiko’s body was in sight.

Fujiko dashed around to the front of the bass to keep it between them, minimizing the chances that Blondie would fire. It was working, and Blondie was getting angry about it.

“What would you classify an AK47 as?” she questioned, hearing Fujiko exchange the clip in her pistol. She charged forward, rifle in one hand and grasping the thin leg to one of the wooden stools placed among the string instruments. “I was thinking percussion, but it might be a wind instrument considering how many holes it blows through people!”

As she approached, Fujiko jumped back, giving the string base a good kick to project it in Blondie’s direction, who in turn hurled the stool towards Fujiko. Fujiko ducked and fired just as Blondie caught the neck of the bass in the crook of her ankle to prevent it from crashing against the floor—but she was still able to get her rifle situated. Sliding the bass off her foot and lurching towards the floor, she fired at Fujiko while the latter was still in the open—that is, not having too much risk of damaging any instruments, but she was still being careful not to hit any that were across the room.

It was the worst area for her to be in, surrounded by instruments that she admired and wouldn’t dream of destroying for anything, and Fujiko could see her getting flustered as her timid firings weren’t hitting their mark.

Fujiko was rushing across the room to the many percussion instruments. In the center there was a huge round drum being suspended up at an angle by a wheeled metal stand—a concert base drum. Fujiko grabbed the bar of the frame encircling the drum and pulled the instrument in front of her, and there were tingling noises as the rounds Blondie fired just barely missed her and ricocheted off the frame.
There was a horrified gasp as Fujiko shot through the drum, estimating her where Blondie was situated. At first, she thought she had hit Blondie, but she soon realized after an irritated yell and sudden firings are Fujiko’s feet, Blondie was simply set out to get revenge for ruining the drum.

Not staying complacent, Fujiko began pushing the drum in the direction of Blondie until she was at a running speed, aiming over the instrument. However, Blondie quickly hit the floor and began streaming rounds level with Fujiko’s feet, careful not to harm any instruments.

Fujiko wasn’t about to pass her and let her have an open shot, so she shoved the drum racing in the girl’s direction, staying among the instruments. Blondie rolled out of the way of the drum, taking aim on Fujiko once more—only to be met with two cymbals flying through the air at breakneck speed. Instinctively—and not having much else choice—Blondie shot the projectiles out of the air, cringing at the noise ringing out and reverberating around the room as the metal was pierced with bullets. She glared at Fujiko as she began to stand, picking up one of the cymbals and casting it back at Fujiko like a frisbee ready to slice someone in half. Fujiko fired at it, knocking it off course and returned her aim to Blondie, who was now headed straight towards her. Just as Fujiko shot, Blondie dropped to the floor again, rolling on her shoulder to land in a kneeling position with her rifle right on Fujiko.

The woodwinds didn’t provide much cover as Fujiko weaved between them, circling around the room—but they did serve as handy weapons. Just as Blondie was upright and about to pull the trigger, a piccolo collided with her forehead and knocked her back. It bounced off and landed on the floor with a loud clang—but that hit didn’t buy Fujiko any time. In fact, it seemed to make Blondie even more angry.

As Fujiko let loose several more shots, Blondie was snarling as she fired at the seductress, keeping her on the run—Fujiko grabbed a clarinet from its stand and as she ran hurled it over at Blondie, stopping her mid-fire. Blondie got to her knees and caught it, placing it aside before instantaneously resuming the flood of bullets chasing after Fujiko. Blood trickled down the split in her forehead, slowly making its way down her face.

Chimes similar to church bells rang in Fujiko’s ears as she passed behind a set of tubular bells, Blondie having accidentally barraged them in an attempt to strike Fujiko. The repetitive sound only reminded Fujiko how many bullets were actually heading towards her, and that she couldn’t hold still if she wanted to live.

While passing behind the instruments provided her some cover from the rifle, it also meant Blondie had those few seconds while out of sight to move. Fujiko noticed that each time she came back into view, Blondie was always quick to hit the deck, dodging any bullets—she was clearly familiar with firearm combat, and while handling such heavy weaponry as well.

Fujiko was just racing behind a sleek, black grand piano, the lid hiding her upper half from view—she was getting close to where she had started at the harpsichord, close to the door. Blondie shot between the legs of the piano and bench, but Fujiko’s steps were fast enough to avoid being hit. She gripped her pistol tightly, making a horizontal jump between the piano and harpsichord and predicting where Blondie would be dropping to the floor.

Staring daggers at the She member as she drifted through the air, Fujiko shot just as Blondie rolled back onto to ground and shot a line of bullets at her before she would disappear behind the harpsichord.

Just before she did so, Fujiko saw the girl’s flaxen locks fall down upon her shoulders and face, her eyes wide and a few strands fluttering down to the floor—Fujiko had shot straight through
her hairband.

Fujiko landed on her side and quickly brought herself up to a kneel, reaching for another clip of ammo—but she felt none. Looking down, she realized that Blondie had actually managed to shoot her belt off, leaving a small tear in the side of her bodysuit.

Like all her clothes and gear, that thing was *expensive*, and now Blondie was going to have to pay for it.
Chapter 15
A Failed Connection
A Search for Expressions

At the library, Lupin looked over his shoulder at Goemon. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Okay.” Lupin, standing on a stepladder near the top of one of the shelves, pulled the top of a book by Pierre Péju until it became jammed in a tilted stance. “One!”

Goemon, across the room, pulled down a book by Pierre Imbert. “Two!”

Lupin was rushing his ladder halfway around the room, then scrambled to the top. “Three!”

“Four!”

“Five!”

“Six!”

The two took a deep breath, collecting themselves in the center of the room, Lupin laughing a bit. “Nice one!” They paused at the sound of a rumbling, then watched as the bookcases against the furthest wall began to move aside, taking up the space between the other sections. Hurrying over to it, Lupin and Gomeon looked at what the wall revealed. There was a small hole, not indicated by any fancy decoration, but Lupin knew the Pierre key would fit snugly in there.

Eagerly he unlocked…well, the wall, and it began to split just as the bookcases did, exposing a long tunnel. The ceiling was lined with fluorescent white lighting and thank goodness the metal walls and floors weren’t shiny because anyone would probably go blind.

Lupin looked at the time. It had been a little over fifteen minutes, and no one had said they had any hold-ups. “Alrighty, let’s go!”

Goemon nodded. “Right.”

That was one thing Lupin loved about Goemon. Whenever he was on a mission, if things went awry, he had no problems. If they were caught on film and alerted Zenigata they were there? No problem. If the traps weren’t disabled yet? No problem. Lupin saw it as a bit of fun, whereas Goemon saw it as yet another inconvenience to surpass.

Their steps made hollow noises as they walked down the bright walkway, Goemon’s hand on Zantetsuken the whole time. What Jigen had said earlier to him about being a “best friend” had been slightly comforting, but Goemon still felt weak-willed. He was afraid of snapping.

“Lupin, maybe I should walk in front,” he suggested; perhaps being unable to see the thief would dull the bloodlust that he was fearful of.

“Nah, don’t worry, I’ll be able to handle any traps if we trigger ‘em.”

“Are you doubting my ability?” Goemon said bluntly, furrowing his brow. “I can assure you my reflexes are more than adequate.”

“It’s fine, I got it,” Lupin assured. “Thanks, pal.”

That single word, “pal,” forced Goemon to accept the decision. He didn’t want to, because
standing behind Lupin was making him wish the thief would trigger the traps—maybe even want to push him into one—just so he could watch. He felt disgusted with himself, but did his best to fight the feeling.

After a few yards in the passage there was a slight decline—so the vault was even lower than the library-basement.

“Do you smell that?” Goemon asked suspiciously.

Lupin sniffed as he began taking the first few steps down the ramp. “Huh…. Well it’s not me; this cologne—ACK!”

Goemon tackled Lupin, but not to the ground; he launched them as far as he could through the air, almost hitting the sloping ceiling before they landed at the very bottom of the ramp, a loud whooshing sound drowning out their grunts as they hit the ground. Goemon quickly straightened up, and the sudden heat in the air was enough of a confirmation without turning to see the hallway filled with billowing flames.

“What the hell?!” Lupin said with disbelief, still sitting and staring as the flames ceased to project from several spouts in the wall. “Weight-triggered flamethrowers? Who uses that tactic anymore?!”

Saved him again, did you?

No, I— Goemon stopped and knitted his brows together, shaking his head. I am not going to let this happen now… he told himself determinedly. “It seems Fujiko has not disabled the traps,” Goemon said flatly, although Lupin knew there was a hint of irritation in there. The thief chuckled.

“You think she’s tryna pull a fast one?” he asked, although it was almost a suggestion. He stood up and put his hands in his pockets, looking at their next obstacle. They were at the edge of a room that was covered floor to ceiling in grey tiles. “I think we know what this one is. Looks like you’re up, Goemon.”

Lupin had his Walther P38 ready as Goemon took a first step onto one of the twenty-four-inch square tiles. A sharp noise pierced the air, and the samurai turned to cut a small projectile—a poison dart, it seemed. Lupin shot the mechanism in the wall before the tile would close and hide it again.

Next step. Goemon heard the tile scraping open from either side of him, but his speed was too advanced for such a thing to get the best of him. In one swoop he had cut the dart aimed for his legs and the one at eye level with no difficulty, and Lupin took out those two dart-firing machines as well. If Goemon went in a straight line, they had eighteen more tiles to go. No problem.

❖ ❖ ❖

Jigen rushed up the steps. With a few seconds’ debate after his showdown with Goggles, he decided Fujiko would probably need his help more than Lupin did; he had Goemon, and…well, if Goemon ended up being the danger…he’d rather not think about it.

Jigen hadn’t remembered the exact layout of the third floor, so he wasn’t sure where he’d find the security control room—but luckily, he wouldn’t have to. There were loud gunshots coming
from down the hall as he finally reached the top of the broad stairway.

_Damn Fujiko—maybe if she was more agreeable, she wouldn’t be in this mess!_ he thought to himself, although he knew that wasn’t true. In fact, he was probably less agreeable and felt a bit bad; after tying up that Goggles girl with the metal rope (which was quite painful to deal with without gloves), he knew she probably had more tricks up her sleeve and acted accordingly…

“_It’s not personal—well, mostly not personal,_” he had said, and then shot her in the kneecap to assure she wasn’t going to pull anything later on.

Jigen liked to think that her shrieks were due to the pain of the wounds, but he honestly wondered if the fact that “Jiji” was mean to her contributed.

None of that mattered now though. Jigen raced through the hall until coming upon the room that was undeniably the one with the ruckus. There were bullet holes all along the walls leading up to it, and inside was some serious shouting.

Just as he entered, Fujiko furrowed her brow, scurrying over to her broken belt and removing a clip as she heard Blondie’s rapid footsteps approaching. Fujiko exchanged ammo within seconds and leaned out to fire—but she didn’t see Blondie.

Well, if her footsteps were that close and she wasn’t on that side of the harpsichord, then she must be on the other side, quickly coming up behind her.

Fujiko didn’t take the time to look. She was instantly racing around to the front, feeling the vibrations of the bullets piercing the floor right behind her. After rounding that corner, she quickly dove behind the harpsichord’s other side and pressed her back up against it, Blondie not far behind her—but not close enough either. Fujiko tilted and twisted, seeing Blondie’s legs visible between those of the harpsichord and bench, her shoes sliding across the tile as she skidded to change direction in an attempt to pursue Fujiko.

Not for long. Fujiko pulled the trigger twice, hitting Blondie square in the ligament behind her left knee and the other ripping straight through her right Achilles tendon. Jigen, who had had his aim ready for when Blondie came out from behind the instrument, didn’t need to waste a bullet as she toppled over right when rounding the corner. Fujiko, facing him with her back against the wooden side, suddenly caught sight of him.

“The automatic rifle fired as Blondie landed on the floor, not quite having Fujiko in her sights, but changing her mood about mistreating the instruments. The bullets whizzed passed Fujiko’s face as they tore through the wood, and they probably would’ve hit her too if it hadn’t been for Jigen firing several shots straight through the rifle to force it from Blondie’s hands.

Fujiko quickly kicked it out of reach before rising to her feet. Blondie attempted to stand, but held still when Fujiko had her at gunpoint, Jigen not far behind.

“Looks like you put her through hell,” he commented upon seeing her split forehead, bloody face, and now bloody legs. Blondie glared at him. “You gonna kill her or what?”

Fujiko shrugged, saying in a careless tone, “Go ahead, if you want; I’m not in the mood.”

Jigen suppressed a groan. He already let one little murderer live, how soft was he getting?
Now that they were past the tiled room, Goemon and Lupin were able to take a breath.

“That was tedious,” the samurai commented.

“Well, now’s no time to stop,” Lupin said, sounding chipper. Ahead of them was yet another room...although it was not like the other. It was all a dark metal, and...there were two men lying limp in the center of the floor. “Wait, Goemon!” Lupin said before the samurai could step forth and take care of whatever trap this was—because it wasn’t one that could be “taken care of.” “See those body suits? All rubber, and thick rubber soles on their boots,” he pointed out. “This must be an electric floor...”

“Electric?” Goemon said, pondering. “Then why are they unconscious if they are protected?”

“Good question,” Lupin said suspiciously. They were clearly guards, so... “Someone must’ve already been here and knocked ’em out.” Goemon gained a severe look, deducing the same as Lupin.

“Do you think the intruders are still here?”

Lupin did a quick call through the communication system. Nothing. “I’m gonna say yes. Goemon, I need your help with this real quick, then run and help Fujiko and Jigen.”

“What do you need me to do?”

Lupin seemed pensive. “It’s dangerous and a lot to ask.”

Goemon looked at him dully. “That does not bother me.”

“Heh, I thought not, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Lupin turned to the room. “See that guy closest? I need you to jump on him and—”

“I understand,” Goemon said with a nod. Yes, his balance did indeed outshine any of the Lupin gang. The room was about fifteen feet across, with the closest man being about halfway. That sort of a jump would be no problem for Goemon. Now, landing on something so unstable... well, they would just have to see.

Goemon slid his foot back and bent his knees in a short crouch, then was in the air in a split second. He traveled across the room with his feet tucked beneath him, extending them at just the right time to plant them right on the knocked-out guard—who's body began to roll beneath him from the momentum. Goemon jumped from foot to foot to stay atop—he hadn’t expected the man to be so...well, squishy and pliable. As the body settled under his hops, Goemon was able to steady himself with a relieved breath. With the rubber hindering any electric current, the man was a human stepping stone between life and possibly death, depending on the floor's voltage. Now the second guard was in reach.

He was going to have to be careful not to touch the floor when he grabbed him and not to lose his balance while pulling. Goemon shifted his own weight accordingly as he grabbed the toe of the second guard’s boot—thinking about it, taking his boots and wearing them would be the easiest way to do things, but that would be bad news for the guard because he would surely be electrocuted. No, instead, Goemon was just going to have to turn them longways into a type of
Now that the guard was positioned in a way that would allow for someone to leap off him to the next hallway, Goemon jumped atop the body and began pulling the first guard longways.

Goemon drew a sharp breath as he felt the shoulder of the guard he was standing on dislocate beneath his footing with a crunch. Lupin went rigid, seeing Goemon’s foot slide back to just mere centimeters from the electric floor. However, the weight of the guard he was gripping had kept him steady—and the sudden jerk also set him up perfectly for stepping.

Bingo. Goemon stood carefully and ran across the bodies, jumping back to where Lupin stood.

“Here,” Lupin said, holding out a round bomb the size of an orange. “It’s a gas grenade—nothing fatal, but it’ll knock out a room of people. Use it if things get too tough, alright? Just make sure after you pull the pin—this thing—you hold this down until you throw it!” Lupin paused seeing Goemon’s dissatisfied expression. “’C’mon, I was just making sure you know how to use it.”

Goemon didn’t have a problem with that—if Lupin had been speaking to him condescendingly, Goemon hadn’t picked up on it this time. What bothered him was for a moment, just the briefest of moments, he wondered if he was just being used. He did Lupin’s bidding and assisted with the traps, and now that he’d served his purpose he was being cast aside? Why was Lupin sending him away—and why was he doing so if he thought Goemon might need to rely on such an artificial escape tactic such as a grenade? “Do you not think I can handle myself?”

Lupin smirked. “Of course, I do—”

“Or are you afraid that I will not be able to control myself?”

The thief looked at him oddly. “No, I just figured this’d make your life a bit easier.”

“Do you not think Fujiko and Jigen can handle themselves?” Goemon continued. *Do you not trust me to be around you?*

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “Well, sure, but who doesn’t like a little help every now and then?” He gave a heartening smile. “You’ve been helping me this whole time, I figure it’s time they get a little break, right?”

“’A break’?” Goemon questioned, narrowing his eyes. He felt as if his insides were growing taut. “You feel you can do your part on your own, and the others are capable, so ‘a break’ is all I am in this?”

“What?” Lupin said, taken aback. “No, what I’m saying is that you’re the most versatile here! You’re great in any situation!” Goemon didn’t look moved. “Listen, they say a bundle of sticks can’t be snapped, right?”

“That depends—”

“Work with me here. We’re all sticks in a bundle,” Lupin continued to get his point across, “and you’re like a log in there protecting everyone from getting broken. No matter how much pressure, you always make sure those sticks makes it through to the end.”

Goemon thought for a moment. “Would it not be unwise to be carrying a log in—”

“Okay, okay,” Lupin said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Think of something Sun Tzu
would say right now about plans or something, and pretend I’m saying it.”

“Er…” Goemon looked away, feeling a bit pressured. “The quality of decision is like the well-timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim.”

“There ya go!” Lupin said, clapping him on the back. “You’re like that falcon—only, you’re swoopin’ in to save people, not destroy people, okay?”

“I…suppose…” Goemon had often showed up in the nick of time to tip the odds in the Lupin gang’s favor; perhaps helping Jigen and Fujiko, who were to bear the brunt of dealing with any guards remaining and any more that showed up to the mansion, would be best instead of assisting Lupin swipe treasures. “But what if an ambush is waiting for you? At least let me—”

“No, no, hurry, Goemon! We haven’t heard from them in a while!” Lupin urged, pushing him towards the exit. He wanted Goemon to leave for…reasons. “It could be an emergency and they’re depending on you!”

“Right.” Goemon gave a curt nod, stowing the bomb away, but he hesitated before he left. “Lupin, are you sure you can do this alone?”

The thief grinned. “Are you worried about me?”

“What? Of course not—I…” Goemon stiffened and averted his eyes, not really knowing what he felt. He really didn’t want to use the “I just want to make sure you don’t die so I can be the one to kill you” excuse…

“C’mon, you know me!” Lupin’s tone was upbeat, but that was exactly what made Goemon question his competence. “What? You don’t believe me? Watch.” Lupin rolled his shoulders back, then jumped a few feet onto the first guard’s body, running—rather wobbly—across him and hopping on to the next man, then making it to the other hall. “See?”

Goemon gave a slight smile; Lupin would be okay. And with that he turned to run, but suddenly stopped. “Lupin!” he called back, getting the thief’s attention before he ran off. “I remember now. It was Sun Tzu who said ‘the best defense is a good offence’.”

“Really?”

“Yes. ‘Rely not on the chance of your enemy not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable.’”

Lupin blinked. He supposed that sort of meant the same thing…but Goemon looked so happy, Lupin couldn’t disagree. “Exactly! We’re counting on you to be the log and falcon that make us unassailable!”

Lupin couldn’t help but grin at the samurai’s genuinely pleased look as he ran back across the tile floor and dashed up the ramp as quickly as possible—and it turns out it was just the top step that triggered the flames. Goemon had no complaints.

As he came to the library, Goemon weighed whether he should go through the window or through the library door. When it came down to it, he had no idea where the door led, but he knew if he got back out the window, he could easily cut through the front entrance of the mansion and go help Fujiko and Jigen from there. Up the bookcase he climbed, standing on top of the one that was almost beneath the window. Not knowing what the weight-triggered one would do, he avoided it by using Zantetsuken as a grip on the wall, then swung his legs up, hitched them on the windowsill, and then he was out.
Well, out of the house, but straight into another dilemma.

Decided to try out the brush-pen I got for Christmas. (Grid-style shading just isn't doing it for me anymore.) It's been two weeks since I've drawn anything, so this came out way more dynamic than the scene really is, haha. Looks like he jumped from a four-story building, not across a room! ^^;

He traveled across the room with his feet tucked beneath him, extending them at just the right time to plant them right on the knocked-out guard...
As soon as he was upright, that dreaded sight appeared in front of him.

“What do you want?” Goemon said to the specter shortly, regaining himself and standing upon the grass.

“Getting impatient?” his clone asked, arms folded into his sleeves and a repulsive smirk on his face. “Whatever for?”

“I have a responsibility to see to,” Goemon said, turning to rush to the front of the mansion—only he was stopped in his tracks by a blade.

By Zantetsuken—but not his own.

Goemon turned his widened eyes to the snickering copy holding the katana in front of him, which was exhibiting an ominous shadow. Goemon clenched his fists, his own Zantetsuken ready to be drawn. “What are you doing? You are not real.”

“Am I not?” he challenged all too confidently. Goemon narrowed his eyes, then quickly unsheathed Zantetsuken to block the sudden strike coming down towards him at lightning speed.

There was a loud, clear ringing of metal as the two Zantetsukens clashed. Goemon’s jaw dropped, speechless. The lookalike had yanked his collar in their past meetings, but Goemon thought those instances were merely a part of his imagination. This physical contact was too tangible for Goemon to settle on the idea that it was an illusion...

“No, you are not real!” Goemon snarled, parrying before trying to sprint off. He had a job to do—but his clone wasn’t going to let that happen. Goemon fell forward, his feet being swept from beneath him. In a smooth transition he rolled onto his back, holding his blade crossways to stop his copy’s katana from coming down on him.

It’d been a long time since Goemon had actually had to duel someone—no sword was a match for Zantetsuken except...Zantetsuken.

“This—this is impossible...” Goemon gasped, far worse than confused as his breath became unsteady.

“Believe me, it is more than possible. It is happening,” the doppelganger assured him. “I am tired of you. First you save Lupin once more, falling for this friend idiocy, and now you wish to go assist the others?”

“Yes!” Goemon spat, kicking the clone away and jumping to his feet. He had never been able attack the specter—he always disappeared before Goemon could do so. What was going on? “I have a role that I have chosen,” Goemon said to him, tone unwavering, “and I plan to see it through.”

The reflection looked Goemon up and down as the latter got into stance, clutching Zantetsuken in both hands while the apparition stood upright with his ill-fated version of the sword outstretched towards him.

“Your plans always fail. You never complete anything successfully.” Goemon narrowed his eyes at the duplicate’s arrogance. “Killing Lupin. Returning the Jade Dragons. Your place as a
samurai. As an assassin. Your sole purpose. Killing Lupin. None of them have you completed, and the list goes on.”

Goemon swallowed. “Enough of your talk.”

“Does the truth hurt?” the mirror image questioned with a sneer. “The only time you have ever accomplished anything was with me—otherwise, you are just an utter failure.”

“Enough!” Goemon snapped, lunging forward. Zantetsuken cut through the air with breakneck swiftness, slashing down diagonally. “I have no time for this!” he yelled as the clone deflected it, then attempted a thrust, which Goemon nimbly swept aside with his sword.

“You have no time for what? Wasting your life?” the other replied snidely. As Goemon swung across, the clone ducked, allowing him to then take a slice at the original’s legs, forcing Goemon to jump up to avoid the attack. As his feet returned to the ground, Goemon swung his sword down upon the crouching copy, although it was blocked. The blades glinted in the moonlight, along with the beads of anxious sweat building upon Goemon.

“I have no need for you,” he said, trying to keep his breath—his sword, his eyes, everything—steady, “and what I see as success is my own.”

“What?” The copy scowled at him, a vicious look in his eye. “You would be nothing without me—”

“What you say has no meaning to me now!”

Suddenly both their attention was drawn to the front of the mansion. There were police sirens in the distance; Goemon knew they were coming straight for the Pierre house. He turned to defy the specter…but he was gone.

Goemon had no time to ponder on it. He rushed to the front door and sliced it to bits without bothering to check if it was unlocked. Just as he disappeared inside, he could hear the sirens right outside the mansion as the cars infiltrated the property, and the footsteps of several officers and guards plowing across the yard and driveway.

“LUPIN, I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!” Zenigata’s voice boomed from a megaphone.

Well, at least the gang knew where Zenigata was now.

❖   ❖   ❖

Fujiko looked at Jigen oddly. “Did I just hear Zenigata?” she asked.

“After all this crazy shit,” Jigen said as they lifted Blondie, her ankles and wrists restrained and tied together with instrument strings, “I would be glad for somethin’ so familiar to happen.” They tossed her into the back of the grand piano, an unpleasant noise sounding from the harshness against the cords.

“I can’t believe you would treat instruments this way—!” the She member scolded them before Jigen slammed the piano’s lid down.
“Your poor classical-loving soul,” Fujiko said with a pout, looking at all the destruction in the room.

“I’m already over it,” Jigen said gruffly. “Now let’s get outta here.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Downstairs—way, way, way downstairs—Lupin was practically salivating as he approached the door to the vault. He knew someone was here before him, and he had a feeling they were still. The gang’s communication was cut off, there were no backup guards yet, and Fujiko hadn’t been able to disable the traps.

Someone was definitely here.

Lupin took out the key and translucent gloves from his jacket pocket and scanned Mrs. Pierre’s iris and fingerprints into the wide metal door’s security system, then inserted the key. With a twist, there was a thundering shudder as the thick metal lock released from the inside, and Lupin pulled the loosened door open. The steel to the vault was at least a foot thick, and inside was a lounge-like room with vintage French patterns on the walls and a fancy rug in the center. Upon the rug stood a mannequin and a velvet display case.

There they were: Pierre’s Adamantium. Back when diamonds had first been thought to be the hardest material on the planet, the Pierre family had fashioned a head-to-toe chainmail suit of armor, each tiny steel chain link having a diamond fused right in the center—totaling in over seventy-five thousand diamonds. At the collar and edge of the chainmail hood was black leather adorned with diamonds in an intricate pattern—the perfect lighting of the room showed just how lustrous it really was, looking so otherworldly and fantastical that it had rightfully earned the name of Adamantium.

Next to it, in the closable case, a pair of matching daggers was displayed. While the blades were too big to be made from one whole diamond—being about eighteen inches long—there was about a whole inch of diamond lined on the honed edges, carved and welded into a fit piece of steel before being cut down to the sharpest of points. The hilt guards were encrusted with diamonds, with the weighty pommels each a gigantic diamond itself.

They were absolutely dazzling. That was partially why Lupin didn’t want Goemon to come with him all the way to the vault, and the entire reason why the nature of the treasure was never revealed; Jigen and Lupin had decided together that the daggers would be Goemon’s portion of the loot, to add to his sword collection.

Without wasting another moment, Lupin rushed over, taking the burlap sack that had been tucked between his jacket and dress shirt, and began scooping the chainmail off the mannequin. Once that was in the bag, he shut the case holding the daggers and stowed it away with the armor. Chainmail is relatively light, so the entire haul only weighed about thirty-five pounds, which would feel like nothing after he the threw it over his shoulder.

“Why, hello, Mr. Lupin III,” someone said in a modulated tone, interrupting him just as he was tying the bag off. Lupin paused, gaining a confident smile as he turned around. A woman about the same age as himself was placed upon an antique lounge chair that was stationed in the corner. She had most likely been there the whole time.
Her sleek inky hair was both parted and cut asymmetrically, the longer half reaching her chest, the other barely making it to her shoulder, but both tapering up to the nape of her neck to reveal an undercut. Her features were very angular and sharp—the only way to describe her look was venomous. The short woman stood up, dressed in all black and sporting a turtleneck, jeans, and leather boots.

“You must be fan considering how you were waiting for me,” he replied in a husky voice with his sideways smile. “I’m flattered. I was hoping we’d meet, Jianya.”

The way her lips seemed to twist up only ever so slightly seemed permanent, but her eyes spoke enough to show her grin. “Trust me, when this ordeal is over, you’re going to wish. You. Hadn’t.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Goemon darted down one of the halls on the first floor, the newly arrived guards bursting through the mansion’s entrance.

He could feel it.

His adrenaline was too high, this anxiousness peaking after the encounter with his clone—he was on the verge of some sort of breakdown, and he didn’t want it to become a violent one. As soon as he would have to draw Zantetsuken to deflect any rounds, he was going to lose control. Perhaps it wouldn’t have bothered him in the past, but it would seem like straight murder now.

Goemon didn’t want to be a murderer—not anymore.

“Going to help your ‘friends’?” that voice sounded as Goemon ran his way up the steps to the second floor. There he was, the clone, standing at the top of the steps. Goemon paused. No—he couldn’t, not in this state. “Go on, do it.”

He wanted to get away from the guards, but he didn’t dare go find Fujiko and Jigen now.

Goemon took a few steps back down the stairs, standing at the halfway point. If he went down, there might be a massacre; if he went up, he risked hurting Jigen and Fujiko. He sat back against the wall and clutched his forehead as the sound of footsteps clattered from below while the officers searched the bottom floor. They were sure to make their way up soon…. There was a slimmer chance of running into his comrades if he continued up, and if he could just find an outer wall of the house he could escape, but Goemon had a hunch that his assailant wasn’t going to let him go so easily.

“You want to help your ‘friends,’ do you not?” his clone tempted, walking down the steps to him. Goemon saw his hand on the fake Zantetsuken.

Goemon narrowed his eyes. “What are you trying to do?” he demanded, having an impression of what the clone’s hostile intentions were about. “Are you trying to use force in order to manipulate my mind now?”

“It is your own fault for not instilling your faith in me,” he answered slyly, looking down on Goemon. “But still a way to convert you.”
“As if I would let you,” Goemon snapped grimly, running his way up the stairs at him. He was so tired of this doubt, this harassment of his own mind. He slashed back and forth, the copy meeting the blade with his own Zantetsuken each time. Goemon jumped atop the stairway railing in an attempt to gain the high ground. The double tried to run him through, making Goemon parry before he began running up any higher, which resulted in the copy wildly cutting through the air at him, destroying any of the railing within distance.

Goemon landed agilely on his toes at the top of the steps and lunged his sword forward. The clone dodged to the side briskly, making an upward swoop with his Zantetsuken, cutting through the stairs in an attempt to split Goemon in half, who sidestepped and held his katana steadfastly against the force to stop the copy in his tracks.

The lookalike leapt forward, directing Goemon’s Zantetsuken aside with his sword, then swinging it about when he was nearly upon him. Goemon darted aside into the hall to avoid the contact as the specter continued smirking. There was no time wasted. He ran at Goemon, sword gripped tightly in his hand. He wielded it with precise strokes that were becoming more frequent, forcing Goemon to block and parry without any openings to get his own attacks in. He was pushing Goemon back with such aggression, the walls around them becoming shredded.

“‘The best defense is a good offense,’ correct, Goemon?” the clone jeered, going for a diagonal strike across his torso. Goemon hit it aside and tried to parry the fake Zantetsuken from his hand, but this fake was as good as the real Goemon. He deflected another blow from above and kicked at the copy while he was occupied. However, he wasn’t occupied enough—while still holding the pressure down upon Goemon’s uplifted arms in the struggle of blocking, the reflection quickly twisted on his heel to avoid the kick and sequentially lifted his knee into Goemon’s gut. “It seems you have neither!”

Goemon tumbled backwards, the breath knocked out of him as he rolled across the debris-strewn hallway. He was able to steady himself, but not speedily enough to be back on his feet. The doppelganger was upon him in mere fractions of a second, and the power being forced upon Goemon as he held Zantetsuken sideways to hold off the copy's attack was leaving him trembling. He fell back to his elbow, unsure how much longer he could deter this mirror image.

His condescending smirk was so discouraging, but Goemon tried not to let it get to him—even when he stepped down on his chest, the blade getting ever nearer to his face no matter how hard Goemon tried to fight it.

The muffled sound of gunfire from the floor below was reaching its way to him, paired with the energetic sputtering of Lupin as he was making his escape. The footsteps of the guards nearing the steps diminished as they ran after the thief.

Goemon gritted his teeth. Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko were waiting for him. He couldn’t just give in. “I told you that I have no need for you,” he declared, beginning to raise himself up. “What you deem worthy has no value to me!”

The clone narrowed his eyes but didn’t have time to retort. Goemon slipped Zantetsuken aside and leaned his head away, allowing his foe's blade to travel down and narrowly miss splitting his head, although Goemon did feel a sting as the blade gently passed over his cheek. His own sword now free, Goemon aimed a slash that would pass through the specter’s leg which was pinning him and straight through his midriff—at least, the move would have if the copy hadn’t sprung away.

That was alright. Goemon was able to jump to his feet again and raced for his enemy, feeling a whole new motivation. He wasn’t out for blood this time, he was here for purging—and
for his friends.

“You are a disease,” he accused, slicing across, and forcing the specter to dodge back. “You are my so-called illness that you speak of!” Goemon struck downward, but was met with a block. The clone deflected Goemon’s sword aside and slashed horizontally, making Goemon duck out of the way. “I will overcome you!”

Goemon drove his katana upwards, straight at the specter’s chest—

“What are you doing?” a voice said. Goemon blinked. Once again, the clone was gone. He felt a heaviness come over him. Nothing had been resolved.

He would be back.

“Why did you cut yourself?”

“What?”

“Yeah, I just saw you do it.”

Goemon reached up—indeed, there was real blood dripping from the finessed slice in his cheek. It was real, but…he had done it himself? He pursed his lips and furrowed his brow as he straightened up, sheathing Zantetsuken before turning his eyes upon the speaker.

“You?” He went rigid. Goggles—no longer wearing goggles—was cupping her left eye, that entire side of her face stained with blood, as well as that from her nose. She was staring at him, leaning against the wall for support since her right knee had a hole blasted through it. Seeing he wasn’t answering, she shrugged and headed towards the stairs. “What are you—what are the She doing here?”

“I was just escaping,” she answered casually—she slid across the wall as she limped, her blood-soaked pantleg making a disturbing squelching sound. “The triad…. Well, first I had to get through some guards to disable the surveillance system…”

“Guards?” So there had been more guards, as suspected—and it looked like they treated Goggles far from kindly, which was despicable, because even with their first encounter in the bamboo forest Goemon knew she had hardly any potential to be harmful. “There are more guards down there. Find another way.”

Goemon knew he shouldn’t help her, but he felt he had to at least offer her that advice.

“It’s fine,” she said dismally, but stopped when she realized the railing was demolished. Goggles let out a little groan, wondering if her life was worth the torture these steps were going to put her through.

Goemon pursed his lips contemplatively, then walked over to her and grabbed her arm through her hoodie.

“You are injured,” Goemon reminded her.

“Yeah, I know,” Goggles said to him, raising an eyebrow as if it mattered. “Listen, I didn’t want to be here. I only came to talk to Jiji and he was mean to me,” she told him.  

Jiji? Who is Jiji? A dog? Or cat?
“I just want to go home.”

Goemon blinked. He couldn’t just leave a poor young girl in this mansion, battered and defenseless. True, she was a She member, but it seemed like a place she didn’t belong. Goemon let her arm go and began taking some of the wrappings from around his waist. “Hold still.”

“What—?” Goggles watched him oddly as he kneeled down and wrapped them tightly around her wounded knee, cutting the cloth with Zantetsuken before tying it off.

“Let me see your eye,” he said, standing up to face her.

Her expression was somewhere between unsure and unamused. “Are you dumb or something?”

Goemon’s eyebrow twitched with annoyance—she was certainly blunt, but that didn’t necessarily make her a bad person. He grabbed her wrist and pulled it aside to reveal…what was left of her eye…if that’s what it could even be described as. Squinting, Goemon reached forward and attentively picked out a few remaining shards of glass from the muddled tissue.

“Ouch!”

He ignored her protest and went on with dressing her eye, wrapping the bandages crossways around her head. “That should be fine.”

“You…yeah, you’re dumb.”

Ignoring her and without another question, he picked the young lady up into his arms. “I will get you out of here.”

“What—?” she said with surprise, although not too much alarm. It seemed this girl didn’t know fear or nervousness—or perhaps was just naïve. Either way, Goemon was determined to help her, and jumped over what was left of the railing, gliding down to the bottom off the stairs, making the girl let out a loud “OOF!” as he landed tactfully.

He paused before going down the hallway. He could hear Zenigata talking. “Right now, it seems that there is only one man from the Lupin gang left in this premises,” he said. “He’s far more dangerous than anything any of you have ever encountered.”

“Now, surround the area, MAKE SURE he doesn’t escape! You, SEARCH THE HOUSE!”

Goemon raised an eyebrow—that was a strange choice of words for Zenigata. “Hold your breath,” he told Goggles lowly, shifting her over his shoulder to free his arm.

“Eh?”

“I said, hold your breath.” Goemon reached inside his kimono and took out the smoke grenade that Lupin had given him. Clutching the strike lever, he pulled the pin with his mouth and ran. Turning down the corner, the entrance room was in sight, and he tossed the grenade all the way down the hall.
“What the…?”

Several inquisitive voices sounded as the item bounced across the floor into the front room—then they started scrambling, but by that time it was already too late. Smoke erupted from the grenade, and Goemon was running through it, making sure the girl stayed steady on his shoulder as he did his best to weave between the twenty-or-so guards and officers while covering the majority of his face with his sleeve. His eyes burned, but soon he was outside—he had made it.

And without killing anyone.

He did it.

In fact, he had even saved someone.

Goemon made a quick turn once on the porch, seeing that the gateway was swarmed with security now, and he headed for the side of the house before anyone would notice him during the commotion. “Where should I take you?”

“Right here is fine,” she answered simply.

“I cannot just—” Goemon suddenly drew in a sharp breath as something pricked his neck. He tensed up—for a moment at least, before he felt his muscles almost instantly start to give way. He paused, reaching up to grab whatever was piercing him, but there was nothing.

With his hold weakening, Goggles slid off his shoulder and stood on the ground.

Goemon gritted his teeth, seeing some sort of medical needle in her grasp, and had to brace himself as his hands and knees landed in the grass, shadowed by the house.

“Sorry. It’s…not personal—well, mostly not personal,” Goggles said to him, a friendly smile on her face.

“But…why?” he managed, looking up at her as he wobbled on all fours. Why would she do this to him? He tried to help her—he didn’t understand. He never understood why people did these things to him, and it was constantly blurring the lines between who he should trust and who he shouldn’t.

“Because you’re dumb,” Goggles told him frankly. Goemon knew she was only answering what he had asked her, but it felt like she was answering every question he had for himself. She seemed pretty amused. “I even told you, but you still helped me. What’s wrong with you?”

He was terrible at judging people, but he wanted to understand friendship so badly…

What was he missing?

What was wrong with him?

He tried to pick himself up off his knees, fighting to keep his eyes open as several other women came into closer view. He looked up to see Zenigata—but only for a brief moment. With an easy sweep, the disguise was off, revealing the long-haired Boots had been impersonating the inspector.

A disguise…?

“I can’t believe they threw you in the piano,” she laughed, Blondie beside her with her
AK47 resting on her shoulder casually.

“It’s not funny! So many perfect instruments ruined…”

“Ah! If it isn’t Miss Man.”

Goemon glared up at them, although they were growing quite hazy. They towered over him, their laughter sounding far off as he struggled to keep his vision focused.

“So, you got him?” a new voice said as she approached. “Good job.”

“Thanks, Jianya,” Goggles said lightheartedly.

Jianya? Goemon thought with spite. His thoughts were becoming faded, but he still knew that name was bad news. “Where are Lu…Lupin and the others…?”

“I guess they don’t call him a master thief for nothing,” Jianya replied, hands on her hips as she looked down at him. Goemon’s stomach churned, though he wasn’t sure if it was from the turn of events or the drugs taking over the last of his control. “He got away, but the important thing now,” she went on, kicking him onto his side and crouching next to him, “is that you didn’t, Ishikawa Goemon.”

Forgive me for not inking their faces, I don't trust myself enough to do it correctly, haha. You can see my lines are still unsteady, but I think I'm getting better! :D
There was a loud, clear ringing of metal as the two Zantetsukens clashed. ... This physical contact was too tangible for Goemon to settle on the idea that it was an illusion...

(Also, sorry I forgot to draw Zantetsuken’s sheath for both of them, just pretend they’re there.)
Addressing Transgressions (Original)

Chapter Summary

**WARNING:** This chapter, along with two future chapters, contains torture scenes. *However*, I have **edited versions** of each that censor/tone down *most* gruesome details but still retain everything necessary for the story. (They are marked as such in the Chapter Index and are placed directly after corresponding uncensored chapters). So, if you would like to read the **edited version**, please go to the **next chapter**. :)

Chapter Notes

Why would I contain torture descriptions at all if I can get the point across without them? To help the reader empathize. Knowing the mental and emotional strain that Goemon experiences is essential for the story, but I think knowing the physical aspects as well creates a better opportunity to perceive what he is willing to endure for Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko, and--more importantly--how he feels about doing so. (Wolf and Rose made me feel a whole hell of a lot worse knowing *exactly* what Goemon went through, opposed to if it had just been implied.)

But I completely understand if you don't like reading that sort of thing, so rest assured that **if you choose to read the edited versions instead, you will still be getting all the necessary thoughts, dialogue, and emotions conveyed to comprehend everything. :)**

Lupin couldn’t help but laugh to himself as he hauled Pierre’s Adamantium to the car, not one person in pursuit. Even after everyone on the bottom floor had seen him, he was still able to give them the slip—granted, it took him five or ten minutes consisting of running out into the unanticipated swarm of security, then rushing back to under the stairs where the maze-like passage to the library was, bumping into Jianya on the way, and miraculously escaping through the window he had originally entered through.

It was a good thing he and Goemon hadn’t triggered that bookcase when they first infiltrated. Not only did it fall over, it set off an alarm and began filling the room with some sort of gas—although it definitely served Lupin well in getting those trackers off his tail.

Now that the Fiat was in sight as he booked down the street, he almost felt as if he had escaped too easily—save for that bullet Jianya lodged in his right shoulder. Yeah, she was skilled enough to get a hit on him, but no match for such a renowned escape artist.

Not to mention, neither was Zenigata or those guards, who Lupin had left behind to deal with each other. Zenigata might not have gotten Lupin this time, but at least he was going to lasso in more good feedback for capturing infamous gang members.

Suddenly the lights of the Fiat came on just as he was approaching—but he quickly
recognized a familiar face in the driver’s seat.

“Ah, Lupin!” Jigen said with a smirk, sticking his head out the window. “We were just about to come get you.”

“No need for that!” the thief replied in a chipper voice, wrenching open the back door.

“You got the goods?”

“You know it!” Lupin hopped into the car. Fujiko looked back at him from the passenger seat as he looked around with just as much uncertainty.

“Where’s Goemon?” the three asked simultaneously.

“He’s not with you!!”

“I thought he was with you!”

“Why would he be with us?!”

“He went to go help you!”

The trio exchanged glances.

“Dammit, Goemon, always showin’ off,” Jigen muttered, starting the car and kicking it out into the street. He honestly just said that to lighten the mood. They were all dreading the same thing: Goemon having a sudden rampage, which would not end well with so many people there, for both the guards and—more importantly—what could happen to Goemon. He may be the best swordsman, but he was still only human.

Unsurprisingly, the roads had been blocked off for the police cars…but there weren’t any cars when they got there, even though it hardly took a minute for the gang to get there. Jigen came to a screeching halt in the driveway and they exited the car.

“Did Zenigata go after the She?” Fujiko asked, looking around incredulously. It was like no one was ever there, besides the sliced front door.

“They might’ve chased after Goemon,” Jigen suggested—if the cops lost Lupin, Goemon would be the next prime target before the She were.

“Goemon!” Lupin called out at the entrance. He covered his face with the sleeve of his good arm, seeing the residue of the dissipated gas bomb. “Something’s not right; if they went straight after Goemon or the She, they wouldn’t have time to move the gassed bodies…” Lupin said as he returned to the others. “They would’ve had to immediately carried everyone to the cars and hightailed it.”

The look on all their faces showed the comprehension of how good this wasn’t.

Just like clockwork, they heard a phone ring…but it wasn’t any of theirs. They looked over to see the screen of a smartphone lighting up on the stone edge of the fountain. Lupin snatched it up, grimacing as he answered the video call. Jigen and Fujiko looked over his shoulder to see a short Chinese girl with an A-line haircut.

“Ah, Lupin III, Mr. Jigen, and Miss Mine,” she greeted. She seemed to be sitting in the passenger seat of a car.
“Jianya,” Lupin snarled, the other two not even needing an introduction to figure that out.

“I commend your creative escape tactics,” she congratulated with a pleased smile. “How is your shoulder?”

“Where is Goemon?” he questioned with detestation.

Jianya ignored him. “Thanks for showing up. You know, I really need someone to take the Jade Dragons back to the temple since I’ll be a bit…busy with my new friend.” Her grin and tone were unsettlingly sweet.

“Alright, we’ll return the goddamn Dragons!” Lupin barked. “Now give Goemon back!”

“Hm…I think he’d rather spend some quality time with us for a bit,” Jianya said with a disturbing snigger, moving her phone to show the back seat of the car. An unconscious Goemon sat buckled up in the middle, his hands tied together and head slumped back against the headrest. He was placed between Blondie and Goggles, who still had Goemon’s bandages around her eye and was using her fingers to push the corners of his lips into a smile. The windows were tinted; there was no way to tell where they were. Jianya asked, “What do you think, Mr. Ishikawa? You want to spend some time with us?”

Goggles grabbed Goemon’s lower lip, moving it to match the syllables as she answered, “I would love to!”

The other girls gave a round of laughter at the immature mischief, provoking glares from the three receivers of the call.

“It’s settled then,” Jianya said, returning the camera to herself, but still allowing a view of the back—just to taunt them. “We’ll be keeping him for a while—”

“You bitch, where the fuck are you taking him?” Jigen growled, done with their antics and grabbing the phone from Lupin. She seemed rather pleased at the bearded man’s menacing scowl.

“It’s not personal, Jiji,” Goggles mocked his quote, leaning forward. “At least, it wasn’t until now.”

If the situation wasn’t so dire, Fujiko and Lupin would definitely be questioning what the hell happened between that girl and Jigen to make her go from chaotic cute to true terrifying in half a second.

“Just tell us what we need to do to get him back,” Fujiko said, trying to keep things rational. Clearly they were maniacal, and Goemon had warned the She were ruthless when provoked. Fujiko didn’t want to goad them into doing anything worse to Goemon than they had already planned.

“For now, just return the Dragons and Pierre’s Adamantium,” Jianya said in a civil tone. “Keep that phone, and we’ll talk more then.”

_Fuck…_ Fujiko narrowed her eyes. With her experiences, female gang members operated far differently than male ones; things weren’t done straightforward. Deals were full of loopholes to keep you exploitable, and they didn’t just get even: They paid back with interest.

“Oh, and just so you don’t waste your time—because I know you want to get Mr. Ishikawa back as soon as possible—don’t bother trying to trace the call. And you don’t need to worry about Biming or the Ying, because we’ll be taking care of them _real soon._
“Just like we’ll be taking GREAT care of Mr. Ishikawa!” Boots jeered from the drivers seat, the others cheering in agreement.

“Keep me updated, okay?” Jianya said as Lupin took the phone back. “It’s good he’ll have some new friends, but we wouldn’t want Mr. Ishikawa to think his old ones abandoned him, now, would we?”

“You scumbags,” Lupin hissed through his teeth, knuckles turning white as he gripped the phone.

Jianya gave an amused hum. “Bye, for now.”

With that, the call ended and the screen went black.

“Those pieces of shit…” Lupin said lowly, his whole body tense with rage.

“Just wait ’til I get a gun to her head,” Jigen said, every fiber of his voice relaying his callousness regarding human life from years of being a hitman. However, Goemon’s life was one that he actually did care about. Fujiko was speechless, her apprehension written all over her face. The two were in disbelief that Blondie and Goggles had somehow gotten free, and they weren’t sure, but what if this could’ve been prevented if they’d just killed those two? It was weighing heavily on the both of them, but it was no time to worry about their own feelings. Goemon was in an unstable state for whatever reason, and if they didn’t get him back soon…well, they didn’t know how it would affect their kidnapped friend.

Fujiko looked over at Lupin, whose expression was beyond pensive and far beyond fury. While she had quite a few tricks up her sleeve, it was the thief who was the ultimate mastermind in this dynamic. “Lupin…what do we do?”

“I’ll tell you what the hell we’re gonna do.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Goemon found filling his lungs with air to be proving difficult. The ground was cold against his bare skin as he was splayed face-down. He opened his eyes but could see nothing. He felt nothing—nothing but weak. Struggling, he attempted to raise himself to his hands and knees, but to no avail.

“You prove yourself once more,” a disappointed tone reached Goemon’s ears, somehow still managing to sound jeering.

Not you… Goemon thought to himself miserably, fighting for a few more breaths. Anyone but you…

“No, it is me,” his clone said to him tediously. “And you, unfortunately, are you.” Unable to do much else, Goemon lifted his head to see the doppelganger sitting in front of him, arms crossed into his sleeves. “You let this happen again? Even after Lupin insults you about it—identifies your weakness for you—you let it happen again?!”

Goemon knew he was talking about being too trusting with women and assuming they’re innocent based on their looks. “I tried—”
“That is the worst thing you could say,” the copy spat. “Saying that is just admitting your obvious failure. At least keep some dignity and tell yourself it happened because you did not try.” Goemon’s head started falling, too exhausted to deal with this trouble. However, he was grabbed by his hair and yanked to face the specter. “Let me tell you everything you did wrong other than letting your guard down. You let Lupin talk you into these stupid ideas! For what? To ‘be a pal’?”

Goemon’s head started falling, too exhausted to deal with this trouble. However, he was grabbed by his hair and yanked to face the specter. “Let me tell you everything you did wrong other than letting your guard down. You let Lupin talk you into these stupid ideas! For what? To ‘be a pal’?”

Goemon glared at him, not giving the other the satisfaction of an answer. As a result, the clone pulled his hair tighter. “You degraded yourself for the Jade Dragons although you did not want to. You save those three multiple times. You had so many opportunities to eliminate them and did not. Lupin sends you away after using you to get past the traps. And now they have all left you behind.”

“That is untrue,” Goemon argued hoarsely. Unamused, his reflection dropped Goemon’s head, letting his face hit the ground.

“I am so tired of all these lies planted in your head by those fools…. In the end, they escaped, and you did not. But do they care? No, of course not. Why would they?”

“That—”

“Do not try to defend them. You bent to their every whim! Have you forgotten who you are?!”

“I was not going to just let the others down,” Goemon stated sternly, looking up at the copy defiantly. “You cannot make me betray them again.”

“Betray…? How does betrayal feel, knowing you are most surely to suffer while they spare you not even a glance? How does betrayal feel from the victim’s side?” The mirror image narrowed his eyes. “Not much better, does it?”

Goemon gave a dry swallow. “I know they will be loyal to me.”

There was nothing but disgust on the specter’s face.

“You deserve this. You think you can be one of them…” Goemon winced as his head was yanked back so his double could look him in the eye. He felt so small, so worthless under that gaze. “You need to wake up.”

“WAKE UP!”

Goemon gasped as a gush of water was thrown over him, shocking him awake. He was disoriented and now drenched, but felt just as exhausted. “Ugh…. Lupin…?” Goemon asked, lifting his heavy eyelids.

“Nope. Lupin’s not here. But I’ll let him know he’s the first one you asked for.”

As his hearing and eyesight began functioning properly, he saw a sneering Jianya holding a bucket before him—and a few feet below him? A panicked realization came over Goemon. He instinctively made an effort to move, which resulted in a terrible stinging on his wrists. Turning his head, he saw a rope of steel fibers passing through a thick metal ring that was drilled into a cement pillar. There was one on each side, the ropes tightly secured on his wrists, outstretching his arms sideways and keeping him suspended.

He didn’t know how long he had been hanging there, but the skin was raw, and his ankles weren’t in much better shape. They were bound together with the same rope in an intricate knot, and several weight plates were tied on the other end, pulling his legs to a point that they were
rendered completely immobile.

The room was large and barren. Smooth cement floor. White walls. A short staircase was to Goemon’s left, a door to his right. Although he couldn’t make much out behind him, he could see there were shelves taking up the entirety of the wall.

Now that he was aware of his surroundings, albeit clearly not able to react to anything, he analyzed his own state. As if being restrained didn’t prove him vulnerable enough, they had stripped him down to nothing but his fundoshi—although he would soon learn that baring his skin would serve as more than just a fear tactic. However, none of that really mattered; he was completely defenseless here no matter what shape he was in.

When it came down to it, Lupin hadn’t been able to retrieve him.

“Well, well, well. Ishikawa Goemon XIII. How’d you sleep?” Jianya asked, sounding quite courteous. Goemon looked down at her, feeling sick to his stomach. He had a hunch that Zantetsuken’s ominous foreshadowing was soon going to be experienced.

“Yes, because we ABSOLUTELY care,” another female voice said sarcastically from behind Jianya.

“No, we don’t. We know that drug blocks all REM sleep—of course he didn’t sleep well.”

“That was sarcasm. You need to train your ears to hear the fluctuations and tonal patterns of it.”

Goemon looked up and saw three other girls sitting on plush sofas around a low glass table—it was Boots, Blondie, and Goggles.

_Goggles…_ Goemon looked at her spitefully. She had gauze taped over her left eye, her face and clothes now clean. She was sitting upside-down with her feet over the back of the couch and head on the seat, playing some sort of hand-held video game. How could she sit there so carefree knowing that she did this to him?

It made him wish the guards had injured her far, _far_ worse than what they had.

No, it made him wish _he_ could be the one to do so.

“Don’t be upset at her,” Jianya said coolly, seeing his stare. “Blame your comrade for not killing her in the first place.”

_Comrade?_ Goemon thought things over. “Jiji” must’ve been Jigen, and it was he who inflicted those wounds, not the guards…. And if Boots had been posing as Zenigata… “Those policemen were all She members?”

No wonder Goggles had had no hesitancy to reach the bottom floor, she would be rejoining her teammates, not sneaking past guards.

“I wish I had a gold star sticker for you,” Jianya told him in a faux-encouraging tone. “Too bad you didn’t figure that out sooner.”

“Where are Lupin and the others?” Goemon demanded, concerned that perhaps they had been captured as well.

“Aw, worried about your friends? How touching,” Jianya said with a snicker. “Oh, I’m
A stony expression came over the samurai’s face. Goemon might have been bad at gauging young women’s innocence, but that damage was already done. He knew Jianya was all deception, and he was determined not to let her get to him. However, Jianya didn’t miss the fact that she had caught his attention and prompted something in his mind with the “friend” subject. She began strolling back and forth with her hands laced behind her back.

“You want to know what I mean when I say ‘left behind’? It means—”

“I know what it means,” Goemon interrupted. In this circumstance, he wouldn’t usually provide any acknowledgement to an interrogator, but her words were so similar to his...

“So it seems,” Jianya cooed, walking behind him, “but it has no meaning with no context.” He could hear something being picked off the shelves before she sauntered back in front of him. She was holding a whip over her shoulder, the edge of it dragging across the floor—it was a stockwhip, having a long handle for more leverage, therefore maximizing the momentum of the strike. “I think you should know just how much your ‘friends’ value you, since it might help in your decision to talk before things get messy.”

“Any utterance of yours is worthless to me,” Goemon retorted.

“Don’t talk to me about worth,” she scoffed, keeping her perpetual smile. “I don’t need to be educated by a man who no one values.”

This was just like talking to him, that imaginary voice plaguing him. But she was wrong—they both were, and Goemon was going to make sure they knew it. Because he knew it. “You speak of it as if they had a choice in this matter.”

“A choice? Ha! Make of it what you will, but I offered you back to them in exchange for the Dragons. The infamous Lupin, Fujiko, and Jigen made the choice that the prize in their hands is more important than having you,” she told him brashly. Jianya saw that disbelieving look in his eye, doubting her words, but his hesitance indicated he was doubting his own thoughts as well.

“There is no reason for me to believe anything you say,” he said flatly.

“You won’t talk, will you?” she said to him, examining the frayed tip of the well-used whip.

“No,” Goemon replied, confident in his answer. Just as before, the words still stood, “I would rather die than sell Lupin out.”

“That’s exactly what they told me you would say,” Jianya said with awe.

See? For Lupin to say that, he has total confidence in my loyalty, Goemon thought to himself. He was satisfied with that, and Goemon could just look at this as another chance to uphold that trustworthiness.

“It’s also exactly why they said it didn’t matter if I had you,” Jianya added frivolously, making her captive’s determined air falter. She gave a quiet laugh at the irony. “Don’t worry, your ‘friends’ have complete faith in you—well, your silence, at least, Mr. Ishikawa...”

Goemon knew deep down Jianya was lying, because...well, she just had to be.... They cared about him. Sure, none of this would have happened if they had just listened to him, but—
None of this is their fault, Goemon thought resolutely before his mind could wander.

But as he hung helplessly it was so disheartening to hear those women laughing at him, his situation, and no doubt at the fact that Lupin and the others had let him come to this…

No, I am certain that if they could have prevented this, they would have! he tried to convince himself.

Seeing Goemon disturbed in his own thoughts, Jianya finally spoke again. “You know how close they were. I’m not sure if they didn’t realize your absence or if they just didn’t care, but they seemed to forget about you pretty quickly…like you weren’t even a concern,” she went on with false sympathy. “I want you to think about that when I ask you where they are currently.”

Goemon furrowed his brows, keeping silent. He honestly didn’t know where the Lupin gang (sans himself…) would be, but he certainly wasn’t going to give her any ideas, and if he said he had no information…well, the look on all the girls’ faces suggested that there was no intention of mercifully killing him off.

“So, Mr. Ishikawa, where are they?” Jianya asked, strolling back and forth behind him. He assumed what was coming next, and it wasn’t going to make him talk. There was a loud crack and a blistering pain across his shoulder blades as the leather of the whip split his skin open. “Feel free to start talking when you like,” Jianya said lightheartedly, “because I don’t like repeating myself, so I won’t be asking you again.”

Goemon gritted his teeth as another lashing was cast across his back, crossing over the first in an “X” pattern. Right, left, right, left—the gashes were crisscrossing, and he felt the four corners of skin at the center of each “X” detaching. As his back continued to be flayed open, the disconnected skin was lining his open wounds like a bloodied alabaster wall. Goemon was no stranger to pain, but it became harder to ignore with each strike. He tried not to flinch, as when he did the metal strands of the ropes scraped against him, duplicating miniscule lacerations into his wrists and ankles, getting deeper and deeper like hundreds of layered papercuts.

Focusing on his surroundings to help his mind block out the pain didn’t help. The three other girls’ amused chatter invaded his ears, along with their disparaging laughs at the grunts of pain he could no longer suppress.

Zenigata clenched his fists as he stood in front of the Pierre mansion. Somehow, he had been doubly duped.

This was awful. No, beyond awful. He never would’ve guessed that Lupin would conspire with an agency large enough to not only take out half his squad but actually disguise themselves as it as well. It just didn’t seem like a “Lupin” thing to do.

Was he losing his inspector intuition?

No, he didn’t buy it. There was more going on than what was on the surface. Zenigata had gotten too eager; he had originally been waiting at the mansion, knowing Lupin wouldn’t fall for such an amateur luring scheme the police department devised, but there was a sighting of Lupin at the bank, so he had rushed over, only to find—after a half-hour chase—that it was an imposter.
They weren’t able to get any information out of her, either, and she was vicious enough that Zenigata had been worried Yata might lose control of his bowels when he had tried to question her.

Speaking of which…

“Inspector Zenigata,” a rather crestfallen Yata said as he approached, “there are no leads for Lupin or who he was working with.” The poor guy looked as if he was having to tell his parents he failed kindergarten.

“No, he wasn’t working with them,” Zenigata informed confidently, much to Yata’s surprise. “Lupin finds value in the chase. He wouldn’t set things up so there wouldn’t be one.” That was one reason Lupin loved Zenigata so much: He could be pushed to his limits in terms of escaping without having to compromise the use of his best thievery skills; Zenigata was good enough to test it all.

“What are you saying, sir?” Yata asked hesitantly.

“There’s a third party here,” the inspector determined, “one that wanted to lure me away and make sure there were no disruptions. Someone wanted Lupin to themselves.”

Yata blinked. How did he get that from this scene? There was nothing to go off of other than the Lupin impostor and security swap-out—the treasure was gone, and after all he’d seen, Yata didn’t doubt Lupin’s abilities, but to assume that the thief wasn’t teamed up with—

“Hello?” Zenigata answered his phone. It was an unknown number, but— “LUPIN?!”

“Ay, calm down, Pops! You want me to go deaf?!” Lupin’s voice sounded from the phone.

“You’re going to get it after tonight, you know that?” Zenigata threatened, stalking down the driveway. “And for the other night!”

“Ooo, so forceful,” Lupin teased, “but, Pops, listen—"

“Where are you?” he demanded, rounding the cement wall.

“Pops—"

“Are you in trouble?” Zenigata said lowly now that he was out of sight. Yata, who stuck to his side unless ordered otherwise on these Lupin escapades, was the only one within earshot—Zenigata wished he’d told him to go do something else before this phone call just so his partner didn’t have to weigh his morals of legality with the inspector’s decisions.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

Zenigata thought as much.

“Trouble? Me?” Lupin said in an upbeat tone, but the inspector knew better.

“You have other methods of showing off your getaways, so why else would you call if you weren’t in knee-deep?—and I don’t mean ‘you’ specifically,” Zenigata responded, turning his back to Yata so he didn’t have to look at the policeman’s somewhat-disappointed look that the inspector was somewhat-cooperating with their target.

“Yeah, you got me,” Lupin confessed. “I need your help for this one. Well, I don’t need your help, but it would certainly get Goemon back faster if you did.”
Goemon? So, whoever this third party was, they had the samurai... “Who are they?”

Lupin knew Zenigata would have already been on the right track.

“You ever heard of the She triad?” the thief began.

“Never have.”

“They’re a gang of women from China, and they’re the ones who blew this whole night for both of us. They’re bad news—and they’re crazy.”

Zenigata didn’t doubt it judging by the one they captured. He thought for a moment. As much as he wished no ill-will on the Lupin gang (other than being captured, but that was justice, not malice), he had to keep his job in mind. “Lupin, this is none of my business. I can’t help you.”

“Wait wait wait!” Lupin sputtered before the inspector could hang up on him. “It doesn’t have anything to do with you now, but I know how it can. You can investigate them under the impression they were working with me—I’ll give you any clues you need.”

“Then tell me where you are,” Zenigata told him bluntly.

“Uh...not yet.” He knew a bargain was entailed, and he would make sure it would be worth it. “I’ll give you all the intel on the She, okay? I just need you to help me do a little digging to find out where they’re at, then a little more help with the infiltration.”

“It sounds like you want me to do all the work.”

“Just think of it as...” Lupin tried to think of a way that would sound flattering. “...you and I will be the brains of the group, and you’ll provide the brawn with your troops. You walk away with the glory of taking down one of China’s most renowned triads, and we walk away with our friend back.”

“If you want this to work out,” Zenigata said gruffly, “the deal is that you’re going to be walking away in handcuffs.”

Lupin gave a lighthearted sigh. “I thought as much. How about as soon as I know Goemon is okay,” he began, knowing that the samurai was in a rough mental state and he wanted to be there for him during that time, “I’ll turn myself in—no, I’ll let you catch me during our next heist so you’ll look even better.”

Zenigata narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “I don’t want to just catch you, I want you behind bars, got it? No tricks mid-trip to prison.”

“You have my word.”

“Alright.... Deal.”

“Okay, perfect! Can you meet up now?”

“Meet up?! If we’re meeting up, then I’ll just cuff you then!”

“But we made a deal!”

Zenigata pinched the bridge of his nose. Lupin made him promise beforehand so he would have immunity to be being arrested.
“You did this on purpose.” There was silence between them filled with anticipation as Lupin waited for the answer. “Fine…”

Lupin gave a loud cheer that made Zenigata hold the phone away, carefully bringing it back to his ear once he was sure the thief’s outburst was finished. They were both men of their word, and after disclosing a place of Lupin’s choosing, Zenigata went to hang up. “Oh, and, Pops!” Lupin interrupted one last time. “Thank you.”

Zenigata ended the call immediately. He would never say, “you’re welcome” and acknowledge that he’d actually done something to help the thief out of the kindness of his heart with no intent of arresting him, and he didn’t plan to now.

Stowing his phone away, he looked up to see Yata just…staring ruefully at Zenigata. The inspector gave a heavy sigh. Of course he didn’t approve of working with an internationally-famous criminal, and it was a bit of a stretch to say that Zenigata was doing this just for the sake of capturing Lupin…but he could claim it was fully for the sake of justice. He waited for his partner’s scrutiny.

“Why…why does Lupin have your phone number?”

❖❖❖

Since her call with Lupin, Jianya and her crew had taken Goemon to the homely destination of the torture chamber and were in the process of “taking care of him,” just as they had promised Lupin.

Goemon’s back now looked like a dripping crosshatch sketch. The skin at the intersections of the strikes was peeling upwards, almost as if reaching out in some sort of entreaty. Perhaps his skin had reached its point of surrender, but Goemon had remained steadfast in his loyalty to the others. He hadn’t uttered a single word, despite the doubt clawing at the back of his mind.

“Jianya,” Boots said from the couch, “the whipping is getting boring.” The other two girls mumbled in agreement.

“You’re right,” Jianya said dismissively, coiling the whip up. “There’s no more space left to get creative anyways.”

“He just keeps grunting and gasping,” Blondie added. “I want him to make some fun noises.”

“What’s next?”

Boring? Fun? Next? As if the bleeding lashes weren’t enough, the salt from Goemon’s sweat was continuously amplifying the pain. His throat was dry as he stared over at the other girls snacking and enjoying refreshments. It seemed this sort of event was something they’d attended before.

“When is the lingchi gonna to start?”

A traditional Chinese form of torture, lingchi, or “death by one thousand cuts.” Goemon knew this much, that pieces of flesh were slowly stripped from you, usually starting with easy-to-remove places like the chest and inner thighs. Death was indeed prolonged in this fashion.
“I don’t want him to die,” Jianya said with disapproval. “Besides, we already started that with Biming. No one wants to see a duplicate piece of art. Although, that gives me an idea…”

There was some rummaging behind him as Jianya picked out a new tool. He had no idea what to expect next, but her tone and not being able to see her made him anxious. Goemon let out a brief, gruff yowl when suddenly a sharp feeling was concentrated on his back. He felt one of the loose edges from a piece skin, having been sectioned off by overlapping lashes, being pulled at—no, being peeled. Clenching his teeth shut could only limit his voice so much, which provided a bit of entertainment for the girls…as if the physical pain wasn’t enough. Once the final edge was ripped from his flesh, he took in a breath of what would normally be considered relief, but that was a foreign word to him right now.

“You really don’t have any fat, do you?” Jianya said with interest. The others’ faces brightened up a bit with enthusiasm as she stepped in front of Goemon with a pair of needle-nose pliers that had a rectangular section of skin dangling from it. “All that, and I didn’t even see the thinnest layer. I’m getting inspired already—you’ll make quite the fascinating canvas.”

Canvas…? Was she going to sew a tent out of him? Maybe a bag? Goemon swallowed, narrowing his eyes at her and trying not to look at the several inches of his own skin held before him. His back was slick with blood, his forearms and feet accumulating their own amount from the steel ropes, and being strung up as such didn’t make breathing easy.

Why was this happening to him?

In Goemon’s chest was something heavy. He didn’t want to blame Lupin and the others for what he was going through, but if he didn’t, he was left to ask himself…what did he do to deserve this? The sporadic visitor of his past self would have quite a few answers, none of which would make him feel any better.

Goemon had been so preoccupied with the fact that a piece of his back had just been ripped from him that he hadn’t noticed the metal cylinder in Jianya’s other hand. Goemon felt a rush of blood course through him at the clicking noise and a steady flame appeared from the nozzle of the gas cylinder. A blowtorch was not something Goemon had anticipated.

“Did you know that third degree burns usually don’t hurt?” Jianya asked, looking at the flame. “Once you’re there, the nerve endings are all dead. But…to get there, we have to go through the first and second degrees.” She returned her attention to Goemon, her eyes bearing a mischievous smile. “And then there’s always the skin underneath those first few layers that’s still tender.”

Goemon had been whipped before, although not to the point where his back looked like mincemeat. And there had been an attempt to set him on fire, although there was no significant damage—much to the contrary of what it seemed Jianya had planned for him.

“Where do you want to start?”

Goemon stared across the room at the plain wall, trying to ignore her—trying to ignore everything. That darkness overshadowing his mentality, the growing doubt, the exhaustion, the animosity…. It was a fog in his head that was getting too dense to see through.

“I would appreciate if you look at me when I’m talking to you…” Without warning there was an intense heat upon his left ribs. He winced, the concentrated point of the fire burning a single spot of skin. Goemon glared at her, and as a result Jianya pulled the flame back. “That’s better,” she said, her sharp eyes showing satisfaction. “Quite the gentleman, aren’t you? Did Lupin
have just as easy a time making you do what he says?"

Jianya’s unwavering polite tone, along with her verbal and physical torment, seemed to test how many buttons she could push at once.

The small patch of skin was burning, Goemon’s back was stinging and throbbing, his stressed joints were aching, and he was sure she hadn’t even gotten started on him.

“The answer is no; Lupin had an even easier time.”

It couldn’t be. Any familiar face would’ve been more welcome. Goemon dared to let his eyes wander in the direction of the voice. It was…but Goemon wanted to know why did it have to be him? The lookalike was standing there halfway between him and the couches, evaluating the scene just as he had done in Goemon’s dream, where the others in the room were still present. It was as if his mind was too weak-willed to keep the barrier up between what was real and what was his imagination. It was melding the two together.

Put simply, his mind’s distress was becoming part of his reality. There was no more differentiation.

The blowtorch was held up to his left side again, the flame reflecting in Jianya’s attentive eyes as she carefully guided the fire to follow where a rib would lie beneath his muscle, wrapping around to below his pectoral muscle. Goemon clenched his fists, trying not to writhe in a useless attempt to avoid the burning. Back and forth she moved the torch along that single rib, producing a stripe that got redder and redder as if layering paint. The skin was searing, he could feel it becoming taunt as it began to blister. It hurt even more when his panting expanded his ribcage and forced the unpliant skin further. It was so excruciating, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

“Nothing you can do, besides talking,” the specter reminded, observing the She member’s handiwork. “But I would prefer your silence. Withstanding pain is about the only good attribute your pathetic existence has left; I would hate for you to give that up.”

Suddenly the intensity of the scorching stopped, allowing for Goemon to steady his breaths a bit—although, Jianya hadn’t removed the torch from him. As she had said, all the nerves were dead, leaving nothing but a long, charred stripe lining his rib. The coloration was being lost altogether, turning black. Although he couldn’t feel the fire on the main mark, the skin still alive around it was scalding, the blisters bubbling up as the heat passed over.

“Ever roasted a marshmallow?” Jianya said, shutting the torch off. “They get crispy and black on the outside, but retain that gooey, supple texture on the inside. Humans are just like that.” Goemon was unblinking as she held up the pliers. “Let me show you...”

The tip of the pliers clamped down into one end of the blackened skin, and then she began pulling. The charred began to break off from the blistered, tugging at the swollen skin until it separated. The woman took her time, extending the agony far longer than need be, and there was no way Goemon could contain his voice.

Touching a burn came nowhere near comparison to what this felt like as the twelve-inch black strip was pried from his body, tearing at the burn and exposing the raw layers of skin underneath, now covered in pus from the broken blisters.

“See? Gooey and supple.”
Even Goemon’s mirror image had to grimace as that sight, especially when Jianya made the decision to hang the strip of flesh across his opposite arm, placing it ever so carefully.

“She makes odd analogies, but I think overall, this will be good for you,” the copy said to him, looking up contentedly as she began on the next rib. Knowing what was coming didn’t make the experience any less painful. Goemon did everything in his power not to cry out, his breaths rushing through his teeth.

“Come on, Mr. Ishikawa, be a man,” Boots jeered from the comfort of the couch.

“He’s doing good so far, but there hasn’t been anyone who Jianya couldn’t make cry,” Blondie said. “I hope he does soon, heh…”

As Jianya began using the pliers once more, Goemon couldn’t help it. A strained groan worked its way out, only ceasing once the tip of the new scrap was pried off. His panting and sweating was quickly drying his mouth further, although his skin was staying quite moist, judging from the wet noise created as Jianya slapped the new decorative ribbon over his arm next to the first.

Or maybe it was just the clinging ooze from the burst blisters that caused the sound.

Jianya poked the exposed wound with one of her pointed fingernails, making Goemon wince. “You’re quite resilient,” she praised with poised delight. “I wonder if your friends would go through the same to protect you?”

“No,” the doppelganger scoffed.

“I would not wish them to,” Goemon argued breathlessly. “I would rather them reveal the information than suffer on my behalf.”

The two looked up at the samurai, one amused, the other clearly disapproving.

“What a noble answer for someone abandoned so quickly,” Jianya complimented.

“Noble? Stupid, perhaps,” the copy corrected, “but not noble. Nothing about you is worth admiring.”

“Just…shut…up…” Goemon growled, and there were stunned noises—and stunned silences.

Jianya blinked, a spark flaring up in her abyss-like eyes, an unsettling pairing with that smile of hers. “‘Shut up?’”

He hadn’t meant Jianya—but he wasn’t going to try and make excuses in an attempt to gain mercy. Goemon glared at his clone.

“There is no one to blame but yourself,” he said simply, shrugging as the three girls watched with astonishment.

“If you don’t like me talking,” Jianya told Goemon, putting the pliers and blowtorch down before returning to the shelves, “allow me to help you get over your shyness.”

She reappeared with some sort of remote control that had four levers on it, then walked to the front of a concrete pillar where he couldn’t see, and—using a stepladder—took something off the wall. Goemon could see her pulling two strings as she walked, then grabbed two more from the
next pillar, finally making her way back in front of Goemon. Jianya moved the stepladder in front of him and walked up it, finally coming face to face with her victim.

She held up four fishing hooks, the lines attached to reels mounted in the concrete pillars, no rods. A line on either side was positioned towards the ceiling, the two others at eye-level...or would be, if he wasn’t suspended in the air.

“How nice of you to hold these for me,” she thanked in advance, sticking the hooks with one tug into his shoulder, making him draw in a sharp breath. Little drops of blood poked their way out until she ripped the first hook out, where scarlet started flowing from the small puncture. “Come help me with this.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Boots got up, too eager for Goemon’s liking, as Blondie and Goggles were both fairly injured. Jianya handed Boots the controller, then dug her pointed nails into Goemon’s cheeks as she gripped his face.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” Goemon snapped, trying to pull away.

“What’s that, Mr. Ishikawa? You’re so quiet...” she hissed, prying between his molars through his cheeks to get him to open his mouth. “And I’d love to hear your opinion on these subjects, since my banter is boring you.”

Goemon tried to keep his teeth clenched and did his best to turn away from her. It didn’t matter though—he eyed the hook with disdain, unable to avoid her slipping it between his bunched lips and pulling the point upward and to the right, forcing him to arch his neck to avoid it penetrating through his lip. Boots slowly tilted one of the levers, the line growing taut as it was reeled in from the concrete pillar until Jianya instructed her to stop.

“I never really thought about an interrogation where holding your tongue would have had a better outcome than speaking,” Goemon’s mirror image commented from below.

Goemon glowered at Jianya, not daring to move as the second hook was placed behind the left side of his upper lip, angled out, and pulled tight. He felt the points on the verge of breaking through the skin, tasting the smallest drops of blood as their steady pressure kept him from moving his mouth.

Then came the bottom lip. Jianya placed the last two hooks and reeled them in simultaneously, forcing him to keep his jaw open to prevent the hooks from ripping through. His lips were pulled open diagonally in a square shape, and if he moved the slightest bit in any direction or attempted to close his mouth, he would have at least two new piercings.

Already his strained neck muscles were growing tired from keeping his head at such an angle. As Boots went back to her seat, the other two girls talking excitedly with her, Jianya narrowed her eyes at Goemon.

“This should help you find your voice. Don’t be timid, now,” she encouraged. “Just imagine this audience as your friends—because friends open up to each other, right?”

Goemon didn’t know what to think, and Jianya enjoyed that uncertain quivering in his eyes. He wasn’t afraid—at least, not of the pain, but this uneasiness was pulsing through him. Everything she said made him feel...terrible. Like he was worthless, making him regret all his decisions, negate his beliefs, and question his goals and purpose further.... She wasn’t insulting him, and while her words made him wish she never existed, they didn’t make him hate her...they made him hate himself.
Jianya patted his head as if to comfort him, then smoothly walked down the stepladder and moved it aside.

“Now, let’s get back to business, shall we?”

There was the click of the blowtorch, and Goemon hoped he could summon the willpower to not move.

His head was at an upward angle to where his esophagus was wide open, and paired with the immobility of his mouth, there was no way to suppress any noise.

“I am rather curious to see how you fare with this one…” his mirage stated curtly.

Goemon’s fingernails dug into his palms as he felt the flame once again on his skin, the heat raking across his next rib. He squeezed his eyes shut. His instincts were begging to let him relax the muscles, so he had to concentrate on keeping his mouth forced open and his head lifted; he could already feel the metal digging tiny pits into the inside of his mouth even with his trying.

But he didn’t want to give the She the satisfaction of hearing his unrestrained pain. That also took concentration. He tried holding his breath, but it was no use. With his airways so agape, his panting from before had escalated into heaving lungfuls that stretched at his blistered side, occasionally separated by a parched cough.

If he could just meditate, prepare himself and just rebuild his mind’s stability, perhaps he wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed, but there was no chance of clearing his mind here. There was no rebuilding the stability he longed for, not through meditation alone. It had been that way for quite some time, perhaps years…his meditation merely kept the effects bottled-up, letting them build until they would amass into something he wouldn’t be able to overcome.

Maybe the clone was right. Maybe there was no way to get rid of him.

Maybe the problem was Lupin and the others, he just simply refused to believe it…

Goemon had stopped paying heed to sparing his wrists, and it was evident. The blood clung to the underside of his arms, trickling down more and more rapidly as the liquid accumulated. The innumerable cuts on his back pulsed with his quickening heartbeats, his joints felt like they were about to give way, and his side…

Finally, a wave of humiliation enveloped Goemon as he couldn’t hold back anymore, the scorching taking its toll and driving a yell out of him as the blisters festered.

It made him sick how his agony was part of their entertainment.

“No, you yourself are the entertainment,” Goemon heard his copy remark over his rough screaming. “You always have been. These girls are just a bit more difficult to please than Lupin and the others.”

No, that couldn’t be. Goemon wasn’t just entertainment to them—he had more purpose than that. Sure, they thought it was amusing how he dressed, and his mannerisms, but everyone thought that.

Everyone thought that… They were no exception. Goemon was a multipurpose tool used for whatever they needed, including a good laugh.

Jianya paused as the next strip was ready to be pulled, allowing Goemon a few voiceless
gasps. “Well done, Mr. Ishikawa,” she said to him brightly. His eyes traveled over to her, avoiding turning his head, and most certainly avoiding the sight of the girls tickled over his suffering. “You’re really coming out of your shell. Please, tell me more.”

Jianya couldn’t tell if his gaze read scorn or pleading, but it was soon gone as he started hacking—which he tried to control for the sake of the hooks threatening his mouth. As Jianya started up with the pliers again, Blondie couldn’t help but admire.

“What a divine sound, screaming and coughing intertwined—it’s almost like a duet, and yet a battle between the two, trying to express the greater anguish…”

“I’m just waiting for him to start whining and crying. He was already close to losing his mind before we brought him here, it shouldn’t be too long now before he cracks,” Boots added brashly.

“Hm,” the specter said thoughtfully, watching Goemon’s tired body tremble with each breath as Jianya slapped yet another stretch of skin over his right arm. “You heard them. It should not be long. Or, you could save yourself the trouble and just let me out now. You do not want to be where you are, in this room or as a person. Let me out. Trust me—trust your true self.”

Goemon stared at the ceiling. He wanted to argue. He wanted a lot of things. He wanted Lupin and the others to come bursting through one of those doors, experience that same feeling he had before when rescued from Wolf and Rose. He wanted to believe they cared.

He wanted to believe in Fujiko’s words of forgiveness and Jigen’s talk of best friends. He wanted to believe he could laugh this off, just as he and Lupin had laughed off the samurai’s attempt to kill him.

*Attempt…*

The copy huffed through his nose. Goemon looked down at him, seeing that Jianya had disappeared to the shelves. “Did you laugh about it because it was in the past, or because Lupin told you to?” Goemon furrowed his brow. “Neither. You laughed because you were afraid of what it would be to you if not comical.”

The real Goemon’s eyes narrowed, expressing his skepticism.

“You were afraid to face what had become of yourself,” he elaborated, smirking. “A weakling with no willpower, no control, and no grasp of your true purpose anymore.”

*That is not true—he is not real,* Goemon thought to himself desperately, shutting his eyes as his only means to get as far away from the copy as possible.

“You were afraid of how Lupin would react if he dwelled on the matter longer,” the clone went on, forcing him to listen. “If he took your betrayals more seriously. If he abandoned you.”

*He would not abandon me—he will not.* Goemon had to keep his determination. He had to hold on to this last bit, because there was no more running from his doubt and confusion now.

Was this the result of his distrust?

“‘He will not’? No, he already *has.*”

Suddenly there was the sharp whooshing of compressed air. Jianya stood in front of him with two canisters.
“Liquid nitrogen. Now that you’ve told us your thoughts on fire, let’s hear what you have to say about frostbite.”
Lupin couldn’t help but laugh to himself as he hauled Pierre’s Adamantium to the car, not one person in pursuit. Even after everyone on the bottom floor had seen him, he was still able to give them the slip—granted, it took him five or ten minutes consisting of running out into the unanticipated swarm of security, then rushing back to under the stairs where the maze-like passage to the library was, bumping into Jianya on the way, and miraculously escaping through the window he had originally entered through.

It was a good thing he and Goemon hadn’t triggered that bookcase when they first infiltrated. Not only did it fall over, it set off an alarm and began filling the room with some sort of gas—although it definitely served Lupin well in getting those trackers off his tail.

Now that the Fiat was in sight as he booked down the street, he almost felt as if he had escaped too easily—save for that bullet Jianya lodged in his right shoulder. Yeah, she was skilled enough to get a hit on him, but no match for such a renowned escape artist.

Not to mention, neither was Zenigata or those guards, who Lupin had left behind to deal with each other. Zenigata might not have gotten Lupin this time, but at least he was going to lasso in more good feedback for capturing infamous gang members.

Suddenly the lights of the Fiat came on just as he was approaching—but he quickly recognized a familiar face in the driver’s seat.

“Ah, Lupin!” Jigen said with a smirk, sticking his head out the window. “We were just about to come get you.”

“No need for that!” the thief replied in a chipper voice, wrenching open the back door.

“You got the goods?”

“You know it!” Lupin hopped into the car. Fujiko looked back at him from the passenger seat as he looked around with just as much uncertainty.

“Where’s Goemon?” the three asked simultaneously.

“He’s not with you?!”

“I thought he was with you!”

“Why would he be with us?!”
“He went to go help you!”

The trio exchanged glances.

“Dammit, Goemon, always showin’ off,” Jigen muttered, starting the car and kicking it out into the street. He honestly just said that to lighten the mood. They were all dreading the same thing: Goemon having a sudden rampage, which would not end well with so many people there, for both the guards and—more importantly—what could happen to Goemon. He may be the best swordsman, but he was still only human.

Unsurprisingly, the roads had been blocked off for the police cars…but there weren’t any cars when they got there, even though it hardly took a minute for the gang to get there. Jigen came to a screeching halt in the driveway and they exited the car.

“Did Zenigata go after the She?” Fujiko asked, looking around incredulously. It was like no one was ever there, besides the sliced front door.

“They might’ve chased after Goemon,” Jigen suggested—if the cops lost Lupin, Goemon would be the next prime target before the She were.

“Goemon!” Lupin called out at the entrance. He covered his face with the sleeve of his good arm, seeing the residue of the dissipated gas bomb. “Something’s not right; if they went straight after Goemon or the She, they wouldn’t have time to move the gassed bodies…” Lupin said as he returned to the others. “They would’ve had to immediately carried everyone to the cars and hightailed it.”

The look on all their faces showed the comprehension of how good this wasn’t.

Just like clockwork, they heard a phone ring…but it wasn’t any of theirs. They looked over to see the screen of a smartphone lighting up on the stone edge of the fountain. Lupin snatched it up, grimacing as he answered the video call. Jigen and Fujiko looked over his shoulder to see a short Chinese girl with an A-line haircut.

“Ah, Lupin III, Mr. Jigen, and Miss Mine,” she greeted. She seemed to be sitting in the passenger seat of a car.

“Jianya,” Lupin snarled, the other two not even needing an introduction to figure that out.

“I commend your creative escape tactics,” she congratulated with a pleased smile. “How is your shoulder?”

“Where is Goemon?” he questioned with detestation.

Jianya ignored him. “Thanks for showing up. You know, I really need someone to take the Jade Dragons back to the temple since I’ll be a bit…busy with my new friend.” Her grin and tone were unsettlingly sweet.

“Alright, we’ll return the goddamn Dragons!” Lupin barked. “Now give Goemon back!”

“Hm…I think he’d rather spend some quality time with us for a bit,” Jianya said with a disturbing snigger, moving her phone to show the back seat of the car. An unconscious Goemon sat buckled up in the middle, his hands tied together and head slumped back against the headrest. He was placed between Blondie and Goggles, who still had Goemon’s bandages around her eye and was using her fingers to push the corners of his lips into a smile. The windows were tinted; there was no way to tell where they were. Jianya asked, “What do you think, Mr. Ishikawa? You
Goggles grabbed Goemon’s lower lip, moving it to match the syllables as she answered, “I would love to!”

The other girls gave a round of laughter at the immature mischief, provoking glares from the three receivers of the call.

“It’s settled then,” Jianya said, returning the camera to herself, but still allowing a view of the back—just to taunt them. “We’ll be keeping him for a while—”

“You bitch, where the fuck are you taking him?” Jigen growled, done with their antics and grabbing the phone from Lupin. She seemed rather pleased at the bearded man’s menacing scowl.

“It’s not personal, Jiji,” Goggles mocked his quote, leaning forward. “At least, it wasn’t until now.”

If the situation wasn’t so dire, Fujiko and Lupin would definitely be questioning what the hell happened between that girl and Jigen to make her go from chaotic cute to true terrifying in half a second.

“Just tell us what we need to do to get him back,” Fujiko said, trying to keep things rational. Clearly they were maniacal, and Goemon had warned the She were ruthless when provoked. Fujiko didn’t want to goad them into doing anything worse to Goemon than they had already planned.

“For now, just return the Dragons and Pierre’s Adamantium,” Jianya said in a civil tone. “Keep that phone, and we’ll talk more then.”

Fuck… Fujiko narrowed her eyes. With her experiences, female gang members operated far differently than male ones; things weren’t done straightforward. Deals were full of loopholes to keep you exploitable, and they didn’t just get even: They paid back with interest.

“Oh, and just so you don’t waste your time—because I know you want to get Mr. Ishikawa back as soon as possible—don’t bother trying to trace the call. And you don’t need to worry about Biming or the Ying, because we’ll be taking care of them real soon.”

“Just like we’ll be taking GREAT care of Mr. Ishikawa!” Boots jeered from the drivers seat, the others cheering in agreement.

“Keep me updated, okay?” Jianya said as Lupin took the phone back. “It’s good he’ll have some new friends, but we wouldn’t want Mr. Ishikawa to think his old ones abandoned him, now, would we?”

“You scumbags,” Lupin hissed through his teeth, knuckles turning white as he gripped the phone.

Jianya gave an amused hum. “Bye, for now.”

With that, the call ended and the screen went black.

“Those pieces of shit…” Lupin said lowly, his whole body tense with rage.

“Just wait ’til I get a gun to her head,” Jigen said, every fiber of his voice relaying his callousness regarding human life from years of being a hitman. However, Goemon’s life was one
that he actually did care about. Fujiko was speechless, her apprehension written all over her face. The two were in disbelief that Blondie and Goggles had somehow gotten free, and they weren’t sure, but what if this could’ve been prevented if they’d just killed those two? It was weighing heavily on the both of them, but it was no time to worry about their own feelings. Goemon was in an unstable state for whatever reason, and if they didn’t get him back soon…well, they didn’t know how it would affect their kidnapped friend.

Fujiko looked over at Lupin, whose expression was beyond pensive and far beyond fury. While she had quite a few tricks up her sleeve, it was the thief who was the ultimate mastermind in this dynamic. “Lupin…what do we do?”

“I’ll tell you what the hell we’re gonna do.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Goemon found filling his lungs with air to be proving difficult. The ground was cold against his bare skin as he was splayed face-down. He opened his eyes but could see nothing. He felt nothing—nothing but weak. Struggling, he attempted to raise himself to his hands and knees, but to no avail.

“You prove yourself once more,” a disappointed tone reached Goemon’s ears, somehow still managing to sound jeering.

Not you…

Goemon thought to himself miserably, fighting for a few more breaths. Anyone but you…

“No, it is me,” his clone said to him tediously. “And you, unfortunately, are you.” Unable to do much else, Goemon lifted his head to see the doppelganger sitting in front of him, arms crossed into his sleeves. “You let this happen again? Even after Lupin insults you about it—identifies your weakness for you—you let it happen again?!”

Goemon knew he was talking about being too trusting with women and assuming they’re innocent based on their looks. “I tried—”

“That is the worst thing you could say,” the copy spat. “Saying that is just admitting your obvious failure. At least keep some dignity and tell yourself it happened because you did not try.” Goemon’s head started falling, too exhausted to deal with this trouble. However, he was grabbed by his hair and yanked to face the specter. “Let me tell you everything you did wrong other than letting your guard down. You let Lupin talk you into these stupid ideas! For what? To ‘be a pal’?” Goemon glared at him, not giving the other the satisfaction of an answer. As a result, the clone pulled his hair tighter. “You degraded yourself for the Jade Dragons although you did not want to. You save those three multiple times. You had so many opportunities to eliminate them and did not. Lupin sends you away after using you to get past the traps. And now they have all left you behind.”

“That is untrue,” Goemon argued hoarsely. Unamused, his reflection dropped Goemon’s head, letting his face hit the ground.

“I am so tired of all these lies planted in your head by those fools…. In the end, they escaped, and you did not. But do they care? No, of course not. Why would they?”
“That—”

“Do not try to defend them. You bent to their every whim! Have you forgotten who you are?!”

“I was not going to just let the others down,” Goemon stated sternly, looking up at the copy defiantly. “You cannot make me betray them again.”

“Betray…? How does betrayal feel, knowing you are most surely to suffer while they spare you not even a glance? How does betrayal feel from the victim’s side?” The mirror image narrowed his eyes. “Not much better, does it?”

Goemon gave a dry swallow. “I know they will be loyal to me.”

There was nothing but disgust on the specter’s face.

“You deserve this. You think you can be one of them…” Goemon winced as his head was yanked back so his double could look him in the eye. He felt so small, so worthless under that gaze. “You need to wake up.”

“WAKE UP!”

Goemon gasped as a gush of water was thrown over him, shocking him awake. He was disoriented and now drenched, but felt just as exhausted. “Ugh…. Lupin…? Goemon asked, lifting his heavy eyelids.

“Nope. Lupin’s not here. But I’ll let him know he’s the first one you asked for.”

As his hearing and eyesight began functioning properly, he saw a sneering Jianya holding a bucket before him—and a few feet below him? A panicked realization came over Goemon. He instinctively made an effort to move, which resulted in a terrible stinging on his wrists. Turning his head, he saw a rope of steel fibers passing through a thick metal ring that was drilled into a cement pillar. There was one on each side, the ropes tightly secured on his wrists, outstretching his arms sideways and keeping him suspended.

He didn’t know how long he had been hanging there, but the skin was raw, and his ankles weren’t in much better shape. They were bound together with the same rope in an intricate knot, and several weight plates were tied on the other end, pulling his legs to a point that they were rendered completely immobile.

The room was large and barren. Smooth cement floor. White walls. A short staircase was to Goemon’s left, a door to his right. Although he couldn’t make much out behind him, he could see there were shelves taking up the entirety of the wall.

Now that he was aware of his surroundings, albeit clearly not able to react to anything, he analyzed his own state. As if being restrained didn’t prove him vulnerable enough, they had stripped him down to nothing but his fundoshi—although he would soon learn that baring his skin would serve as more than just a fear tactic. However, none of that really mattered; he was completely defenseless here no matter what shape he was in.

When it came down to it, Lupin hadn’t been able to retrieve him.

“Well, well, well. Ishikawa Goemon XIII. How’d you sleep?” Jianya asked, sounding quite courteous. Goemon looked down at her, feeling sick to his stomach. He had a hunch that Zantetsuken’s ominous foreshadowing was soon going to be experienced.
“Yes, because we ABSOLUTELY care,” another female voice said sarcastically from behind Jianya.

“No, we don’t. We know that drug blocks all REM sleep—of course he didn’t sleep well.”

“That was sarcasm. You need to train your ears to hear the fluctuations and tonal patterns of it.”

Goemon looked up and saw three other girls sitting on plush sofas around a low glass table—it was Boots, Blondie, and Goggles.

_Goggles…_ Goemon looked at her spitefully. She had gauze taped over her left eye, her face and clothes now clean. She was sitting upside-down with her feet over the back of the couch and head on the seat, playing some sort of hand-held video game. How could she sit there so carefree knowing that she did this to him?

It made him wish the guards had injured her far, far worse than what they had.

No, it made him wish he could be the one to do so.

“Don’t be upset at her,” Jianya said coolly, seeing his stare. “Blame your comrade for not killing her in the first place.”

_Comrade?_ Goemon thought things over. “Jiji” must’ve been Jigen, and it was he who inflicted those wounds, not the guards…. And if Boots had been posing as Zenigata… “Those policemen were all She members?”

No wonder Goggles had had no hesitancy to reach the bottom floor, she would be rejoining her teammates, not sneaking past guards.

“I wish I had a gold star sticker for you,” Jianya told him in a faux-encouraging tone. “Too bad you didn’t figure that out sooner.”

“Where are Lupin and the others?” Goemon demanded, concerned that perhaps they had been captured as well.

“Aw, worried about your friends? How touching,” Jianya said with a snicker. “Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed they were your friends. After all, what kind of twofaced people would leave their friend behind?”

A stony expression came over the samurai’s face. Goemon might be been bad at gauging young women’s innocence, but that damage was already done. He knew Jianya was all deception, and he was determined not to let her get to him. However, Jianya didn’t miss the fact that she had caught his attention and prompted something in his mind with the “friend” subject. She began strolling back and forth with her hands laced behind her back.

“You want to know what I mean when I say ‘left behind’? It means—”

“I know what it means,” Goemon interrupted. In this circumstance, he wouldn’t usually provide any acknowledgement to an interrogator, but her words were so similar to _his_...

“So it seems,” Jianya cooed, walking behind him, “but it has no meaning with no context.” He could hear something being picked off the shelves before she sauntered back in front of him. She was holding a whip over her shoulder, the edge of it dragging across the floor—it was a stockwhip, having a long handle for more leverage, therefore maximizing the momentum of the
strike. “I think you should know just how much your ‘friends’ value you, since it might help in your decision to talk before things get messy.”

“Any utterance of yours is worthless to me,” Goemon retorted.

“Don’t talk to me about worth,” she scoffed, keeping her perpetual smile. “I don’t need to be educated by a man who no one values.”

This was just like talking to him, that imaginary voice plaguing him. But she was wrong—they both were, and Goemon was going to make sure they knew it. Because he knew it. “You speak of it as if they had a choice in this matter.”

“A choice? Ha! Make of it what you will, but I offered you back to them in exchange for the Dragons. The infamous Lupin, Fujiko, and Jigen made the choice that the prize in their hands is more important than having you,” she told him brashly. Jianya saw that disbelieving look in his eye, doubting her words, but his hesitance indicated he was doubting his own thoughts as well.

“There is no reason for me to believe anything you say,” he said flatly.

“You won’t talk, will you?” she said to him, examining the frayed tip of the well-used whip.

“No,” Goemon replied, confident in his answer. Just as before, the words still stood, “I would rather die than sell Lupin out.”

“That’s exactly what they told me you would say,” Jianya said with awe.

See? For Lupin to say that, he has total confidence in my loyalty, Goemon thought to himself. He was satisfied with that, and Goemon could just look at this as another chance to uphold that trustworthiness.

“It’s also exactly why they said it didn’t matter if I had you,” Jianya added frivolously, making her captive’s determined air falter. She gave a quiet laugh at the irony. “Don’t worry, your ‘friends’ have complete faith in you—well, your silence, at least, Mr. Ishikawa…”

Goemon knew deep down Jianya was lying, because…well, she just had to be…. They cared about him. Sure, none of this would have happened if they had just listened to him, but—

None of this is their fault, Goemon thought resolutely before his mind could wander.

But as he hung helplessly it was so disheartening to hear those women laughing at him, his situation, and no doubt at the fact that Lupin and the others had let him come to this…

No, I am certain that if they could have prevented this, they would have! he tried to convince himself.

Seeing Goemon disturbed in his own thoughts, Jianya finally spoke again. “You know how close they were. I’m not sure if they didn’t realize your absence or if they just didn’t care, but they seemed to forget about you pretty quickly…like you weren’t even a concern,” she went on with false sympathy. “I want you to think about that when I ask you where they are currently.”

Goemon furrowed his brows, keeping silent. He honestly didn’t know where the Lupin gang (sans himself…) would be, but he certainly wasn’t going to give her any ideas, and if he said he had no information…well, the look on all the girls’ faces suggested that there was no intention of mercifully killing him off.
“So, Mr. Ishikawa, where are they?” Jianya asked, strolling back and forth behind him. He assumed what was coming next, and it wasn’t going to make him talk. There was a loud crack and a blistering pain across his shoulder blades as the leather of the whip split his skin open. “Feel free to start talking when you like,” Jianya said lightheartedly, “because I don’t like repeating myself, so I won’t be asking you again.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Zenigata clenched his fists as he stood in front of the Pierre mansion. Somehow, he had been doubly duped.

This was awful. No, beyond awful. He never would’ve guessed that Lupin would conspire with an agency large enough to not only take out half his squad but actually disguise themselves as it as well. It just didn’t seem like a “Lupin” thing to do.

Was he losing his inspector intuition?

No, he didn’t buy it. There was more going on than what was on the surface. Zenigata had gotten too eager; he had originally been waiting at the mansion, knowing Lupin wouldn’t fall for such an amateur luring scheme the police department devised, but there was a sighting of Lupin at the bank, so he had rushed over, only to find—after a half-hour chase—that it was an imposter. They weren’t able to get any information out of her, either, and she was vicious enough that Zenigata had been worried Yata might lose control of his bowels when he had tried to question her.

Speaking of which…

“Inspector Zenigata,” a rather crestfallen Yata said as he approached, “there are no leads for Lupin or who he was working with.” The poor guy looked as if he was having to tell his parents he failed kindergarten.

“No, he wasn’t working with them,” Zenigata informed confidently, much to Yata’s surprise. “Lupin finds value in the chase. He wouldn’t set things up so there wouldn’t be one.” That was one reason Lupin loved Zenigata so much: He could be pushed to his limits in terms of escaping without having to compromise the use of his best thievery skills; Zenigata was good enough to test it all.

“What are you saying, sir?” Yata asked hesitantly.

“There’s a third party here,” the inspector determined, “one that wanted to lure me away and make sure there were no disruptions. Someone wanted Lupin to themselves.”

Yata blinked. How did he get that from this scene? There was nothing to go off of other than the Lupin impostor and security swap-out—the treasure was gone, and after all he’d seen, Yata didn’t doubt Lupin’s abilities, but to assume that the thief wasn’t teamed up with—

“Hello?” Zenigata answered his phone. It was an unknown number, but— “LUPIN?!”

“Ay, calm down, Pops! You want me to go deaf?!” Lupin’s voice sounded from the phone.

“You’re going to get it after tonight, you know that?” Zenigata threatened, stalking down the driveway. “And for the other night!”
“Ooo, so forceful,” Lupin teased, “but, Pops, listen—”

“Where are you?” he demanded, rounding the cement wall.

“Pops—”

“Are you in trouble?” Zenigata said lowly now that he was out of sight. Yata, who stuck to his side unless ordered otherwise on these Lupin escapades, was the only one within earshot—Zenigata wished he’d told him to go do something else before this phone call just so his partner didn’t have to weigh his morals of legality with the inspector’s decisions.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

Zenigata thought as much.

“Trouble? Me?” Lupin said in an upbeat tone, but the inspector knew better.

“You have other methods of showing off your getaways, so why else would you call if you weren’t in knee-deep?—and I don’t mean ‘you’ specifically,” Zenigata responded, turning his back to Yata so he didn’t have to look at the policeman’s somewhat-disappointed look that the inspector was somewhat-cooperating with their target.

“Yeah, you got me,” Lupin confessed. “I need your help for this one. Well, I don’t need your help, but it would certainly get Goemon back faster if you did.”

“Goemon? So, whoever this third party was, they had the samurai… Who are they?”

Lupin knew Zenigata would have already been on the right track.

“You ever heard of the She triad?” the thief began.

“Never have.”

“They’re a gang of women from China, and they’re the ones who blew this whole night for both of us. They’re bad news—and they’re crazy.”

Zenigata didn’t doubt it judging by the one they captured. He thought for a moment. As much as he wished no ill-will on the Lupin gang (other than being captured, but that was justice, not malice), he had to keep his job in mind. “Lupin, this is none of my business. I can’t help you.”

“Wait, wait, wait! I’ll give you all the intel on the She, okay? I just need you to help me do a little digging to find out where they’re at, then a little more help with the infiltration.”

“It sounds like you want me to do all the work.”

“Just think of it as…” Lupin tried to think of a way that would sound flattering. “…you and I will be the brains of the group, and you’ll provide the brawn with your troops. You walk away with the glory of taking down one of China’s most renowned triads, and we walk away with our friend back.”
“If you want this to work out,” Zenigata said gruffly, “the deal is that you’re going to be walking away in handcuffs.”

Lupin gave a lighthearted sigh. “I thought as much. How about as soon as I know Goemon is okay,” he began, knowing that the samurai was in a rough mental state and he wanted to be there for him during that time, “I’ll turn myself in—no, I’ll let you catch me during our next heist so you’ll look even better.”

Zenigata narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “I don’t want to just catch you, I want you behind bars, got it? No tricks mid-trip to prison.”

“You have my word.”

“Alright…. Deal.”

“Okay, perfect! Can you meet up now?”

“Meet up?! If we’re meeting up, then I’ll just cuff you then!”

“But we made a deal!”

Zenigata pinched the bridge of his nose. Lupin made him promise beforehand so he would have immunity to be being arrested.

“You did this on purpose.” There was silence between them filled with anticipation as Lupin waited for the answer. “Fine…”

Lupin gave a loud cheer that made Zenigata hold the phone away, carefully bringing it back to his ear once he was sure the thief’s outburst was finished. They were both men of their word, and after disclosing a place of Lupin’s choosing, Zenigata went to hang up. “Oh, and, Pops!”

Zenigata interrupted one last time. “Thank you.”

Lupin ended the call immediately. He would never say, “you’re welcome” and acknowledge that he’d actually done something to help the thief out of the kindness of his heart with no intent of arresting him, and he didn’t plan to now.

Stowing his phone away, he looked up to see Yata just…staring ruefully at Zenigata. The inspector gave a heavy sigh. Of course he didn’t approve of working with an internationally-famous criminal, and it was a bit of a stretch to say that Zenigata was doing this just for the sake of capturing Lupin…but he could claim it was fully for the sake of justice. He waited for his partner’s scrutiny.

“Why…why does Lupin have your phone number?”

❖ ❖ ❖

Since her call with Lupin, Jianya and her crew had taken Goemon to the homey destination of the torture chamber and were in the process of “taking care of him,” just as they had promised Lupin.

Goemon’s back now looked like a dripping crosshatch sketch, but Goemon had remained steadfast in his loyalty to the others. He hadn’t uttered a single word, despite the doubt clawing at
the back of his mind.

“Jianya,” Boots said from the couch, “the whipping is getting boring.” The other two girls mumbled in agreement.

“You’re right,” Jianya said dismissively, coiling the whip up. “There’s no more space left to get creative anyways.”

“He just keeps grunting and gasping,” Blondie added. “I want him to make some fun noises.”

“What’s next?”

_Boring? Fun? Next?_ As if the bleeding lashes weren’t enough, the salt from Goemon’s sweat was continuously amplifying the pain. His throat was dry as he stared over at the other girls snacking and enjoying refreshments. It seemed this sort of event was something they’d attended before.

“When is the lingchi gonna to start?”

A traditional Chinese form of torture, lingchi, or “death by one thousand cuts.” Goemon knew this much, that pieces of flesh were slowly stripped from you, usually starting with easy-to-remove places like the chest and inner thighs. Death was indeed prolonged in this fashion.

“I don’t want him to die,” Jianya said with disapproval. “Besides, we already started that with Biming. No one wants to see a duplicate piece of art. Although, that gives me an idea…”

There was some rummaging behind him as Jianya picked out a new tool. He had no idea what to expect next, but her tone and not being able to see her made him anxious. Goemon let out a brief, gruff yowl when suddenly a sharp feeling was concentrated on his back. Clenching his teeth shut could only limit his voice so much, which provided a bit of entertainment for the girls…as if the physical pain wasn’t enough. Once it ceased, he took in a breath of what would normally be considered relief, but that was a foreign word to him right now.

“You really don’t have any fat, do you?” Jianya said with interest. The others’ faces brightened up a bit with enthusiasm as she stepped in front of Goemon with a pair of needle-nose pliers that had a rectangular section of skin dangling from it. “All that, and I didn’t even see the thinnest layer. I’m getting inspired already—you’ll make quite the fascinating canvas.”

_Canvas…?_ Was she going to sew a tent out of him? Maybe a bag? Goemon swallowed, narrowing his eyes at her. Things weren’t looking good for his back, ankles, and wrists, and being strung up as such didn’t make breathing easy.

Why was this happening to him?

In Goemon’s chest was something heavy. He didn’t want to blame Lupin and the others for what he was going through, but if he didn’t, he was left to ask himself…what did he do to deserve this? The sporadic visitor of his past self would have quite a few answers, none of which would make him feel any better.

Goemon had been so preoccupied with the fact that a piece of his back had just been ripped from him that he hadn’t noticed the metal cylinder in Jianya’s other hand. Goemon felt a rush of blood course through him at the clicking noise and a steady flame appeared from the nozzle of the gas cylinder. A blowtorch was not something Goemon had anticipated.
“Did you know that third degree burns usually don’t hurt?” Jianya asked, looking at the flame. “Once you’re there, the nerve endings are all dead. But…to get there, we have to go through the first and second degrees.” She returned her attention to Goemon, her eyes bearing a mischievous smile. “And then there’s always the skin underneath those first few layers that’s still tender.”

Goemon had been whipped before, although not to the point where his back looked like mincemeat. And there had been an attempt to set him on fire, although there was no significant damage—much to the contrary of what it seemed Jianya had planned for him.

“Where do you want to start?”

Goemon stared across the room at the plain wall, trying to ignore her—trying to ignore everything. That darkness overshadowing his mentality, the growing doubt, the exhaustion, the animosity…. It was a fog in his head that was getting too dense to see through.

“I would appreciate if you look at me when I’m talking to you…” Without warning there was an intense heat upon his left ribs. He winced, the concentrated point of the fire burning a single spot of skin. Goemon glared at her, and as a result Jianya pulled the flame back. “That’s better,” she said, her sharp eyes showing satisfaction. “Quite the gentleman, aren’t you? Did Lupin have just as easy a time making you do what he says?”

Jianya’s unwavering polite tone, along with her verbal and physical torment, seemed to test how many buttons she could push at once.

The small patch of skin was burning, Goemon’s back was stinging and throbbing, his stressed joints were aching, and he was sure she hadn’t even gotten started on him.

“The answer is no; Lupin had an even easier time.”

It couldn’t be. Any familiar face would’ve been more welcome. Goemon dared to let his eyes wander in the direction of the voice. It was…but Goemon wanted to know why did it have to be him? The lookalike was standing there halfway between him and the couches, evaluating the scene just as he had done in Goemon’s dream, where the others in the room were still present. It was as if his mind was too weak-willed to keep the barrier up between what was real and what was his imagination. It was melding the two together.

Put simply, his mind’s distress was becoming part of his reality. There was no more differentiation.

The blowtorch was held up to his left side again, following his rib cage. It was so excruciating, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

After causing Goemon enough agony to take a break, Jianya poked the exposed wound with one of her pointed fingernails, making Goemon wince. “You’re quite resilient,” she praised with poised delight. “I wonder if your friends would go through the same to protect you?”

“No,” the doppelganger scoffed.

“I would not wish them to,” Goemon argued breathlessly. “I would rather them reveal the information than suffer on my behalf.”

The two looked up at the samurai, one amused, the other clearly disapproving.

“What a noble answer for someone abandoned so quickly,” Jianya complimented.
“Noble? Stupid, perhaps,” the copy corrected, “but not noble. Nothing about you is worth admiring.”

“Just…shut…up…” Goemon growled, and there were stunned noises—and stunned silences.

Jianya blinked, a spark flaring up in her abyss-like eyes, an unsettling pairing with that smile of hers. “Shut up?”

He hadn’t meant Jianya—but he wasn’t going to try and make excuses in an attempt to gain mercy. Goemon glared at his clone.

“There is no one to blame but yourself,” he said simply, shrugging as the three girls watched with astonishment.

“If you don’t like me talking,” Jianya told Goemon, putting the pliers and blowtorch down before returning to the shelves, “allow me to help you get over your shyness.”

She reappeared with some sort of remote control that had four levers on it, then walked to the front of a concrete pillar where he couldn’t see, and—using a stepladder—took something off the wall. Goemon could see her pulling two strings as she walked, then grabbed two more from the next pillar, finally making her way back in front of Goemon. Jianya moved the stepladder in front of him and walked up it, finally coming face to face with her victim.

She held up four fishing hooks, the lines attached to reels mounted in the concrete pillars, no rods. A line on either side was positioned towards the ceiling, the two others at eye-level…or would be, if he wasn’t suspended in the air.

“How nice of you to hold these for me,” she thanked in advance, sticking the hooks with one tug into his shoulder, making him draw in a sharp breath. Little drops of blood poked their way out until she ripped the first hook out, where scarlet started flowing from the small puncture.

“Come help me with this.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Boots got up, too eager for Goemon’s liking, as Blondie and Goggles were both fairly injured. Jianya handed Boots the controller, then dug her pointed nails into Goemon’s cheeks as she gripped his face.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” Goemon snapped, trying to pull away.

“What’s that, Mr. Ishikawa? You’re so quiet…” she hissed, prying between his molars through his cheeks to get him to open his mouth. “And I’d love to hear your opinion on these subjects, since my banter is boring you.”

Goemon tried to keep his teeth clenched and did his best to turn away from her. It didn’t matter though—he eyed the hook with disdain, unable to avoid her slipping it between his bunched lips and pulling the point upward and to the right, forcing him to arch his neck to avoid it penetrating through his lip. Boots slowly tilted one of the levers, the line growing taut as it was reeled in from the concrete pillar until Jianya instructed her to stop.

“I never really thought about an interrogation where holding your tongue would have had a better outcome than speaking,” Goemon’s mirror image commented from below.

Goemon glowered at Jianya, not daring to move as the second hook was placed behind the left side of his upper lip, angled out, and pulled tight. He felt the points on the verge of breaking through the skin, tasting the smallest drops of blood as their steady pressure kept him from moving
his mouth.

Then came the bottom lip. Jianya placed the last two hooks and reeled them in simultaneously, forcing him to keep his jaw open to prevent the hooks from ripping through. His lips were pulled open diagonally in a square shape, and if he moved the slightest bit in any direction or attempted to close his mouth, he would have at least two new piercings.

Already his strained neck muscles were growing tired from keeping his head at such an angle. As Boots went back to her seat, the other two girls talking excitedly with her, Jianya narrowed her eyes at Goemon.

“This should help you find your voice. Don’t be timid, now,” she encouraged. “Just imagine this audience as your friends—because friends open up to each other, right?”

Goemon didn’t know what to think, and Jianya enjoyed that uncertain quivering in his eyes. He wasn’t afraid—at least, not of the pain, but this uneasiness was pulsing through him. Everything she said made him feel…terrible. Like he was worthless, making him regret all his decisions, negate his beliefs, and question his goals and purpose further…. She wasn’t insulting him, and while her words made him wish she never existed, they didn’t make him hate her…they made him hate himself.

Jianya patted his head as if to comfort him, then smoothly walked down the stepladder and moved it aside.

“Now, let’s get back to business, shall we?”

There was the click of the blowtorch, and Goemon hoped he could summon the willpower to not move.

His head was at an upward angle to where his esophagus was wide open, and paired with the immobility of his mouth, there was no way to suppress any noise.

“I am rather curious to see how you fare with this one…” his mirage stated curtly.

Quite curious, indeed, more and more so as the pain became more excruciating and Goemon could no longer keep himself quiet. A wave of humiliation came over him, the She finally getting their bit of satisfaction.

It made him sick how his agony was part of their entertainment.

“No, you yourself are the entertainment,” Goemon heard his copy remark over his rough screaming. “You always have been. These girls are just a bit more difficult to please than Lupin and the others.”

No, that couldn’t be. Goemon wasn’t just entertainment to them—he had more purpose than that. Sure, they thought it was amusing how he dressed, and his mannerisms, but everyone thought that.

Everyone thought that…. They were no exception. Goemon was a multipurpose tool used for whatever they needed, including a good laugh.

Jianya paused, allowing Goemon a few voiceless gasps. “Well done, Mr. Ishikawa,” she said to him brightly. His eyes traveled over to her, avoiding turning his head, and most certainly avoiding the sight of the girls tickled over his suffering. “You’re really coming out of your shell. Please, tell me more.”
Jianya couldn’t tell if his gaze read scorn or pleading, but it was soon gone as he started hacking—which he tried to control for the sake of the hooks threatening his mouth. As Jianya started up with the pliers again, Blondie couldn’t help but admire.

“What a divine sound, screaming and coughing intertwined—it’s almost like a duet, and yet a battle between the two, trying to express the greater anguish…”

“I’m just waiting for him to start whining and crying. He was already close to losing his mind before we brought him here, it shouldn’t be too long now before he cracks,” Boots added brashly.

“Hm,” the specter said thoughtfully, watching Goemon’s tired body tremble with each breath. “You heard them. It should not be long. Or, you could save yourself the trouble and just let me out now. You do not want to be where you are, in this room or as a person. Let me out. Trust me—trust your true self.”

Goemon stared at the ceiling. He wanted to argue. He wanted a lot of things. He wanted Lupin and the others to come bursting through one of those doors, experience that same feeling he had before when rescued from Wolf and Rose. He wanted to believe they cared.

He wanted to believe in Fujiko’s words of forgiveness and Jigen’s talk of best friends. He wanted to believe he could laugh this off, just as he and Lupin had laughed off the samurai’s attempt to kill him.

Attempt…

The copy huffed through his nose. Goemon looked down at him, seeing that Jianya had disappeared to the shelves. “Did you laugh about it because it was in the past, or because Lupin told you to?” Goemon furrowed his brow. “Neither. You laughed because you were afraid of what it would be to you if not comical.”

The real Goemon’s eyes narrowed, expressing his skepticism.

“You were afraid to face what had become of yourself,” he elaborated, smirking. “A weakling with no willpower, no control, and no grasp of your true purpose anymore.”

That is not true—he is not real, Goemon thought to himself desperately, shutting his eyes as his only means to get as far away from the copy as possible.

“You were afraid of how Lupin would react if he dwelled on the matter longer,” the clone went on, forcing him to listen. “If he took your betrayals more seriously. If he abandoned you.”

He would not abandon me—he will not. Goemon had to keep his determination. He had to hold on to this last bit, because there was no more running from his doubt and confusion now.

Was this the result of his distrust?

“He will not’? No, he already has.”

Suddenly there was the sharp whooshing of compressed air. Jianya stood in front of him with two canisters.

“Liquid nitrogen. Now that you’ve told us your thoughts on fire, let’s hear what you have to say about frostbite.”
Odd Alliances (Original)

Chapter Summary

**WARNING**: This chapter contains torture scenes. For the edited version that censors/tones down most gruesome details but still retains everything that is necessary for the plot, please go to the next chapter. :)

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry, I gave up trying to rhyme the chapter titles with this one. I couldn't think of anything that more or less rhymed that would still pertain to the story.

Jigen leaned up against the balcony railing as he smoked a cigarette. It wasn’t that he was complying with Fujiko’s house rules, but he needed some open space and a bit of seclusion. There was no way to comfort one another, and sitting together to let their negativity feed off each other wasn’t a good idea. Lupin’s ceaseless pacing was already enough unnerving, especially since Fujiko was trying to dress his shoulder wound.

The fact that they were sleep-deprived didn’t help.

“Lupin, will you please sit down?” she said to him, trying to mask her impatience. She had a few towels laid across the couch and a cookie sheet on the table with the removed bullet. Cleaning the shot didn’t get very far—as soon as the disinfecting started stinging, the shirtless Lupin was up and marching about restlessly, ignoring the blood seeping out. It wasn’t in a “gushy” spot anyways, a reason to add to the list of why it wasn’t as concerning as…other things.

His mood had been bad to begin with, but it had escalated once they received a message on the phone Jianya had provided them with. In short, it included a photo, followed by a video, featuring Biming as a demonstration of what Goemon was in for.

It was hard to believe they had been trying to seduce that guy just a few days ago, when he was…normal-looking and sane.

Jigen watched through the open door silently as the tension rose between them. He remembered when Goemon had been captured before; Lupin had kept pretty level-headed. Maybe the difference this time was Goemon’s fragile state of mind now, or maybe it was that the villain’s ultimate goal wasn’t to get to Lupin, so he couldn’t use himself as a bargaining chip. Perhaps it was both…and Jigen had to admit that whatever it was, it made him more nervous as well. Dammit, Goemon, where are you…?

“They probably already brought him back to China!” Lupin continued ranting, making Jigen wonder if Lupin could hear his thoughts. “I should’ve been more careful—I knew he was going through something, but I acted like it was no big deal. What if he took that the wrong way?”

“Lupin—”
“I thought keeping the pressure off him was the right thing to do.” Lupin rubbed his temples in time with his steps. “I thought it would make him feel comfortable. He probably thinks I just don’t give a shit about him!”

“Lupin, that’s not true,” Fujiko tried to calm him down. “We all know if you said anything, he’d just feel cornered. What he needed was time and us to be there for him. That’s what we did, and what we’re going to do when he’s back with us.”

“I just…” Lupin ran a hand through his hair. “I dunno. I figured he’d open up and we’d all help him out with his problem after this heist, and we’re not.” Suddenly a knock on the door broke the thief’s stride, and he was quick to trot over and wrench the door open. “Pops!” he said cheerily, putting on his best act and pulling Zenigata inside. “We’re so glad you could make it!”

Zenigata did not look pleased; if this situation didn’t turn out as dire as he believed it was and he was simply pranked, he would have Lupin’s head.

Well, so to speak. Zenigata wasn’t a big fan of the death penalty. But he also wasn’t a fan of meeting at two o’clock in the morning after having nothing to show for his hard work. The inspector pushed Lupin’s hand off him as they entered the living room, where Fujiko sat waiting to fix Lupin up.

“Why are you so comfortable just blatantly telling me where Fujiko lives?” he demanded.

“Always quick to start the interrogation, eh, Pops?” Jigen flicked his cigarette butt off the balcony as he leaned in the doorway.

“What if any of those gang members were following me?” he continued. “They weren’t, I made sure, but what if they were?”

“I wish they would,” Lupin said sternly, finally letting Fujiko pull him down to the couch. He flinched as she began cleaning the wound once more and gathering some gauze out of the first aid box on the table. “At least then we’d have some sort of lead.”

“You’ve got no leads?” Zenigata looked at Lupin with concern. It seemed they were in the same boat. Fujiko gestured for him to take a seat on the cushiony chair, so he took up the offer. “None?”

“The She keep things pretty under wraps,” Fujiko said grimly, applying pressure to the bullet hole. She pointed to her rather large tablet on the table. “This is everything, and that was after some serious digging.”

“Ami-level digging,” Lupin elaborated. Zenigata’s lips became a tight line. That was pretty high-leveled. He picked up the tablet and swiped through the different documents. Indeed, there wasn’t much information.

“Let me guess, you stole these ‘Jade Dragons,’ this ‘She triad’ wanted revenge, caught wind of how you’d be trying to steal—”

“—would steal—”

“—the Pierre treasure, ambushed you, and now they have Goemon,” Zenigata summed up, his years of investigating making such correlations second-nature. The mere mention of it erased Lupin’s cheery act completely, his expression growing dark. Fujiko held him in place before he could get up and start anxiously pacing again. Zenigata watched Lupin glare at the floor, then observed Fujiko working on his shoulder as she began threading a curved needle. “What happened
“Jianya’s what happened,” Jigen spat as he stepped in and strode towards the table with his hands in his pockets.

“Jianya?” Zenigata swiped across the tablet, coming upon a picture of a cunning-looking woman with a short description—none of which seemed out of the ordinary, containing nothing of importance other than credentials. “She’s a doctor…? A PhD with a double-major in psychology and psychiatrics, and her focus is neuropsychology…. That’s…interesting for a mafia heiress.”

“Being a certified psychiatrist gives her the authority to have anyone she’s seen and prescribed incarcerated against their will,” Fujiko informed. “Word is she’s done it to several members of other triads as threats by disguising meetings as ‘appointments.’ Of course, this is all rumor,” she clarified. “Nothing official has ever been released on her or the She.”

“On top of that, the triad is one of the biggest illegal drug producers in China, and being a psychiatrist gives her access to countless medications—or you could say, ‘ingredients.’” Jigen’s words were ominous enough without his tone. He never did like psychologists and psychiatrists, not after that one brainwashed him, Goemon, and a whole town for the fun of it—and certainly not now.

“The She is known for drugs, but the new urban legend is that Jianya is creating new ones and testing them on people. Using humans as lab rats.”

“Lab rats?” Zenigata said uneasily.

“*After* she has her fun with them.” Lupin finally spoke up. His manner was foreboding. He winced ever so slightly as Fujiko poked one end of the needle into his skin and began to stitch the opening.

“What do you mean…?” Zenigata asked hesitantly, knitting his brows together.

“She likes messing with people’s heads and seeing how they react to pain,” he elaborated, clearly getting heated—not at Zenigata or the questions he was asking, but at Jianya.

“If it’s all just rumor—” Zenigata was interrupted as Lupin pulled out the phone Jianya had left the trio with and pulled up a picture she had recently messaged.

“I don’t know where or when this happened, but *that* used to be *this* guy.” Lupin swiped across the tablet documents to one with Biming on it, and Zenigata took the phone to look at the screen.

Now Zenigata understood the “used to be.” The inspector didn’t dare describe it. This man was tied to a post, but he wasn’t a man anymore. He didn’t even look human.

“That’s just the aftermath. You don’t even wanna see the video.”

“She recorded doing this?” Zenigata said with disbelief.

“The cutting’s not half as disturbing as whatever she drugged him with,” Jigen commented.

The wary tingling in Zenigata’s spine confirmed he understood the situation, but he still couldn’t help but wonder… “Lupin, you’ve infiltrated plenty of top-tier gangs.” In fact, just to get to Ami required immense scheming and meticulous data-acquiring. “What do you need my help for?”
Lupin was going to put it simply. “We don’t have time to be careful, but we don’t have time to screw up either. Goemon’s in more trouble than you think.” Zenigata wasn’t aware of Goemon’s exaggerated stress as of late, but, while the inspector was willing to help them, the Lupin gang didn’t feel it was their place to throw that information about. “We need this as foolproof a plan as a plan with no planning can allow.”

Zenigata looked at him oddly. “Meaning…?”

“Any backup, whether it’s yourself or a whole group of law enforcement, we’ll take,” Fujiko tried to persuade.

However, the inspector didn’t need to be persuaded; he had already made up his mind before he even arrived.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he told them. “I’m going to need more information to build a case to convince the station for support though.”

Like a wish granted, a phone ring interrupted the conversation. Their stomachs rolled—however, it was from Lupin’s phone and not Jianya’s, much to their relief. The thief took his phone out of his pocket and quickly put on a smile.

“Ah, Amy!” he said as he answered the video call.

“Ami,” she corrected, then paused. Under usual internet circumstances, a shirtless middle-aged man in a video chat with a schoolgirl usually didn’t entail friendship, but that wasn’t the problem. Just as she was about to ask why Fujiko was stitching the outer side of his right shoulder, she saw Zenigata craning his neck, peeking around the edge on her phone screen. “Is that… Inspector Zenigata?”

“Good morning, Miss Ami.”

“What are you doing there? Lupin, are you being interrogated?”

“No, no! It’s nothing like that!” The thief laughed nervously. He didn’t want to tell her that things were so grave that they actually wanted Zenigata’s help. “Ouch! Fujiko, can’t you be a little more gentle…?”

“What happened to your shoulder?”

“Uh, just a scratch! You on your way to school now?”

Ami didn’t look convinced—she had been shot before, in case Lupin didn’t remember—but she didn’t push the matter.

“Yeah,” she answered, giving a pleasant smile, her ruby hair capturing the morning sun nicely. Being in east Asia, she was six or seven hours ahead of their time. It was good to see she was doing well, but Zenigata could see she had been up for quite a few hours, clearly ones much earlier than she was used to now that she had begun attending school. “I checked everything for you.”

“Sorry to wake you up so early,” Lupin told her genuinely.

“It’s fine,” she assured, then continued, “There isn’t any more information on the She. I tried to trace anything on their phones, but their inside circuit has some sort of hybrid code. I could probably make a program in a few days to break it, but…” Ami looked thoughtful, as if wondering
if she could gauge how serious the situation was based off of the complexity of the She’s security. “…you don’t have that kind of time, do you…?”

“Well, you’re right about that,” Lupin said, trying to stay—well, at least appear—positive. Lupin had suspected that Jianya was confident about being untraceable for a good reason, so he had a backup plan. “How about the Ying?”

“They were easier to hack into. I found their headquarters and got into their database easily.”

“I knew you could do it.” Lupin smirked through the pinching of Fujiko pulling the last of the stitches tight, cutting the string, and closing off the wound.

“I checked for outposts closer than Hong Kong, but there are none.”

Lupin bit his cheek. So, the Ying triad was their only bridge to the She now. They were going to have to go to Hong Kong and make them spill any info they had, then work their way from there… “Thanks, Amy—”

“I did find something else though that I think will be more helpful.”

“More helpful?” Lupin looked at her intently.

“After going into the Ying’s archives, I found out that every member of the head family has a tracking device implanted into one of their teeth,” Ami explained. “I’m guessing Biming went with his wife to France based on where I tracked his location.”

“Went with” was certainly the misconception there, the Lupin gang knew, but that didn’t change the fact that he might be in France.

“Where?” Lupin urged.

“In Paris.”

“Paris?” Right under their noses? “Amy, you’re a goddess,” Lupin commended sincerely before anyone else could express how drastic this news was.

“Er—well, I’m sending you the info now.” Ami gave a soft smile, unsure how to take the compliment. “Tell me how it goes, okay?”

“You got it—have a good day at school!” Lupin said, Ami shaking her head at his lame father-like attitude before they hung up. Instantly Lupin’s face returned to being gravely serious.

“Biming is in Paris?” Fujiko asked with incredulity, looking at the others.

“Unless Jianya ripped his tooth out in China and still has it in her pocket,” Jigen voiced.

“So, she’s with him—or was, in any case…and if we find Jianya, we find Goemon,” Lupin summed up with a growl.

“If that’s the case, then they probably have an outpost here, or at least a hideout,” Zenigata said thoughtfully. “I doubt all those members went back to China. Those and more are most likely grouped here.”

“Jianya’s second-in-command; there’s no way she’d skimp on her entourage,” Lupin agreed. Who knew how many people she could have stationed here? “Pops, we could really use a
squad from you.”

“Let’s get that case together, straight to top priority.”

Jigen was still with anticipation, not ready to be hopeful, but if things worked out where he thought they were heading, not only would they be skipping a trip to China, but Jigen would be getting his revenge much, much sooner than he expected, as well as—and most importantly—their friend back.

❖ ❖ ❖

At first it was like pins and needles on his right side, and then it was so cold that it felt like it was burning.

Goemon wished it had stayed that way.

His skin turned white, he felt the cold digging deeper into his body, pushing its way through his muscles and eventually to his bone as she rounded the ribs on his right side, Jianya working to make her “canvas” symmetrical. It felt like a knife being shoved into him, only the pain of the penetration never subsided. It was like a repeated stab with the beginning and end of the action overlapping so it was a stepless cycle. In his rib, it had the same sensation of a growing pain, but multiplied infinitely.

This pain was something different entirely from the fire. The chill made it hurt to breathe on the inside, not just the skin. Eventually, as the cold pried into his flesh deeper, the line of skin began turning bluish and hard, becoming thoroughly frozen, and it wasn’t until the liquid nitrogen can iced over that she stopped. But that was just the first rib, and she had several more canisters.

When Jianya had stopped, the ache was merely converted into a constant throbbing as his skin thawed, becoming a row of blood-filled blisters.

“Have you forgotten that if you put your mind to it, even Antarctica can seem hot?” his copy questioned snidely, quoting him from so long ago. “Perhaps if you had not become so comfortable with wearing scarves these days, you could withstand this better.”

Goemon tried to drown him out, tried to think of something else. Back then, doing worriless things such as dealing with penguins, Goemon never would have thought he would go through something like this.

Thinking of that and seeing these girls still getting their kicks made him feel so lonely. Goemon wanted to think of a time he shared in laughter. He wanted to bring his mind to other memories of he and the Lupin gang. There were so many that he had never really held in high regard, things he probably should’ve cherished, times he should have laughed with them…but didn’t.

“You hold nothing in high regard,” the specter told him, leaning against one of the cement pillars as Jianya continued her handiwork. “When have you ever shown your appreciation to them?” Goemon’s weary eyes rested on him. “You have no idea how to treat friends. You have no need for friends. And, just as well, you have no friends.”

Goemon squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists as the cold’s fingers plunged deeper
into his side, embracing his rib in something so intense he was waiting for it to simply crack. An airy groan worked up from his lungs.

He was getting to the point where he couldn’t argue, not physically, not emotionally, not mentally. But he wasn’t ready to give up—he couldn’t. It wasn’t about whether or not this darker self won, it was about the others. Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko. Goemon could let his old self go, he could let the illness go, but he couldn’t let them go.

He couldn’t.

No matter how convincing the lookalike and Jianya were.

Goemon’s mind was getting hazy—it wasn’t dulling the current pain he was in, but it was making everything that happened so far seem like so long ago.

And maybe it had been. He had no idea how many hours he had been here. Fatigue was creeping up on him, his lack of sleep and food made it much easier for this excess of pain to overtake him…which in turn was letting Jianya’s words break down his mind’s barriers more and more quickly.

“Thank you for your patience,” Jianya said to him civilly, putting down the liquid nitrogen canister next to the other frozen ones. Goemon watched miserably as she took a step away and admired her work.

His arms were coated, wrists and ankles near shredded. His back was like wet ripped up tissue paper. All his ribs were outlined from below his chest muscles out to his sides and stopping only when it reached the perimeter of his ragged back; the right bands were frozen to a bloody black, the left charred and peeled to a glowing red with crispy burnt accents. Jianya noticed how even though the steel ropes hadn’t loosened, Goemon’s arms weren’t straight out anymore, making him hang a couple inches lower.

“It seems the joints and muscles in your arms are getting worn out,” she commented in a satisfied tone. “I think soon you’ll be relying only on ligaments and tendons to keep your limbs attached—I hope they’re more dependable than Lupin.”

Goemon closed his eyes, looking for something to help keep him hopeful. He could feel his doppelganger’s eyes on him while his grunts became less audible as the intensity of the pain dulled down. There was by no means relief, but his body was too tired to continue responding.

“No time for rest now,” Jianya told him, her voice passing by him as she returned to the shelves, “not when I’ve just figured out what the piece is missing…”

No, not something else… Goemon dreaded. There was the clang of metal and cardboard, and she climbed up the stepladder after having set a box of nails down.

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes,” she said, “we need some vibrance on your face, a little bit of color. I was thinking crimson…” Goemon wondered how she could still be smiling. Then again, he was beginning to wonder how to smile at all; his lips had been stretched open for so long that he could no longer feel the lower half of his face. He didn’t want to think as she maneuvered a nail, at least six inches, towards the back of his agape mouth. “Oh, have you had teeth removed before? You’re missing a molar, but it certainly doesn’t look like it was done professionally…”

She was right. Rose had drilled it right out of Goemon’s head, resulting in him passing out.
He wouldn’t get so lucky this time.

Jianya stowed the nail between her teeth and there was a clipping noise of plastic out of Goemon’s range of sight. He felt a prick in his neck and his blank thoughts began to race, his body starting to rush, but there was no gain, no rejuvenation…. It was like empty energy.

No, there was a gain. His senses felt heightened—he could smell the blood and sweat more distinctly, see Jianya’s twisted lips more clearly, feel the residual pain more extremely. He watched as Jianya recapped a needle in front of his face and tossed it to the floor, then took the nail from between her teeth. Goemon felt his fingers trembling uncontrollably, his breath becoming sporadic, a cold sweat breaking out, and his heart thudding inside his chest.

Jianya watched as the unnatural panic showed in his eyes.

*What is this?* He felt frenzied and yet numb, almost as if he were petrified.

“I made this, and you seemed like the perfect person to test it on,” she explained to him. “You gave me a very stoic impression—not too much scares you, I assume…although you have your insecurities.”

*What—what did she do—what did she do to me?* Goemon tried to think straight, his brain running rampant.

“You see, this induces what I imagine you feel when you have to look death in the eye, knowing your last few moments have arrived.” It was as if she were suggesting that she would be his death as she stared him down. “In other words, how you’ve made plenty of people feel before you killed them.”

Goemon’s eyes widened, feeling sick to his stomach. He’d never experienced anything like this. He couldn’t describe it.

“Is she trying to make you feel guilty?” his clone scoffed.

It was working. Goemon would never wish this upon anyone. He couldn’t believe he had made people feel like this. What kind of person was he?

“What is wrong with you?” the copy said in a demanding tone. “Being superior means having the power to inflict this feeling upon someone. What is questionable about that?”

Goemon wanted to pull away from Jianya, get away from her wretchedness. He ran through any possibilities of getting out of here. He wished the others were here for him.

But why would they be? What if this was what Fujiko had felt before? Perhaps not as intensely, but—but who would want to help someone like him? *Why* would someone want to help him?

*They wouldn’t.*

That was the answer.

“Based on the many like faces I’ve seen, it looks to be working perfectly,” Jianya assured him lightheartedly, observing his breathing go from heaving to breathless and back again, his body cycling between rigid and quivering, but the terror never leaving his expression. Putting the nail back to his molar, she took the hammer out from under her arm. “I sincerely appreciate your cooperation in this volunteer project.”
Antagonizing, irksome, and maddening as it was, there were several hours of preparation that the Lupin gang had to go through before making a move. It wasn’t so much as building Zenigata’s case and getting disguises, it was more so knowing that they couldn’t submit the case until six o’clock in the morning. Then they had to see if it would even be approved…

Lupin sat on the couch with Fujiko’s laptop. Restless, he continuously ran over plans in his head, constantly checking the information Ami had sent for anything he could have missed. Jigen looked over, buttoning up his officer uniform that Zenigata had provided them each with to blend into his squad and allow them to breech into the facility without any interference. Fujiko was getting dressed in her room as well, all of them waiting for the word from Zenigata once he finished presenting the info.

“You should get your disguise on; you don’t wanna be late when Pops calls, do you?” the gunman said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lupin said, waving him off. “You know I can get in and out of a full set of SWAT team gear in thirty seconds flat.”

Jigen was frustrated too, he’d admit it—Goemon’s life and sanity were on the line—but Lupin working himself into a tizzy wasn’t going to help. “Y’know, there is a thing called ‘reading too much into it,’” Jigen reminded.

Lupin was a master at reading between the lines, but there were so few here that it didn’t provide much opportunity. No facts were twisted or compelling. Nothing was out of the ordinary about the area and location Biming was being kept at either. He detected no traps from what Ami sent him; it seemed like any other office building.

“Wait a minute…” Lupin sat back, thinking to himself. Maybe Jigen was right. He needed to look at the blatant elements—maybe there was something he overlooked. “You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

“What is it?” the gunman asked, seeing Lupin’s calculating expression.

“You’re not gonna believe who owns this building.”

And it was a bit hard to believe, honestly, but the pieces would fall into place as they collected them.

Zenigata’s team of twenty—plus the Lupin gang in disguise—arrived at the site, and a few more guarding the perimeter. Zenigata entered the office building, backed by officers and Yata at his side. An attractive Chinese girl at the receptionist desk looked up at them awkwardly.

“How…can I help you?” She watched warily as the policemen began infiltrating the building, quickly beginning their search. Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko stood by Zenigata as he put down a piece of paper.

“Inspector Zenigata of the ICPO. I’ve got a warrant to search the premises and arrest whoever is suspect,” he stated.
“I see…” She shifted behind the desk, as if searching for something, and then her face became very nervous, right before open fire could be heard down the halls.

“Your alarm system not working?” Fujiko said from behind her visored helmet.

“Sorry, but that and your intercom were cut off, courtesy of us,” Lupin said starkly, pointing his police-issued rifle at her. Yata looked a bit surprised at this—as did the receptionist. She swallowed.

“Whatever for?” she asked, but in an instant she had a handgun drawn—and shot from her hand.

“Nice try,” Jigen said, his quick-draw far superior to anything anyone else could manage. Yata’s mouth was agape; he knew that revolver anywhere—he knew their voices too, but he had thought he was just imagining things.

“Really?” Yata looked up at Zenigata, resembling a dog in a shelter whose kennelmate just got adopted. He had thought Zenigata had actually progressed on finding Lupin with all this information he had provided the board…but turns out he already knew where Lupin was—is—and had—has—no intention of capturing him.

Jigen pushed his rifle into a very unexpectant Yata’s arms. “You’ve got a better use for this than me. Go make a difference.”

“Go on,” Zenigata confirmed. “Instruct the troops; you’ve got a big responsibility!”

“Y-yes, sir!” Yata said with a nod, feeling a bit better knowing he was relied on. He made his way down one of the halls—the officers were doing a good job, it seemed, considering none of the gang members had made their way to the front room yet.

“Where’s Jianya?” Lupin demanded from the receptionist. “Better yet, where does she keep her hostages?”

“I’m afraid only authorized personnel are allowed in the recreation room; you’d have to get special clearance from her. Perhaps if we still had the intercom—”

“Cut the shit!” Jigen spat, walking behind the desk and putting his revolver to her head.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t see her today,” the receptionist said, facing away defiantly. “We don’t accept walk-ins…and if you’d like to volunteer for her study, you’ll have to fill out some paperwork.”

There was a short yelp before her head hit the desk, and the three men turned to look at Fujiko, eyebrows raised—they hadn’t expected her to be the first one to crack. She got her rifle back into position, having jammed the butt of it straight into the girl’s neck, rendering her unconscious.

“What? I’m tired of all these snarky bitches.” She tossed her helmet to the ground, freeing her hair refreshingly and whipped off her gear in one fell swoop. “She wasn’t going to talk anyway, so let’s get going.”

The other three looked at each other, Lupin and Jigen shrugging before removing their disguises as well. Jigen reached in his jacket and pulled out his hat, giving it a quick flick so the top would pop back up before restoring it to its rightful place.
“Time to get searching.”

Ten floors to scavenge, but rescue was so close that they could taste it.
Jigen leaned up against the balcony railing as he smoked a cigarette. It wasn’t that he was complying with Fujiko’s house rules, but he needed some open space and a bit of seclusion. There was no way to comfort one another, and sitting together to let their negativity feed off each other wasn’t a good idea. Lupin’s ceaseless pacing was already enough unnerving, especially since Fujiko was trying to dress his shoulder wound.

The fact that they were sleep-deprived didn’t help.

“Lupin, will you please sit down?” she said to him, trying to mask her impatience. She had a few towels laid across the couch and a cookie sheet on the table with the removed bullet. Cleaning the shot didn’t get very far—as soon as the disinfecting started stinging, the shirtless Lupin was up and marching about restlessly, ignoring the blood seeping out. It wasn’t in a “gushy” spot anyways, a reason to add to the list of why it wasn’t as concerning as…other things.

His mood had been bad to begin with, but it had escalated once they received a message on the phone Jianya had provided them with. In short, it included a photo, followed by a video, featuring Biming as a demonstration of what Goemon was in for.

It was hard to believe they had been trying to seduce that guy just a few days ago, when he was…normal-looking and sane.

Jigen watched through the open door silently as the tension rose between them. He remembered when Goemon had been captured before; Lupin had kept pretty level-headed. Maybe the difference this time was Goemon’s fragile state of mind now, or maybe it was that the villain’s ultimate goal wasn’t to get to Lupin, so he couldn’t use himself as a bargaining chip. Perhaps it was both…and Jigen had to admit that whatever it was, it made him more nervous as well. Dammit, Goemon, where are you…?

“They probably already brought him back to China!” Lupin continued ranting, making Jigen wonder if Lupin could hear his thoughts. “I should’ve been more careful—I knew he was going through something, but I acted like it was no big deal. What if he took that the wrong way?”
“Lupin—"

“I thought keeping the pressure off him was the right thing to do.” Lupin rubbed his temples in time with his steps. “I thought it would make him feel comfortable. He probably thinks I just don’t give a shit about him!”

“Lupin, that’s not true,” Fujiko tried to calm him down. “We all know if you said anything, he’d just feel cornered. What he needed was time and us to be there for him. That’s what we did, and what we’re going to do when he’s back with us.”

“I just…” Lupin ran a hand through his hair. “I dunno. I figured he’d open up and we’d all help him out with his problem after this heist, and we’re not.” Suddenly a knock on the door broke the thief’s stride, and he was quick to trot over and wrench the door open. “Pops!” he said cheerily, putting on his best act and pulling Zenigata inside. “We’re so glad you could make it!”

Zenigata did not look pleased; if this situation didn’t turn out as dire as he believed it was and he was simply pranked, he would have Lupin’s head.

Well, so to speak. Zenigata wasn’t a big fan of the death penalty. But he also wasn’t a fan of meeting at two o’clock in the morning after having nothing to show for his hard work. The inspector pushed Lupin’s hand off him as they entered the living room, where Fujiko sat waiting to fix Lupin up.

“Why are you so comfortable just blatantly telling me where Fujiko lives?” he demanded.

“Always quick to start the interrogation, eh, Pops?” Jigen flicked his cigarette butt off the balcony as he leaned in the doorway.

“What if any of those gang members were following me?” he continued. “They weren’t, I made sure, but what if they were?”

“I wish they would,” Lupin said sternly, finally letting Fujiko pull him down to the couch. He flinched as she began cleaning the wound once more and gathering some gauze out of the first aid box on the table. “At least then we’d have some sort of lead.”

“You’ve got no leads?” Zenigata looked at Lupin with concern. It seemed they were in the same boat. Fujiko gestured for him to take a seat on the cushiony chair, so he took up the offer. “None?”

“The She keep things pretty under wraps,” Fujiko said grimly, applying pressure to the bullet hole. She pointed to her rather large tablet on the table. “This is everything, and that was after some serious digging.”

“Ami-level digging,” Lupin elaborated. Zenigata’s lips became a tight line. That was pretty high-leveled. He picked up the tablet and swiped through the different documents. Indeed, there wasn’t much information.

“Let me guess, you stole these ‘Jade Dragons,’ this ‘She triad’ wanted revenge, caught wind of how you’d be trying to steal—”

“—would steal—”

“—the Pierre treasure, ambushed you, and now they have Goemon,” Zenigata summed up, his years of investigating making such correlations second-nature. The mere mention of it erased Lupin’s cheery act completely, his expression growing dark. Fujiko held him in place before he
could get up and start anxiously pacing again. Zenigata watched Lupin glare at the floor, then observed Fujiko working on his shoulder as she began threading a curved needle. “What happened to you?”

“Jianya’s what happened,” Jigen spat as he stepped in and strode towards the table with his hands in his pockets.

“Jianya?” Zenigata swiped across the tablet, coming upon a picture of a cunning-looking woman with a short description—none of which seemed out of the ordinary, containing nothing of importance other than credentials. “She’s a doctor…? A PhD with a double-major in psychology and psychiatrics, and her focus is neuropsychology…. That’s…interesting for a mafia heiress.”

“Being a certified psychiatrist gives her the authority to have anyone she’s seen and prescribed incarcerated against their will,” Fujiko informed. “Word is she’s done it to several members of other triads as threats by disguising meetings as ‘appointments.’ Of course, this is all rumor,” she clarified. “Nothing official has ever been released on her or the She.”

“On top of that, the triad is one of the biggest illegal drug producers in China, and being a psychiatrist gives her access to countless medications—or you could say, ‘ingredients.’” Jigen’s words were ominous enough without his tone. He never did like psychologists and psychiatrists, not after that one brainwashed him, Goemon, and a whole town for the fun of it—and certainly not now.

“The She is known for drugs, but the new urban legend is that Jianya is creating new ones and testing them on people. Using humans as lab rats.”

“Lab rats?” Zenigata said uneasily.

“After she has her fun with them.” Lupin finally spoke up. His manner was foreboding. He winced ever so slightly as Fujiko poked one end of the needle into his skin and began to stitch the opening.

“What do you mean…?” Zenigata asked hesitantly, knitting his brows together.

“She likes messing with people’s heads and seeing how they react to pain,” he elaborated, clearly getting heated—not at Zenigata or the questions he was asking, but at Jianya.

“If it’s all just rumor—” Zenigata was interrupted as Lupin pulled out the phone Jianya had left the trio with and pulled up a picture she had recently messaged.

“I don’t know where or when this happened, but that used to be this guy.” Lupin swiped across the tablet documents to one with Biming on it, and Zenigata took the phone to look at the screen.

Now Zenigata understood the “used to be.” The inspector didn’t dare describe it. This man was tied to a post, but he wasn’t a man anymore. He didn’t even look human.

“That’s just the aftermath. You don’t even wanna see the video.”

“She recorded doing this?” Zenigata said with disbelief.

“The cutting’s not half as disturbing as whatever she drugged him with,” Jigen commented.

The wary tingling in Zenigata’s spine confirmed he understood the situation, but he still couldn’t help but wonder… “Lupin, you’ve infiltrated plenty of top-tier gangs.” In fact, just to get
to Ami required immense scheming and meticulous data-acquiring. “What do you need my help for?”

Lupin was going to put it simply. “We don’t have time to be careful, but we don’t have time to screw up either. Goemon’s in more trouble than you think.” Zenigata wasn’t aware of Goemon’s exaggerated stress as of late, but, while the inspector was willing to help them, the Lupin gang didn’t feel it was their place to throw that information about. “We need this as foolproof a plan as a plan with no planning can allow.”

Zenigata looked at him oddly. “Meaning…?”

“Any backup, whether it’s yourself or a whole group of law enforcement, we’ll take,” Fujiko tried to persuade.

However, the inspector didn’t need to be persuaded; he had already made up his mind before he even arrived.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he told them. “I’m going to need more information to build a case to convince the station for support though.”

Like a wish granted, a phone ring interrupted the conversation. Their stomachs rolled—however, it was from Lupin’s phone and not Jianya’s, much to their relief. The thief took his phone out of his pocket and quickly put on a smile.

“Ah, Ami!” he said as he answered the video call.

“Ami,” she corrected, then paused. Under usual internet circumstances, a shirtless middle-aged man in a video chat with a schoolgirl usually didn’t entail friendship, but that wasn’t the problem. Just as she was about to ask why Fujiko was stitching the outer side of his right shoulder, she saw Zenigata craning his neck, peeking around the edge on her phone screen. “Is that… Inspector Zenigata?”

“Good morning, Miss Ami.”

“What are you doing there? Lupin, are you being interrogated?”

“No, no! It’s nothing like that!” The thief laughed nervously. He didn’t want to tell her that things were so grave that they actually wanted Zenigata’s help. “Ouch! Fujiko, can’t you be a little more gentle…?”

“What happened to your shoulder?”

“Uh, just a scratch! You on your way to school now?”

Ami didn’t look convinced—she had been shot before, in case Lupin didn’t remember—but she didn’t push the matter.

“Yeah,” she answered, giving a pleasant smile, her ruby hair capturing the morning sun nicely. Being in east Asia, she was six or seven hours ahead of their time. It was good to see she was doing well, but Zenigata could see she had been up for quite a few hours, clearly ones much earlier than she was used to now that she had begun attending school. “I checked everything for you.”

“Sorry to wake you up so early,” Lupin told her genuinely.
“It’s fine,” she assured, then continued, “There isn’t any more information on the She. I tried to trace anything on their phones, but their inside circuit has some sort of hybrid code. I could probably make a program in a few days to break it, but…” Ami looked thoughtful, as if wondering if she could gauge how serious the situation was based off of the complexity of the She’s security. “…you don’t have that kind of time, do you…?”

“Well, you’re right about that,” Lupin said, trying to stay—well, at least appear—positive. Lupin had suspected that Jianya was confident about being untraceable for a good reason, so he had a backup plan. “How about the Ying?”

“They were easier to hack into. I found their headquarters and got into their database easily.”

“I knew you could do it.” Lupin smirked through the pinching of Fujiko pulling the last of the stitches tight, cutting the string, and closing off the wound.

“I checked for outposts closer than Hong Kong, but there are none.”

Lupin bit his cheek. So, the Ying triad was their only bridge to the She now. They were going to have to go to Hong Kong and make them spill any info they had, then work their way from there… “Thanks, Amy—”

“I did find something else though that I think will be more helpful.”

“More helpful?” Lupin looked at her intently.

“After going into the Ying’s archives, I found out that every member of the head family has a tracking device implanted into one of their teeth,” Ami explained. “I’m guessing Biming went with his wife to France based on where I tracked his location.”

“Went with” was certainly the misconception there, the Lupin gang knew, but that didn’t change the fact that he might be in France.

“Where?” Lupin urged.

“In Paris.”

“Paris?” Right under their noses? “Amy, you’re a goddess,” Lupin commended sincerely before anyone else could express how drastic this news was.

“Er—well, I’m sending you the info now.” Ami gave a soft smile, unsure how to take the compliment. “Tell me how it goes, okay?”

“You got it—have a good day at school!” Lupin said, Ami shaking her head at his lame father-like attitude before they hung up. Instantly Lupin’s face returned to being gravely serious.

“Biming is in Paris?” Fujiko asked with incredulity, looking at the others.

“Unless Jianya ripped his tooth out in China and still has it in her pocket,” Jigen voiced.

“So, she’s with him—or was, in any case…and if we find Jianya, we find Goemon,” Lupin summed up with a growl.

“If that’s the case, then they probably have an outpost here, or at least a hideout,” Zenigata said thoughtfully. “I doubt all those members went back to China. Those and more are most likely
“Jianya’s second-in-command; there’s no way she’d skimp on her entourage,” Lupin agreed. Who knew how many people she could have stationed here? “Pops, we could really use a squad from you.”

“Let’s get that case together, straight to top priority.”

Jigen was still with anticipation, not ready to be hopeful, but if things worked out where he thought they were heading, not only would they be skipping a trip to China, but Jigen would be getting his revenge much, much sooner than he expected, as well as—and most importantly—their friend back.

❖ ❖ ❖

At first it was like pins and needles on his right side, and then it was so cold that it felt like it was burning.

Goemon wished it had stayed that way.

“Have you forgotten that if you put your mind to it, even Antarctica can seem hot?” his copy questioned snidely, quoting him from so long ago. “Perhaps if you had not become so comfortable with wearing scarves these days, you could withstand this better.”

Goemon tried to drown him out, tried to think of something else. Back then, doing worriless things such as dealing with penguins, Goemon never would have thought he would go through something like this.

Thinking of that and seeing these girls still getting their kicks made him feel so lonely. Goemon wanted to think of a time he shared in laughter. He wanted to bring his mind to other memories of he and the Lupin gang. There were so many that he had never really held in high regard, things he probably should’ve cherished, times he should have laughed with them…but didn’t.

“You hold nothing in high regard,” the specter told him, leaning against one of the cement pillars as Jianya continued her handiwork. “When have you ever shown your appreciation to them?” Goemon’s weary eyes rested on him. “You have no idea how to treat friends. You have no need for friends. And, just as well, you have no friends.”

Goemon was getting to the point where he couldn’t argue, not physically, not emotionally, not mentally. But he wasn’t ready to give up—he couldn’t. It wasn’t about whether or not this darker self won, it was about the others. Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko. Goemon could let his old self go, he could let the illness go, but he couldn’t let them go.

He couldn’t.

No matter how convincing the lookalike and Jianya were.

Goemon’s mind was getting hazy—it wasn’t dulling the current pain he was in, but it was making everything that happened so far seem like so long ago.
And maybe it had been. He had no idea how many hours he had been here. Fatigue was creeping up on him, his lack of sleep and food made it much easier for this excess of pain to overtake him…which in turn was letting Jianya’s words break down his mind’s barriers more and more quickly.

“Thank you for your patience,” Jianya said to him civilly, putting down the liquid nitrogen canister next to the other frozen ones. Goemon watched miserably as she took a step away and admired her work.

Jianya noticed how even though the steel ropes hadn’t loosened, Goemon’s arms weren’t straight out anymore, making him hang a couple inches lower.

“It seems the joints and muscles in your arms are getting worn out,” she commented in a satisfied tone. “I think soon you’ll be relying only on ligaments and tendons to keep your limbs attached—I hope they’re more dependable than Lupin.”

Goemon closed his eyes, looking for something to help keep him hopeful. He could feel his doppelganger’s eyes on him while his grunts became less audible as the intensity of the pain dulled down. There was by no means relief, but his body was too tired to continue responding.

“No time for rest now,” Jianya told him, her voice passing by him as she returned to the shelves, “not when I’ve just figured out what the piece is missing…”

No, not something else… Goemon dreaded. There was the clang of metal and cardboard, and she climbed up the stepladder after having set a box of nails down.

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes,” she said, “we need some vibrance on your face, a little bit of color. I was thinking crimson…” Goemon wondered how she could still be smiling. Then again, he was beginning to wonder how to smile at all; his lips had been stretched open for so long that he could no longer feel the lower half of his face. He didn’t want to think as she maneuvered a nail, at least six inches, towards the back of his agape mouth. “Oh, have you had teeth removed before? You’re missing a molar, but it certainly doesn’t look like it was done professionally…”

She was right. Rose had drilled it right out of Goemon’s head, resulting in him passing out.

He wouldn’t get so lucky this time.

Jianya stowed the nail between her teeth and there was a clipping noise of plastic out of Goemon’s range of sight. He felt a prick in his neck and his blank thoughts began to race, his body starting to rush, but there was no gain, no rejuvenation…. It was like empty energy.

No, there was a gain. His senses felt heightened—he could smell the blood and sweat more distinctly, see Jianya’s twisted lips more clearly, feel the residual pain more extremely. He watched as Jianya recapped a needle in front of his face and tossed it to the floor, then took the nail from between her teeth. Goemon felt his fingers trembling uncontrollably, his breath becoming sporadic, a cold sweat breaking out, and his heart thudding inside his chest.

Jianya watched as the unnatural panic showed in his eyes.

What is this? He felt frenzied and yet numb, almost as if he were petrified.

“I made this, and you seemed like the perfect person to test it on,” she explained to him. “You gave me a very stoic impression—not too much scares you, I assume…although you have your insecurities.”
What—what did she do—what did she do to me? Goemon tried to think straight, his brain running rampant.

“You see, this induces what I imagine you feel when you have to look death in the eye, knowing your last few moments have arrived.” It was as if she were suggesting that she would be his death as she stared him down. “In other words, how you’ve made plenty of people feel before you killed them.”

Goemon’s eyes widened, feeling sick to his stomach. He’d never experienced anything like this. He couldn’t describe it.

“Is she trying to make you feel guilty?” his clone scoffed.

It was working. Goemon would never wish this upon anyone. He couldn’t believe he had made people feel like this. What kind of person was he?

“What is wrong with you?” the copy said in a demanding tone. “Being superior means having the power to inflict this feeling upon someone. What is questionable about that?”

Goemon wanted to pull away from Jianya, get away from her wretchedness. He ran through any possibilities of getting out of here. He wished the others were here for him.

But why would they be? What if this was what Fujiko had felt before? Perhaps not as intensely, but—but who would want to help someone like him? Why would someone want to help him?

They wouldn’t.

That was the answer.

“Based on the many like faces I’ve seen, it looks to be working perfectly,” Jianya assured him lightheartedly, observing his breathing go from heaving to breathless and back again, his body cycling between rigid and quivering, but the terror never leaving his expression. Putting the nail back to his molar, she took the hammer out from under her arm. “I sincerely appreciate your cooperation in this volunteer project.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Antagonizing, irksome, and maddening as it was, there were several hours of preparation that the Lupin gang had to go through before making a move. It wasn’t so much as building Zenigata’s case and getting disguises, it was more so knowing that they couldn’t submit the case until six o’clock in the morning. Then they had to see if it would even be approved…

Lupin sat on the couch with Fujiko’s laptop. Restless, he continuously ran over plans in his head, constantly checking the information Ami had sent for anything he could have missed. Jigen looked over, buttoning up his officer uniform that Zenigata had provided them each with to blend into his squad and allow them to breech into the facility without any interference. Fujiko was getting dressed in her room as well, all of them waiting for the word from Zenigata once he finished presenting the info.

“You should get your disguise on; you don’t wanna be late when Pops calls, do you?” the
“Yeah, yeah,” Lupin said, waving him off. “You know I can get in and out of a full set of SWAT team gear in thirty seconds flat.”

Jigen was frustrated too, he’d admit it—Goemon’s life and sanity were on the line—but Lupin working himself into a tizzy wasn’t going to help. “Y’know, there is a thing called ‘reading too much into it,’” Jigen reminded.

Lupin was a master at reading between the lines, but there were so few here that it didn’t provide much opportunity. No facts were twisted or compelling. Nothing was out of the ordinary about the area and location Biming was being kept at either. He detected no traps from what Ami sent him; it seemed like any other office building.

“Wait a minute…” Lupin sat back, thinking to himself. Maybe Jigen was right. He needed to look at the blatant elements—maybe there was something he overlooked. “You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

“What is it?” the gunman asked, seeing Lupin’s calculating expression.

“You’re not gonna believe who owns this building.”

And it was a bit hard to believe, honestly, but the pieces would fall into place as they collected them.

Zenigata's team of twenty—plus the Lupin gang in disguise—arrived at the site, and a few more guarding the perimeter. Zenigata entered the office building, backed by officers and Yata at his side. An attractive Chinese girl at the receptionist desk looked up at them awkwardly.

“How…can I help you?” She watched warily as the policemen began infiltrating the building, quickly beginning their search. Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko stood by Zenigata as he put down a piece of paper.

“Inspector Zenigata of the ICPO. I’ve got a warrant to search the premises and arrest whoever is suspect,” he stated.

“I see…” She shifted behind the desk, as if searching for something, and then her face became very nervous, right before open fire could be heard down the halls.

“Your alarm system not working?” Fujiko said from behind her visored helmet.

“Sorry, but that and your intercom were cut off, courtesy of us,” Lupin said starkly, pointing his police-issued rifle at her. Yata looked a bit surprised at this—as did the receptionist. She swallowed.

“Whatever for?” she asked, but in an instant she had a handgun drawn—and shot from her hand.

“Nice try,” Jigen said, his quick-draw far superior to anything anyone else could manage. Yata’s mouth was agape; he knew that revolver anywhere—he knew their voices too, but he had thought he was just imagining things.

“Really?” Yata looked up at Zenigata, resembling a dog in a shelter whose kennelmate just got adopted. He had thought Zenigata had actually progressed on finding Lupin with all this information he had provided the board…but turns out he already knew where Lupin was—is—and
had—*has*—no intention of capturing him.

Jigen pushed his rifle into a very unexpectant Yata’s arms. “You’ve got a better use for this than me. Go make a difference.”

“Go on,” Zenigata confirmed. “Instruct the troops; you’ve got a big responsibility!”

“Y-yes, sir!” Yata said with a nod, feeling a bit better knowing he was relied on. He made his way down one of the halls—the officers were doing a good job, it seemed, considering none of the gang members had made their way to the front room yet.

“Where’s Jianya?” Lupin demanded from the receptionist. “Better yet, where does she keep her hostages?”

“I’m afraid only authorized personnel are allowed in the recreation room; you’d have to get special clearance from her. Perhaps if we still had the intercom—”

“Cut the shit!” Jigen spat, walking behind the desk and putting his revolver to her head.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t see her today,” the receptionist said, facing away defiantly. “We don’t accept walk-ins…and if you’d like to volunteer for her study, you’ll have to fill out some paperwork.”

There was a short yelp before her head hit the desk, and the three men turned to look at Fujiko, eyebrows raised—they hadn’t expected her to be the first one to crack. She got her rifle back into position, having jammed the butt of it straight into the girl’s neck, rendering her unconscious.

“What? I’m tired of all these snarky bitches.” She tossed her helmet to the ground, freeing her hair refreshingly and whipped off her gear in one fell swoop. “She wasn’t going to talk anyway, so let’s get going.”

The other three looked at each other, Lupin and Jigen shrugging before removing their disguises as well. Jigen reached in his jacket and pulled out his hat, giving it a quick flick so the top would pop back up before restoring it to its rightful place.

“Time to get searching.”

Ten floors to scavenge, but rescue was so close that they could taste it.
Up, up, up they went to the top floor. Zenigata and the Lupin gang had decided not to split up to search—having Goemon being captured because he was on his own was enough for them to stick together when it came to the She triad. The law enforcement was working their way from the bottom up, so the Lupin gang was hoping the source of all this misfortune would be there at the top to greet them.

Unluckily, that was not the case.

Zenigata was the last to step out of the elevator. Usually they would do things more cautiously, but there were no hallways leading to a snazzy CEO office. It was one big open room, any walls replaced with tall tinted windows to let the sunlight in without blinding anyone. Despite being in plain sight of the sun’s rays, the room was kept quite cool, and to help that serene atmosphere was a multitude of potted plants and the refreshing sound of running water—caused by an artificial river coursing around the vast room and eventually circling around a platform in the center, having bridge-like walkways over the water. On that platform was a set of art deco couches and seats with a matching coffee table, where a group of eight armed She members were talking to three (seemingly nervous) men—four seated on the couch across from them, four taking stands behind them.

The centerpiece of all this setup was rather—no, very disturbing. And familiar.

Behind the table, to the side of the company, standing in the water, was a post. On that post was a brutalized human, looking quite concave in the places where flesh was missing, cut to ribbons in the places still semi-intact. He was absolutely unrecognizable—if Jianya hadn’t sent them a picture of Biming before, they would have worried that the carcass might belong to Goemon.

“That is our business proposition,” one of the Chinese women on the couch said.

“Where is Jianya?” a man, clearly French, replied, glancing around at the girls. It seemed their mere existence was an effective fear tactic, perhaps even without Biming there to set an example. “Why isn’t she here negotiating?”

“You might run this city now,” another girl spoke up jauntily, “but you’re not important enough to talk to her.” Those words made the three men stiffen, wary of the She’s confidence of establishing themselves in Paris. They all suddenly looked up upon hearing the Lupin gang’s footsteps.

“Psh. You call in some of your lackeys to try and intimidate us?” one of the women said, unimpressed.
“Wait—is that Lupin III?” another realized, and instantly all their weapons were drawn—including the French gang members'.

The She knew why Lupin was here, so there was no need for an explanation or conciliation. It was open fire on the spot, pistols at the ready.

Jigen was never slow to disarm an attacker, and did so with his usual ease. His accuracy seemed to throw his target off-guard, so he took a shot at the next. That was two girls disarmed.

While the She members remained on the platform, holding their ground, the Lupin gang and Zenigata advanced. However, there was no cover, so it was best for the four to spread out as they ran in, making the She’s aim disperse.

Lupin, being the most recognizable, seemed to be the prime target. Zenigata took advantage of this, quickly flanking to the right side where the French gang members were positioned with half the She group behind them. Just as Zenigata jumped over the artificial river, he grabbed the girl farthest left, taking her handgun before hurling her backwards into the three-foot-deep water. However, that gained the attention of the other three women. Before the first could fire, he had a cuff around her wrist and pulled as he knelt down, the fire of her rifle pelting the ground.

The inspector twisted her wrist, resulting in her dropping the gun completely, as he hastily turned with a fresh pair of cuffs to apprehend the next girl—who would have already fired at him had it not been for Fujiko vaulting over the couch, her pointed heels digging into the young lady’s gut and sending her straight into the water. Just as Fujiko landed in a crouch, Zenigata’s hand flashed out—he was too far away to reach the fourth girl, but his handcuffs slipping behind the handgun’s trigger and preventing her from firing was enough time for Fujiko. She rammed her feet into the girl’s ankles, quick to jump up and grab her vest to throw her down against the hard marble floor. With a few clicks, Zenigata had their hands cuffed together, he and Fujiko kicking the She’s firearms into the river to render them useless.

“Not bad,” Fujiko commended amusedly as they were crouched behind the couch—it wasn’t often she got to see Pops up against someone other than Lupin and the gang. He wasn’t too sure if he appreciated it though; the inspector’s sense of justice and faith in mankind wished that he could’ve at least given the She a chance to turn themselves in…but he doubted they would’ve complied anyways. “You’ve gotten pretty handy with those through all those years chasing Lupin.”

“I’m just doing my job,” he replied, although Fujiko’s half-insult-half-compliment was somewhat encouraging. “But, yeah, years of chasing Lupin will do that to you.”

Meanwhile, Lupin and Jigen were having their own fun. As the thief ran head-on over the front walkway, Jigen kept his distance—that’s where he preferred to be. Lupin shot the pistol out of one of the man’s hands, leaving him shocked—and a perfect obstacle. Lupin darted to the side, keeping the man between him and the other gang members, stalling their fire for the split second the thief needed to run at them.

Without hesitation, Lupin had the first by the collar, yanking him down so the man’s face could come in full-contact with his knee. One down and tossed aside limply. Before the second man could even get a shot off, Lupin had a bullet sailing straight through his hand, making him drop his weapon. Not wasting any time, the thief grabbed him as well, jerking him down by the jacket and driving his elbow into the back of his neck.

Two down—three, actually, Lupin saw as Zenigata cuffed the third man from behind the couch stealthily, Fujiko jumping out and plowing her knee right in his gut. Lupin smirked as the man fell over, completely winded—they all made quite the team…but it wasn't the whole team.
The three looked over at the remaining four girls—well, two now. One was on the ground, clutching her kneecap, the other knocked out cold on the other side of the river. A third was able to retrieve her pistol off the ground—which Lupin adeptly shot from her hand, Zenigata right behind her to shackle her wrists.

“Geez, how many of those d’you have, Pops?” Lupin questioned with a laugh. Honestly, though, it seemed like he never ran out of those things…

The fourth and last was trying to deal Jigen a few good punches, and he was getting tired of it; much to his dismay, being unarmed didn’t stop these girls like so many other gang members he’d dealt with through the years. As he aimed for her, she grabbed his hand—good. He twisted to where his back was towards her, her arm stretched over his shoulder. Getting a tight grip on her arm, he leaned forward and pulled hard. He heard an unsettling pop of her shoulder as he pulled her up and over, ultimately slamming her back against the unforgiving floor.

Seeing that she wasn’t letting up, he rushed over onto the platform with the girl in pursuit.

These members were good, but they were nothing compared to the crazies dealt with back at the Pierre mansion.

Jigen grabbed one of the lone chairs and pivoted on his heel, smacking her straight off the walkway and into the river. She quickly surfaced with a gasp—and Jigen wasted no time in taking the legs of the chair and pushing her down before jumping on top of the seat, pinning her underwater.

“Man, I’m sick of these women,” Jigen spat.

Lupin and the others watched, a bit dumbfounded as he stood knee-deep on the chair in the water, quaking from the girl’s struggling, before he directed his aim over at Lupin. The thief blinked, wondering what he was aiming at—and it became apparent when he turned his head to see a drenched She member straight behind him—the one Zenigata had initially thrown into the water—rising to her feet after snatching one of the pistols off the ground.

However, she was down in an instant, at the perfect angle for Jigen to get both her knees out in one shot—and Zenigata to shoot the gun from her hand. Even he seemed surprised, as sharpshooting wasn’t really his forte—let alone that impressive reaction time.

“Aw, thanks, Pops!” the thief said in an upbeat tone, making Zenigata eye him—while he appreciated the thanks, he couldn’t unhear the undertones of mockery his mind had cemented into association with Lupin’s voice for so long.

“Lupin, you need to learn to pay attention,” Jigen said, hopping out of the river and onto the walkway now that the chair had stilled, kicking off his shoes to dump the water out. “I doubt Fujiko’d be able to save your ass when I’m not around.”

“Did you forget how I ended up in Enzo’s tower in the first place?” Fujiko snapped back, crossing her arms. She went through a lot to make sure Lupin was safe. “I was much more useful than you, running around, dodging cops—”

“C’mon, don’t fight! I’ll always have Pops watching my back!” Lupin claimed confidently.

“Cut that out,” Zenigata said disapprovingly, moving to cuff the men and women that hadn’t been yet. “It’s my job to arrest you!”

“Yeah, I said you’d be watching my back—while I run away. Like always!” Lupin giggled
Zenigata let out an exasperated sigh, securing the handcuffs tightly around the last of them, just as he started waking up.

“Can…we just leave?” the French gangster asked. “We’re not affiliated with them—”

“No! You’ve got a lot of nerve asking that!” Zenigata told him, standing up. “I’m working to make this world a safer place, and what you do certainly isn’t helping achieve that!”

“Ahh, Pops, heroic as ever,” Lupin admired.

“I want to prevent anyone from turning out like this poor man,” he said, glancing over at Biming. “Anyone who could do something like that, the world could do without.”

“Hold on—” Fujiko said suddenly. “Is Biming…alive?”

They all paused, looking at the man tightly bound to the shellacked post with what looked like belts, and indeed, his chest was rising and falling…albeit very shallow. Zenigata didn’t hesitate to run over to him and begin unhinging the buckles to the leather straps. As Biming fell, Lupin hurried to help Zenigata carefully place the man on the ground. There was no way for them to do it in a way that wouldn’t hurt; the muscles of his chest were exposed, the ones on his lower back, his thighs, his calves…

It was so much worse in person.

“Yeah, he’s alive,” one of the conscious girls said in a snarky tone, “but he won’t be for lo—”

She should’ve taken Jigen's words more seriously when he said he'd had enough, because by now he had no qualms with putting a bullet in anyone's head if it meant they'd shut up. Zenigata pursed his lips as the hitman began to reload with an annoyed grunt—he could tell it bothered Lupin as well, but now wasn’t really the time to be arguing whether or not Jigen should relax on how unmercifully he was approaching this; they were just glad he hadn’t caused too many casualties yet.

Jigen thought he was actually being pretty lenient, considering he wanted them all dead.

“Your name is Biming, right?” Zenigata asked, feeling it would be rather informal to call him by his name without being introduced. It was just in his nature, but he quickly realized that he had no idea if this man could even respond. All along his jawline was removed, and the fleshy parts of his cheeks were missing, enabling his molars to be seen. The fact that he was scalped didn’t make it any easier to look at him. His lips were still intact, so maybe he could speak…

“We’re going to get you out of here, alright?” Zenigata assured, taking out his radio to page Yata—but he stopped upon a very faint voice.

His stomach curdled, all of them looking uneasy as Biming tried to speak.

“Kill…me.”

Zenigata clenched his jaw, shifting as he kneeled next to the man. It wasn’t in his personality to lose hope when someone wasn’t in the best of health…but he wasn’t sure there was much they could do here…
“Don’t talk like that,” Lupin encouraged, although his face was grave. “Pops, go on and call—”

“Step aside,” Jigen said bluntly as he pulled his shoes back on and approached, cocking his magnum. “You know there’s no way he’s gonna make it.”

“Whaddya mean, of course he’s got a chance!” Lupin denied, but that didn’t stop Jigen. Blood was splattered across the floor quicker than the eye could see as the bullet traveled through Biming’s skull.

Zenigata stiffened as the man on the floor in front of him went still. He did suppose it was the most humane thing they could’ve done…but it didn’t make him feel any better. Lupin stood up angrily, but didn’t address Jigen; he just stared at Biming, dead on the floor. He had had a life, had it diminished, and now taken.

Fujiko, still standing near the couch, felt a pang in her chest as she looked at Lupin’s pained face. She could tell he knew there was no way Biming was going to survive, but he was hoping for Goemon’s sake…hoping there was a chance for Goemon should they find him in this bad a condition.

If he was…they all knew that not even Jigen would be able to give the same gift of mercy given to Biming. How could they? It was Goemon—he belonged with them, they couldn’t just let him go…. Which brought the question, what would they do? What would they be able to do?

If they lost Goemon, Lupin was never going to forgive himself. None of them would be able to forgive themselves.

No. Losing him wasn't an option.

“Inspector Zenigata!” a muffled voice came through from the inspector's jacket, gunfire chorusing in the background.

“Yata, go ahead,” Zenigata answered, keeping sure to hold it steady despite his clammy palms.

“Sir, we’re on the third floor—things aren’t looking good,” Yata spoke. “This place is crawling with those women! Per—ACK!—Permission to request backup?!”

“You don’t need to ask me, just do what you think needs to be done,” Zenigata ordered, sounding stern but not reprimanding. But why was Yata wasting time by asking him?! “Retreat if you need to! We don’t need any unnecessary deaths.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Did you find any hostages, or anything suspicious? Anything at all?”

“No, sir!”

The inspector turned towards the Lupin gang. “We’re on a time limit.”

“I doubt anyone here is going to talk,” Fujiko said grimly.

“Well, we can’t just randomly pick a floor and start looking,” Jigen added, looking to Lupin—who was counting on his fingers.
“Six.”

“What?”

“The sixth floor, just trust me on this,” Lupin said, sprinting back over to the elevator. The rest exchanged quick glances before following after him.

And the sixth floor is where they went.

Room after room of disappointment, including the ones on the lower floors Zenigata was being updated on via radio. Speaking of which, it seemed not a room was vacant. She members everywhere. They had turned up absolutely nothing, and Yata and his troops were coming to no conclusions the floor beneath them. Lupin ground his teeth as they walked out of the small office room, dealing with the last She member on this level.

“Fan-fucking-tastic, nobody’s here,” Jigen spat as he stalked back out into the hallway littered with both dead and unconscious bodies, Lupin looking pensive behind him.

“No, Jianya was with Biming in the video, and we found Biming here,” Fujiko reminded. It was logical thinking, but they all knew it didn't necessarily secure any whereabouts…. But there were no other leads, they couldn't give up yet. “There must be something we’re missing.”

Zenigata bit his cheek; Yata’s team hadn’t reported any findings about any hidden rooms, and they had even checked the ground below with all the water and electric systems. There weren’t any cameras that could perhaps give them any leads either. The inspector paused. “Lupin, what are you doing?” he asked, refraining from asking “what’s wrong” since there were indeed many things wrong right now.

The thief was staring at the wall going down the hallway and then back to the door they had just come out of. “There aren’t any doors.”

Jigen and Fujiko exchanged glances. “Yeah…?”

“Why would there be? No rooms, no doors.”

“Exactly,” Lupin said, running back into the previous room. “This room is way too small to occupy that entire space going to the end of the hall, and on the blueprints, I remember a room there.” The other three walked in behind him—and watched as he dashed over a body and past the desk, then began moving the bookcase against the wall. Zenigata ran over and grabbed the other side, but Lupin moved it surprisingly easily.

It was a fake, for easy access to the keyhole in the wall, no doubt.

“Pierre and his damn keys…” Jigen mumbled.

Yup, this building was owned and created by none other than Mr. Pierre himself. That was why Lupin had chosen the sixth floor; the Pierres seemed to have a conceited thing for their name, such as in the mansion's library, and “Pierre” had six letters. It was stretch, but it was something to go off of—and correctly so.

Lupin reached in his pocket and pulled out his copy, glad he had brought it along. Just like when he had been in the library with Goemon, the wall split open with the turn of the key.

And there he was.
Goemon’s mouth was no longer dry.

It was filling with blood as Jianya chipped away at his tooth, breaking it down into small pieces, but always making sure to hammer straight into the root with each hit. Whatever she injected into him, it wasn’t letting him pass out like before. Goemon tried to breathe through his nose and keep his throat closed as much as possible to avoid swallowing the blood, but this overwhelming drug was stealing all control. He felt like he was going to suffocate, and he had to take a breath.

Immediately he began coughing as the liquid poured down his windpipe, and he felt his lips being pulled by the hooks with each jolt. Goemon tried to swallow, just to clear the way for air, not only to breathe but to be able to cough out the blood he had inhaled.

As he did so, he felt the pieces of tooth work their way down his throat, and it made him wretch. He tried so hard not to—he wasn’t sure what to do first, try to breathe, try not to throw up, swallow, cough—

Goemon hadn’t realized through all his own commotion how much he was yelling—how much this drug was making him cry out in pain, cry out in fear, cry out in frustration…

It was too much.

All he could feel was pleading—but he didn’t have anything specific he was pleading for. His heart was racing, head pounding from more than just the shooting pain from his demolished tooth and the repeated sharp surging with each blow to his dental nerve. The air was freezing on his clammy skin, but it didn’t cool him off. Each time his breath came out as yell, it was only interrupted by choking on blood.

What is happening to me—? Why is this happening to me?! Goemon asked himself desperately as he hacked again, causing Jianya to miss her mark on his tooth and sending the nail straight into his gums, making another faucet for blood to gush into the back of his throat.

This drug was going to kill him. Goemon could feel it, his pounding heart ready to burst through his chest compressed by his suffocation. He was going to die without telling Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko how much he truly valued them. He couldn’t pinpoint how exactly he valued them, but he knew that they meant more to him than anyone else because that’s who he wished was there.

Where were Lupin and the others? Why weren’t they here? Didn’t they care about him? Goemon’s vision became blurry and his eyes stung. Lupin never took this long to figure out a plan. No one was coming for him. With everything he had put them through, from attacking Lupin to menacing Fujiko, it made sense that that’s who he wished was there.

Goemon was abandoned.

And it was his own fault. He didn’t try hard enough to understand friendship. He was too inconsiderate. He going to die friendless, never knowing the feeling, and never knowing what part of his life was truth and what was a lie.

Suddenly the pain and stress on his lips was relieved as Jianya pulled the hooks free.
Instantly Goemon let his head fall forward, blood falling out his mouth and onto the floor before he began coughing up the rest.

His mouth hurt so badly—everything hurt. Goemon looked up at Jianya’s smiling face, unaffected from the red splatters he covered her with. So much blood, it was running out of his mouth, and he couldn’t even wipe it.

She turned away from him and walked down the ladder as he kept his eyes fixed on the floor in bewilderment. Even though she had ceased, the overwhelming anxiousness did not.

“What did you…do to me?” he asked without thinking, his voice shaky but not hoarse, as his throat was thoroughly coated.

Jianya raised an eyebrow, using the controller to reel the hooks back in now that they were free from his mouth. “I’m thinking of calling it ‘artificial anxiety,’ although I don’t personally suffer from anxiety, so it may need some fine-tuning…” She turned to face the breathless Goemon as he squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lips, clearly trying to get away from his own mind. He tremored every time he exhaled a shallow breath. “What are you thinking about? I’m interested.”

“You should be thinking about how you would be elsewhere had it not been for Lupin,” the specter told him. Goemon couldn’t focus, but their voices were clear as day, forcing themselves upon him like all his unwanted thoughts were.

“Are you thinking about Lupin III? Perhaps Mr. Jigen or Miss Mine?”

“More so about how wrong you were to trust them,” the clone suggested as an answer.

“No, I am right to trust them!” Goemon shouted, unable to control his emotions. He turned to Jianya, ignoring his clone. “I have faith in them, just like they have in me, and nothing you do will ever make me talk.”

“Talk?” Jianya looked genuinely surprised for a moment, then let slip a little laugh. “Oh, Mr. Ishikawa, you poor thing…” The samurai narrowed his eyes at her. “I thought you would’ve figured it out by now. I don’t care if you talk. I don’t care about the Jade Dragons, I don’t care about Biming wanting to cheat on me, and I most certainly don’t care about Lupin,” she chuckled.

Goemon looked at her, fearfully puzzled. His clone eyed her attentively.

“You see,” Jianya told him pleasantly, “I’m doing this for reputation. You did me wrong; if I let that go unpunished, that would make me look bad. Now, Lupin is infamous. Using him would’ve certainly made a statement—you, though, Mr. Ishikawa, even though I don’t care about Biming, he was my property, and you tried to steal that as well as the Jade Dragons. You and Lupin are equally valuable as far as proving my point as a threat. Understand?”

Goemon blinked. What…?

“You actually thought you were accomplishing something?” Goemon’s face fell as Jianya continued to explain. “You’re not helping Lupin, or being honorable, or being a good friend—whatever it was you thought you were doing, you weren’t.”

Goemon was speechless, his rushing blood turning cold. Nothing? He wasn’t doing this for Lupin and the others? He wasn’t proving his loyalty, or making it up to them…? He was doing it… for nothing?

“Were you perhaps…hoping that this situation would provide a reason you’re worth
“Why are you doing this to me?!” the doppelganger barked. “Why would you do this, Goemon? Why would you give up who you are?!”

“I just want to be happy! Why will you not let me?!”

“Happy? You do not deserve happiness if you think you can obtain it through them!”

“What they gave me is worth far more than any life you could have offered!”

“You repulsive, INSOLENT waste of life! You are here because of THEM! And you are not even accomplishing anything for their benefit, like you foolishly wish! They left you here because they do not CARE!”

“I will not believe you,” Goemon said to himself quietly. “I know the truth.”

“You are a despicable disgrace to all those before you—a defect in an honorable line and you have come about this way because of friendship?!” The clone narrowed his eyes, impatient with Goemon’s resistance. He was going to have to put it short and simple. “Betrayer.”

Goemon stiffened, his jaw slackening as he gazed at his former self.

“Outcast.”

He bowed his head and closed his eyes tightly, knitting his eyebrows together…although not conveying much confidence. “I am not listening to you.”

“Friendless…”

Goemon was unable to keep his voice from trembling as he shook his head. “You are
wrong. You are **wrong**…”

“Look at you. **Pathetic.** And brought to this state because of **them.** You disgust me.”

Boots, Blondie, and Goggles watched, faces blank while Jianya took in Goemon’s breakdown eagerly.

“Can you imagine that these emotions were lying within a man such as Mr. Ishikawa?” she asked excitedly, never taking her eyes off him. “Someone supposedly so ‘unemotional’? These results are superb—this drug induced amygdalin hyperactivity, and by exposing him to only negative stimuli and targeting parts of the midbrain, this enhanced his reception of pain and provoked his fears and grief—but paralyzing the parasympathetic nerve system, so to speak, seems to not only amplify the effects but prolong them as well. That’s the best adjustment I’ve made to this experiment yet, don’t you agree?”

The three subordinates looked at each other unsurely. Judging by Goemon’s emotional state, they had to admit the drug was…doing a good job.

“I have no idea what that meant, but I’m guessing this is the worst he’s felt in his entire life,” Boots said blandly.

“You flatter me,” Jianya replied, seizing the words as a compliment.

“I think you made him go crazy,” Goggles told her simply. “The way he was talking to himself was…yeah, crazy.”

*I am not crazy…*

“Indeed. But he seemed at least mildly unstable to begin with, so I’ll have to test this on others to see if there are varied results,” Jianya thought aloud.

Goemon’s breathing steadied as the drug began to wear off, and his quivering died down slowly. However, the damage was already done. He had felt that hysteria, that instability…the worry…the abandonment…and it lingered amongst the sorrow of knowing what he was.

“Is it clear to you now?” he heard both his tormentors say.

Goemon glared at Jianya as she approached.

“Just hurry up and kill me.”

“Kill you?” she asked with delight. Goemon gritted his teeth, and as he did so he felt a painful crunch. She spoke, “So you’ve accepted the truth that they aren’t—”

He spit the blood-smothered piece of tooth out at her, hitting her in the face. For the first time he’d seen, her smile faded as the chip landed on the floor with a clack. The lookalike blinked with surprise at his sudden boldness.

“You cannot twist my thoughts of them,” Goemon stated. “No matter what you say, I care about them. But I realize they will be better off without me.”

Jianya was unmoved. “If you feel that way, then why wouldn’t you just leave, hm? You would rather die than live without them?”

“No,” Goemon objected confidently. “I would rather die than have sick people like you two
make me doubt them ever again.”

Jianya raised an eyebrow at the “two” part, but was too displeased to mention it as she watched Goemon spit a mouthful of blood to the ground, leaving a bit of residue among the stained lower half of his face.

“I see…” The woman thought for a few moments. “In any case, I can at least finish my artwork for today.” Jianya picked up the hammer and fished out a thin nail from the box. “You wield your sword with your right hand, correct?”

Goemon pursed his lips. He’d had enough mind manipulation. She wasn’t going to get a word out of him, not even if she used that disgusting injection on him again. All the physical pain—his aching, stinging minced back, his mangled wrists and ankles, his tender oozing burn marks that stung just from being exposed to air, the blood-filled blisters over the perpetual ache reaching into his side, the sore muscles, weakening joints, strained ligaments, and now this stabbing pain shooting through his jaw as his mouth drained more blood—they were all nothing.

“Back to the silent treatment, I guess. I’ll just have to remove the fingernails from both your hands.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Lupin stepped onto the plush carpet, his three comrades following. Mr. Pierre sat in a room decorated in forest green, his wife laying in a huge bed. Her golden locks were messy and splayed out across the pillow, her face pale and eyes shut—though not peacefully.

Mr. Pierre stood up, shocked as the four stepped in.

“L-Lupin—? How did you get here?” he asked with unpleasant surprise.

“You know, I’d be asking the same thing if this wasn’t actually your building,” Lupin said sternly. There was no need for idle questions. “Where’s Goemon?”

Jigen fired, shooting the revolver from Mr. Pierre’s hand before he even had a chance to aim.

“I’d cooperate if I were you,” he told the man gruffly, and Mr. Pierre sat back down on the chair next to the bed, where his wife stirred.

“What’s going on…?” she asked breathlessly, shifting, but not opening her eyes. Why was she here, of all places?

“So, you’ve been with the She this whole time?” Lupin said, walking up to him. However, Mr. Pierre seemed nothing but steadfast.

“That’s right,” he replied shamelessly. “Is that a problem?”

Lupin glared at him, lining up his pistol to his forehead. “Yeah, it is, because any friend of Jianya’s is an enemy of mine.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mr. Pierre told him. “Unfortunately, I’m doing business with her at
the moment, so I can’t help you.”

“Do you even know what she does?” Lupin inquired heatedly. How could anyone support her?!

“I do—in fact, I encourage it.”

Lupin’s finger was so close to squeezing that trigger. Jigen gritted his teeth with disgust.

“Your wife is here sick and you’re supporting someone who’s experimenting on people? Causing them pain?” Fujiko asked with disbelief, knitting her brows together.

“That’s right!” Mr. Pierre stood up angrily, Lupin keeping his Walther steadily aimed. “I don’t care how she does it, as long as Jianya cures my wife!”

So that’s why she was here…. Fujiko had disguised herself as Mrs. Pierre's nurse, so she knew the woman's state. However, there had been nothing saying she had ever seen Jianya or was receiving any treatment other than that from her neurologist...

“She doesn’t look too cured to me,” Jigen scoffed. “That psycho bitch couldn’t help a person if her life depended on it.”

Mr. Pierre glowered at Jigen. “Well, my wife’s life does depend on it. You don’t understand—you didn’t see her before! I can’t remember the last time she was this coherent before this week. She's able to speak to me again because of Jianya. You’d never be able to understand.”

“I don’t need to understand,” Jigen growled, “and I don’t care either. It doesn’t change what Jianya does and where Goemon is.”

“My wife would be dead if it weren’t for Jianya,” Mr. Pierre defended. “No one could help with her stress-induced seizures, and her schizophrenia was bringing them on more and more often.” He squinted, then looked over at his wife wistfully. “It’s injured her physically, and the oxygen deprivation was going to damage her brain permanently.”

“So, you think her life is worth more than anyone else’s?!! Your peace and comfort are worth more than their sanity?!” Lupin yelled furiously, grabbing the collar of Mr. Pierre’s suit with his free hand and yanking him forward, putting his pistol to the man’s temple. “That’s quite the insult to my friend, and a sad misconception, sir.”

“What’s happening…?” Mrs. Pierre said hoarsely, although she didn’t seem to be completely conscious. “Is something wrong…?” Lupin’s gaze didn’t waver, though Fujiko watched the woman carefully. Zenigata swallowed; he felt bad for her, but nothing could justify Jianya’s actions…or Mr. Pierre’s approval of them.

“Please, can we take this somewhere else?” Mr. Pierre asked for the sake of his waking wife.

“The damage is done,” Lupin declined. “I’m just gonna prevent any more from happening, and you’re gonna tell me how.”

“No. I don’t care how many people Jianya goes through.”

“What a coincidence,” Lupin snarled, “because I don’t care how many people we have to go through to get Goemon back.”
“Likewise.” Jigen pointed his magnum at Mrs. Pierre. Maybe Lupin would have a hard time killing an innocent, but Jigen…well, a hitman's gotta do what a hitman—no, what a friend's gotta do.

Mr. Pierre looked ready to struggle to protect his wife, but Lupin wasn’t going to allow it. Lupin lowered his head, his scowl menacing. It wasn’t often someone had the ability to make him so livid.

“We’re gonna ask you one more time: Where’s Goemon?”

Mr. Pierre grimaced—but suddenly Fujiko aimed at the doorway upon hearing footsteps.

“Drop your weapons!” Yata demanded, aimed right for Lupin, who paid him no attention.

“Yata, stand down,” Zenigata told him, pushing his arm down and looking at the scene.

“But—they’re civilians!” Yata looked at him with utter confusion, before realizing that, yes, Zenigata was wholeheartedly cooperating with Lupin…much to his dismay.

“Tell me where Goemon is,” Lupin said lowly, mere inches from Mr. Pierre’s face, who narrowed his eyes. Fed up with this game, Lupin angled his gun aside, then pulled the trigger. Mrs. Pierre’s eyes blinked open wearily at the noise while her husband let out a scream of pain. He clutched his left ear—or where it used to be. It was now somewhere else in the room, detached as Lupin had shot it off. Yata immediately pointed his gun at Lupin.

“Don’t even think about it.” Fujiko had him straight in her sights.

“Calm down, all of you,” Zenigata told them, mostly directed at Yata. He turned toward Mr. Pierre. “I suggest you talk. You’ll be taken away whether you do or not, and I assume you’d like to spend your last moments with your wife peacefully.”

“Or we can make these her last moments instead,” Jigen threatened, letting off his own shot. There was a sharp cry from the disarrayed woman as a bullet went through the blankets and plunged into her thigh. Pierre immediately let go of his ear and went to tend to his wife, but Lupin tightened his hold—and the distance between his pistol and Mr. Pierre’s temple to nonexistent.

Mr. Pierre furrowed his brows and clenched his jaw in defeat. “She...took your friend to the bottom floor.”

“We’ve searched this place top to bottom!” Lupin said, now furious. He threw Mr. Pierre to the ground, shoving his foot into his chest, crouching down and planting the barrel straight on his forehead.

“Have you?”

“No more tricks.”

“Over there,” Mr. Pierre said, pointing to the far wall, right next to the bed. Another keyhole? “There’s an elevator to an undocumented floor beneath the building. It’s the only way to get there.”

Lupin glared, his knuckles turning white. The blueprints—the stairwell had been wider from the sixth floor down, but it was so insignificant. Mr. Pierre must’ve narrowed those stairwells and installed the secret elevator with dimensions to near-match the stairwells of the higher floors. “You and your damn construction industry sure are great at hiding shit.”
“The Pierres never miss a chance to create a place for burying secrets,” he said sardonically. “The elevator will open up to the lab; your friend is in one of the other rooms. I don’t know which one, but the only people down there are Jianya and her right-hand women.”

Lupin glared, almost unwillingly let the man up to go to his wife, then made his way over to the secret elevator.

“Yata,” Zenigata prompted, “the rest is in your hands. We’ve got business to see to.”

Lupin gave the inspector a dutiful nod, the gang moving in and awaiting the elevator’s opening. Yata still looked rather

“Wait,” Mr. Pierre stopped them, only gaining harsh glares in return. He looked displeased with himself, almost reluctant, but seemed to be coming to terms with himself. “I will tell you that the first room to the right of the lab is Jianya’s souvenir room. Your friend’s belongings will be there. It’s where she keeps all her…patient’s items on display.”

No one answered—it was useful information, but there was no way Lupin, Jigen, or Fujiko would ever thank this man, and Zenigata wasn't about to do it in there place.

“But don’t go into the room after that one,” he warned with all seriousness, shaking his head. “That’s her art room.”

Nobody liked the sound of that, and thankfully the elevator opened before they had too much time to dwell on it.

“Let’s go get Goemon.”
ATTENTION: This is the edited version of the previous chapter, censoring/toning down most torture descriptions. If you would like to read the uncensored version instead to get the whole experience, go back a chapter; if you already have read that version and are trying to continue the story, please proceed to the next chapter. :)
While the She members remained on the platform, holding their ground, the Lupin gang and Zenigata advanced. However, there was no cover, so it was best for the four to spread out as they ran in, making the She’s aim disperse.

Lupin, being the most recognizable, seemed to be the prime target. Zenigata took advantage of this, quickly flanking to the right side where the French gang members were positioned with half the She group behind them. Just as Zenigata jumped over the artificial river, he grabbed the girl farthest left, taking her handgun before hurling her backwards into the three-foot-deep water. However, that gained the attention of the other three women. Before the first could fire, he had a cuff around her wrist and pulled as he knelt down, the fire of her rifle pelting the ground.

The inspector twisted her wrist, resulting in her dropping the gun completely, as he hastily turned with a fresh pair of cuffs to apprehend the next girl—who would have already fired at him had it not been for Fujiko vaulting over the couch, her pointed heels digging into the young lady’s gut and sending her straight into the water. Just as Fujiko landed in a crouch, Zenigata’s hand flashed out—he was too far away to reach the fourth girl, but his handcuffs slipping behind the handgun’s trigger and preventing her from firing was enough time for Fujiko. She rammed her feet into the girl’s ankles, quick to jump up and grab her vest to throw her down against the hard marble floor. With a few clicks, Zenigata had their hands cuffed together, he and Fujiko kicking the She’s firearms into the river to render them useless.

“Not bad,” Fujiko commended amusedly as they were crouched behind the couch—it wasn’t often she got to see Pops up against someone other than Lupin and the gang. He wasn’t too sure if he appreciated it though; the inspector’s sense of justice and faith in mankind wished that he could’ve at least given the She a chance to turn themselves in…but he doubted they would’ve complied anyways. “You’ve gotten pretty handy with those through all those years chasing Lupin.”

“I’m just doing my job,” he replied, although Fujiko’s half-insult-half-compliment was somewhat encouraging. “But, yeah, years of chasing Lupin will do that to you.”

Meanwhile, Lupin and Jigen were having their own fun. As the thief ran head-on over the front walkway, Jigen kept his distance—that’s where he preferred to be. Lupin shot the pistol out of one of the man’s hands, leaving him shocked—and a perfect obstacle. Lupin darted to the side, keeping the man between him and the other gang members, stalling their fire for the split second the thief needed to run at them.

Without hesitation, Lupin had the first by the collar, yanking him down so the man’s face could come in full-contact with his knee. One down and tossed aside limply. Before the second man could even get a shot off, Lupin had a bullet sailing straight through his hand, making him drop his weapon. Not wasting any time, the thief grabbed him as well, jerking him down by the jacket and driving his elbow into the back of his neck.

Two down—three, actually, Lupin saw as Zenigata cuffed the third man from behind the couch stealthily, Fujiko jumping out and plowing her knee right in his gut. Lupin smirked as the man fell over, completely winded—they all made quite the team…but it wasn’t the whole team.

The three looked over at the remaining four girls—well, two now. One was on the ground, clutching her kneecap, the other knocked out cold on the other side of the river. A third was able to retrieve her pistol off the ground—which Lupin adeptly shot from her hand, Zenigata right behind her to shackle her wrists.

“Geez, how many of those d’you have, Pops?” Lupin questioned with a laugh. Honestly, though, it seemed like he never ran out of those things…
The fourth and last was trying to deal Jigen a few good punches, and he was getting tired of it; much to his dismay, being unarmed didn’t stop these girls like so many other gang members he’d dealt with through the years. As he aimed for her, she grabbed his hand—good. He twisted to where his back was towards her, her arm stretched over his shoulder. Getting a tight grip on her arm, he learned forward and pulled hard. He heard an unsettling pop of her shoulder as he pulled her up and over, ultimately slamming her back against the unforgiving floor.

Seeing that she wasn’t letting up, he rushed over onto the platform with the girl in pursuit.

These members were good, but they were nothing compared to the crazies dealt with back at the Pierre mansion.

Jigen grabbed one of the lone chairs and pivoted on his heel, smacking her straight off the walkway and into the river. She quickly surfaced with a gasp—and Jigen wasted no time in taking the legs of the chair and pushing her down before jumping on top of the seat, pinning her underwater.

“Man, I’m sick of these women,” Jigen spat.

Lupin and the others watched, a bit dumbfounded as he stood knee-deep on the chair in the water, quaking from the girl's struggling, before he directed his aim over at Lupin. The thief blinked, wondering what he was aiming at—and it became apparent when he turned his head to see a drenched She member straight behind him—the one Zenigata had initially thrown into the water—rising to her feet after snatching one of the pistols off the ground.

However, she was down in an instant, at the perfect angle for Jigen to get both her knees out in one shot—and Zenigata to shoot the gun from her hand. Even he seemed surprised, as sharpshooting wasn't really his forte—let alone that impressive reaction time.

“Aw, thanks, Pops!” the thief said in an upbeat tone, making Zenigata eye him—while he appreciated the thanks, he couldn't unhear the undertones of mockery his mind had cemented into association with Lupin's voice for so long.

“Lupin, you need to learn to pay attention,” Jigen said, hopping out of the river and onto the walkway now that the chair had stilled, kicking off his shoes to dump the water out. “I doubt Fujiko’d be able to save your ass when I’m not around.”

“Did you forget how I ended up in Enzo’s tower in the first place?” Fujiko snapped back, crossing her arms. She went through a lot to make sure Lupin was safe. “I was much more useful than you, running around, dodging cops—”

“C’mon, don’t fight! I’ll always have Pops watching my back!” Lupin claimed confidently.

“Cut that out,” Zenigata said disapprovingly, moving to cuff the men and women that hadn’t been yet. “It’s my job to arrest you!”

“Yeah, I said you’d be watching my back—while I run away. Like always!” Lupin giggled to himself.

Zenigata let out an exasperated sigh, securing the handcuffs tightly around the last of them, just as he started waking up.

“Can…we just leave?” the French gangster asked. “We’re not affiliated with them—”

“No! You’ve got a lot of nerve asking that!” Zenigata told him, standing up. “I’m working
to make this world a safer place, and what you do certainly isn’t helping achieve that!”

“Ah, Pops, heroic as ever,” Lupin admired.

“Inspector Zenigata!” a muffled voice came through from the inspector's jacket, gunfire chorusing in the background.

“Yata, go ahead,” Zenigata answered, quickly pulling out his radio.

“Sir, we’re on the third floor—things aren’t looking good,” Yata spoke. “This place is crawling with those women! Per—ACK!—Permission to request backup?!”

“You don’t need to ask me, just do what you think needs to be done,” Zenigata ordered, sounding stern but not reprimanding. But why was Yata wasting time by asking him?! “Retreat if you need to! We don’t need any unnecessary deaths.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Did you find any hostages, or anything suspicious? Anything at all?”

“No, sir!”

The inspector turned towards the Lupin gang. “We’re on a time limit.”

“I doubt anyone here is going to talk,” Fujiko said grimly.

“Well, we can’t just randomly pick a floor and start looking,” Jigen added, looking to Lupin—who was counting on his fingers.

“Six.”

“What?”

“The sixth floor, just trust me on this,” Lupin said, sprinting back over to the elevator. The rest exchanged quick glances before following after him.

And the sixth floor is where they went.

Room after room of disappointment, including the ones on the lower floors Zenigata was being updated on via radio. Speaking of which, it seemed not a room was vacant. She members everywhere. They had turned up absolutely nothing, and Yata and his troops were coming to no conclusions the floor beneath them. Lupin ground his teeth as they walked out of the small office room, dealing with the last She member on this level.

“Fan-fucking-tastic, nobody’s here,” Jigen spat as he stalked back out into the hallway littered with both dead and unconscious bodies, Lupin looking pensive behind him.

“No, we still haven’t found Biming,” Fujiko reminded. “There must be something we’re missing.”

Zenigata bit his cheek; Yata’s team hadn’t reported any findings about any hidden rooms, and they had even checked the ground below with all the water and electric systems. There weren’t any cameras that could perhaps give them any leads either. The inspector paused. “Lupin, what are you doing?” he asked, refraining from asking “what’s wrong” since there were indeed many things wrong right now.
The thief was staring at the wall going down the hallway and then back to the door they had just come out of. “There aren’t any doors.”

Jigen and Fujiko exchanged glances. “Yeah…?”

“Why would there be? No rooms, no doors.”

“Exactly,” Lupin said, running back into the previous room. “This room is way too small to occupy that entire space going to the end of the hall, and on the blueprints, I remember a room there.” The other three walked in behind him—and watched as he dashed over a body and past the desk, then began moving the bookcase against the wall. Zenigata ran over and grabbed the other side, but Lupin moved it surprisingly easily.

It was a fake, for easy access to the keyhole in the wall, no doubt.

“Pierre and his damn keys…” Jigen mumbled.

Yup, this building was owned and created by none other than Mr. Pierre himself. That was why Lupin had chosen the sixth floor; the Pierres seemed to have a conceited thing for their name, such as in the mansion's library, and “Pierre” had six letters. It was stretch, but it was something to go off of—and correctly so.

Lupin reached in his pocket and pulled out his copy, glad he had brought it along. Just like when he had been in the library with Goemon, the wall split open with the turn of the key.

And there he was.

❖ ❖ ❖

Jianya continued working on Goemon’s tooth. Whatever she injected into him, it wasn’t letting him pass out like before. Goemon tried to breathe through his nose and keep his throat closed as much as possible to avoid swallowing the blood, but this overwhelming drug was stealing all control. He felt like he was going to suffocate, and he had to take a breath.

The moment he did so, it made him wretch. He tried so hard not to—he wasn’t sure what to do first, try to breathe, try not to throw up, swallow, cough—

Goemon hadn’t realized through all his own commotion how much he was yelling—how much this drug was making him cry out in pain, cry out in fear, cry out in frustration…

It was too much.

All he could feel was pleading—but he didn’t have anything specific he was pleading for. His heart was racing, head pounding from more than just the shooting pain from his dental nerve. The air was freezing on his clammy skin, but it didn’t cool him off. Each time his breath came out as yell, it was only interrupted by choking.

What is happening to me—? Why is this happening to me?! Goemon asked himself desperately as he hacked again.

This drug was going to kill him. Goemon could feel it, his pounding heart ready to burst
through his chest compressed by his suffocation. He was going to die without telling Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko how much he truly valued them. He couldn’t pinpoint how exactly he valued them, but he knew that they meant more to him than anyone else because that’s who he wished was there.

Where were Lupin and the others? Why weren’t they here? Didn’t they care about him? Goemon’s vision became blurry and his eyes stung. Lupin never took this long to figure out a plan. No one was coming for him. With everything he had put them through, from attacking Lupin to menacing Fujiko, it made sense that that they wouldn’t.

Goemon was abandoned.

And it was his own fault. He didn’t try hard enough to understand friendship. He was too inconsiderate. He going to die friendless, never knowing the feeling, and never knowing what part of his life was truth and what was a lie.

Suddenly the pain and stress on his lips was relieved as Jianya pulled the hooks free. Instantly Goemon let his head fall forward, blood falling out his mouth and onto the floor before he began coughing up the rest.

His mouth hurt so badly—everything hurt. Goemon looked up at Jianya’s smiling face, unaffected from the red splatters he covered her with. So much blood, it was running out of his mouth, and he couldn’t even wipe it.

She turned away from him and walked down the ladder as he kept his eyes fixed on the floor in bewilderment. Even though she had ceased, the overwhelming anxiousness did not.

“What did you…do to me?” he asked without thinking, his voice shaky but not hoarse, as his throat was thoroughly coated.

Jianya raised an eyebrow, using the controller to reel the hooks back in now that they were free from his mouth. “I’m thinking of calling it ‘artificial anxiety,’ although I don’t personally suffer from anxiety, so it may need some fine-tuning…” She turned to face the breathless Goemon as he squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lips, clearly trying to get away from his own mind. He tremored every time he exhaled a shallow breath. “What are you thinking about? I’m interested.”

“You should be thinking about how you would be elsewhere had it not been for Lupin,” the specter told him. Goemon couldn’t focus, but their voices were clear as day, forcing themselves upon him like all his unwanted thoughts were.

“Are you thinking about Lupin III? Perhaps Mr. Jigen or Miss Mine?”

“No, I am right to trust them!” the clone suggested as an answer.

“Talk?” Jianya looked genuinely surprised for a moment, then let slip a little laugh. “Oh, Mr. Ishikawa, you poor thing...” The samurai narrowed his eyes at her. “I thought you would’ve figured it out by now. I don’t care if you talk. I don’t care about the Jade Dragons, I don’t care about Biming wanting to cheat on me, and I most certainly don’t care about Lupin,” she chuckled. Goemon looked at her, fearfully puzzled. His clone eyed her attentively.

“You see,” Jianya told him pleasantly, “I’m doing this for reputation. You did me wrong; if
I let that go unpunished, that would make me look bad. Now, Lupin is infamous. Using him would’ve certainly made a statement—you, though, Mr. Ishikawa, even though I don’t care about Biming, he was my property, and you tried to steal that as well as the Jade Dragons. You and Lupin are equally valuable as far as proving my point as a threat. Understand?”

Goemon blinked. What…?

“You actually thought you were accomplishing something?” Goemon’s face fell as Jianya continued to explain. “You’re not helping Lupin, or being honorable, or being a good friend—whatever it was you thought you were doing, you weren’t.”

Goemon was speechless, his rushing blood turning cold. Nothing? He wasn’t doing this for Lupin and the others? He wasn’t proving his loyalty, or making it up to them…? He was doing it… for nothing?

“Were you perhaps…hoping that this situation would provide a reason you’re worth keeping?” the She commander inquired. “Obviously there’s no convincing those others, so were you trying to convince yourself?”

“Face it!” his copy snapped, walking towards him. “Admit you were wrong! Admit you have become something worthless, and that is how everyone sees you! You are the only one who is blind to the fact!”

“Get away from me!”

“Then tell me what your purpose is! A man is worthless without a purpose, is he not?!”

“I—I can be a good friend!”

“A good friend?! That is not what I asked!” The reflection paused with realization, then laughed, clenching his fists angrily. “You believe that is your purpose? Something unachievable to you, but also useless?! Listen to me when I tell you that you are INCAPABLE of having friends!”

“Yes, I can!” Goemon shouted through clenched teeth, opening his eyes to glare at the lookalike, although the fear of uncertainty was still showing through. His fingernails dug into his palms. “I can!”

“I, the superior part of you, will never allow it!”

“No!” Goemon protested, the mix of doubt and horror forced upon him by the injection showing on his face. Never? The clone was part of him, but did he have that kind of power? “Why are you doing this to me?!”

“How does it feel? I ask you the same question every waking moment!” the doppelganger barked. “Why would you do this, Goemon? Why would you give up who you are?!!”

“I just want to be happy! Why will you not let me?!”

“Happy? You do not deserve happiness if you think you can obtain it through them!”

“What they gave me is worth far more than any life you could have offered!”

“You repulsive, INSOLENT waste of life! You are here because of THEM! And you are not even accomplishing anything for their benefit, like you foolishly wish! They left you here because they do not CARE!”
“I will not believe you,” Goemon said to himself quietly. “I know the truth.”

“You are a despicable disgrace to all those before you—a defect in an honorable line and you have come about this way because of friendship?” The clone narrowed his eyes, impatient with Goemon’s resistance. He was going to have to put it short and simple. “Betrayer.”

Goemon stiffened, his jaw slackening as he gazed at his former self.

“Outcast.”

He bowed his head and closed his eyes tightly, knitting his eyebrows together…although not conveying much confidence. “I am not listening to you.”

“Friendless…”

Goemon was unable to keep his voice from trembling as he shook his head. “You are wrong. You are wrong…”

“Look at you. Pathetic. And brought to this state because of them. You disgust me.”

Boots, Blondie, and Goggles watched, faces blank while Jianya took in Goemon’s breakdown eagerly.

“Can you imagine that these emotions were lying within a man such as Mr. Ishikawa?” she asked excitedly, never taking her eyes off him. “Someone supposedly so ‘stoic’? These results are superb—this drug induced amygdalin hyperactivity, and by exposing him to only negative stimuli and targeting parts of the midbrain, this enhanced his reception of pain and provoked his fears and grief—but paralyzing the parasympathetic nerve system, so to speak, seems to not only amplify the effects but prolong them as well. That’s the best adjustment I’ve made to this experiment yet, don’t you agree?”

The three subordinates looked at each other unsurely. Judging by Goemon’s emotional state, they had to admit the drug was…doing a good job.

“I have no idea what that meant, but I’m guessing this is the worst he’s felt in his entire life,” Boots said blandly.

“You flatter me,” Jianya replied, seizing the words as a compliment.

“I think you made him go crazy,” Goggles told her simply. “The way he was talking to himself was…yeah, crazy.”

I am not crazy…

“Indeed. But he seemed at least mildly unstable to begin with, so I’ll have to test this on others to see if there are varied results,” Jianya thought aloud.

Goemon’s breathing steadied as the drug began to wear off, and his quivering died down slowly. However, the damage was already done. He had felt that hysteria, that instability…the worry…the abandonment…and it lingered amongst the sorrow of knowing what he was.

“Is it clear to you now?” he heard both his tormentors say.

Goemon glared at Jianya as she approached.

“Just hurry up and kill me.”
“Kill you?” she asked with delight. Goemon gritted his teeth, and as he did so he felt a painful crunch. She spoke, “So you’ve accepted the truth that they aren’t—”

He spit the blood-smothered piece of tooth out at her, hitting her in the face. For the first time he’d seen, her smile faded as the chip landed on the floor with a clack. The lookalike blinked with surprise at his sudden boldness.

“You cannot twist my thoughts of them,” Goemon stated. “No matter what you say, I care about them. But I realize they will be better off without me.”

Jianya was unmoved. “If you feel that way, then why wouldn’t you just leave, hm? You would rather die than live without them?”

“No,” Goemon objected confidently. “I would rather die than have sick people like you two make me doubt them ever again.”

Jianya raised an eyebrow at the “two” part, but was too displeased to mention it as she watched Goemon spit a mouthful of blood to the ground, leaving a bit of residue among the stained lower half of his face.

“I see…” The woman thought for a few moments. “In any case, I can at least finish my artwork for today.” Jianya picked up the hammer and fished out a thin nail from the box. “You wield your sword with your right hand, correct?”

Goemon pursed his lips. He’d had enough mind manipulation. She wasn’t going to get a word out of him, not even if she used that disgusting injection on him again. All the physical pain was nothing.

“Back to the silent treatment, I guess. I’ll just have to remove the fingernails from both your hands.”

❖ ❖ ❖

Lupin stepped onto the plush carpet, his three comrades following. Mr. Pierre sat in a room decorated in forest green, his wife laying in a huge bed. Her golden locks were messy and splayed out across the pillow, her face pale and eyes shut—though not peacefully.

Mr. Pierre stood up, shocked as the four stepped in.

“L-Lupin—? How did you get here?” he asked with unpleasant surprise.

“You know, I’d be asking the same thing if this wasn’t actually your building,” Lupin said sternly. There was no need for idle questions. “Where’s Goemon?”

Jigen fired, shooting the revolver from Mr. Pierre’s hand before he even had a chance to aim.

“I’d cooperate if I were you,” he told the man gruffly, and Mr. Pierre sat back down on the chair next to the bed, where his wife stirred.

“What’s going on…?” she asked breathlessly, shifting, but not opening her eyes. Why was
she here, of all places?

“So, you’ve been with the She this whole time?” Lupin said, walking up to him. However, Mr. Pierre seemed nothing but steadfast.

“That’s right,” he replied shamelessly. “Is that a problem?”

Lupin glared at him, lining up his pistol to his forehead. “Yeah, it is, because any friend of Jianya’s is an enemy of mine.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mr. Pierre told him. “Unfortunately, I’m doing business with her at the moment, so I can’t help you.”

“Do you even know what she does?” Lupin inquired heatedly. How could anyone support her?!

“I do—in fact, I encourage it.”

Lupin’s finger was so close to squeezing that trigger. Jigen gritted his teeth with disgust.

“Your wife is here sick and you’re supporting someone who’s experimenting on people? Causing them pain?” Fujiko asked with disbelief, knitting her brows together.

“That’s right!” Mr. Pierre stood up angrily, Lupin keeping his Walther steadily aimed. “I don’t care how she does it, as long as Jianya cures my wife!”

So that’s why she was here…. Fujiko had disguised herself as Mrs. Pierre's nurse, so she knew the woman's state. However, there had been nothing saying she had ever seen Jianya or was receiving any treatment other than that from her neurologist...

“She doesn’t look too cured to me,” Jigen scoffed. “That psycho bitch couldn’t help a person if her life depended on it.”

Mr. Pierre glowered at Jigen. “Well, my wife’s life does depend on it. You don’t understand—you didn’t see her before! I can’t remember the last time she was this coherent before this week. She’s able to speak to me again because of Jianya. You’d never be able to understand.”

“I don’t need to understand,” Jigen growled, “and I don’t care either. It doesn’t change what Jianya does and where Goemon is.”

“My wife would be dead if it weren’t for Jianya,” Mr. Pierre defended. “No one could help with her stress-induced seizures, and her schizophrenia was bringing them on more and more often.” He squinted, then looked over at his wife wistfully. “It’s injured her physically, and the oxygen deprivation was going to damage her brain permanently.”

“So, you think her life is worth more than anyone else’s?!! Your peace and comfort are worth more than their sanity?!” Lupin yelled furiously, grabbing the collar of Mr. Pierre’s suit with his free hand and yanking him forward, putting his pistol to the man’s temple. “That’s quite the insult to my friend, and a sad misconception, sir.”

“What’s happening…?” Mrs. Pierre said hoarsely, although she didn’t seem to be completely conscious. “Is something wrong…?” Lupin’s gaze didn’t waver, though Fujiko watched the woman carefully. Zenigata swallowed; he felt bad for her, but nothing could justify Jianya’s actions…or Mr. Pierre’s approval of them.
“Please, can we take this somewhere else?” Mr. Pierre asked for the sake of his waking wife.

“The damage is done,” Lupin declined. “I’m just gonna prevent any more from happening, and you’re gonna tell me how.”

“No. I don’t care how many people Jianya goes through.”

“What a coincidence,” Lupin snarled, “because I don’t care how many people we have to go through to get Goemon back.”

“Likewise.” Jigen pointed his magnum at Mrs. Pierre. Maybe Lupin would have a hard time killing an innocent, but Jigen…well, a hitman's gotta do what a hitman—no, what a friend's gotta do.

Mr. Pierre looked ready to struggle to protect his wife, but Lupin wasn’t going to allow it. Lupin lowered his head, his scowl menacing. It wasn’t often someone had the ability to make him so livid.

“We’re gonna ask you one more time: Where’s Goemon?”

Mr. Pierre grimaced—but suddenly Fujiko aimed at the doorway upon hearing footsteps.

“Drop your weapons!” Yata demanded, aimed right for Lupin, who paid him no attention.

“Yata, stand down,” Zenigata told him, pushing his arm down and looking at the scene.

“But—they’re civilians!” Yata looked at him with utter confusion, before realizing that, yes, Zenigata was wholeheartedly cooperating with Lupin…much to his dismay.

“Tell me where Goemon is,” Lupin said lowly, mere inches from Mr. Pierre’s face, who narrowed his eyes. Fed up with this game, Lupin angled his gun aside, then pulled the trigger. Mrs. Pierre’s eyes blinked open wearily at the noise while her husband let out a scream of pain. He clutched his left ear—or where it used to be. It was now somewhere else in the room, detached as Lupin had shot it off. Yata immediately pointed his gun at Lupin.

“Don’t even think about it.” Fujiko had him straight in her sights.

“Calm down, all of you,” Zenigata told them, mostly directed at Yata. He turned toward Mr. Pierre. “I suggest you talk. You’ll be taken away whether you do or not, and I assume you’d like to spend your last moments with your wife peacefully.”

“Or we can make these her last moments instead,” Jigen threatened, letting off his own shot. There was a sharp cry from the disarrayed woman as a bullet went through the blankets and plunged into her thigh. Pierre immediately let go of his ear and went to tend to his wife, but Lupin tightened his hold—and the distance between his pistol and Mr. Pierre’s temple to nonexistent.

Mr. Pierre furrowed his brows and clenched his jaw in defeat. “She...took your friend to the bottom floor.”

“We’ve searched this place top to bottom!” Lupin said, now furious. He threw Mr. Pierre to the ground, shoving his foot into his chest, crouching down and planting the barrel straight on his forehead.

“Have you?”
“No more tricks.”

“Over there,” Mr. Pierre said, pointing to the far wall, right next to the bed. Another keyhole? “There’s an elevator to an undocumented floor beneath the building. It’s the only way to get there.”

Lupin glared, his knuckles turning white. The blueprints—the stairwell had been wider from the sixth floor down, but it was so insignificant. Mr. Pierre must’ve narrowed those stairwells and installed the secret elevator with dimensions to near-match the stairwells of the higher floors. “You and your damn construction industry sure are great at hiding shit.”

“The Pierres never miss a chance to create a place for burying secrets,” he said sardonically. “The elevator will open up to the lab; your friend is in one of the other rooms. I don’t know which one, but the only people down there are Jianya and her right-hand women.”

Lupin glared, almost unwillingly let the man up to go to his wife, then made his way over to the secret elevator.

“Yata,” Zenigata prompted, “the rest is in your hands. We’ve got business to see to.”

Lupin gave the inspector a dutiful nod, the gang moving in and awaiting the elevator’s opening. Yata still looked rather

“Wait,” Mr. Pierre stopped them, only gaining harsh glares in return. He looked displeased with himself, almost reluctant, but seemed to be coming to terms with himself. “I will tell you that the first room to the right of the lab is Jianya’s souvenir room. Your friend’s belongings will be there. It’s where she keeps all her… patient’s items on display.”

No one answered—it was useful information, but there was no way Lupin, Jigen, or Fujiko would ever thank this man, and Zenigata wasn't about to do it in there place.

“But don’t go into the room after that one,” he warned with all seriousness, shaking his head. “That’s her art room.”

Nobody liked the sound of that, and thankfully the elevator opened before they had too much time to dwell on it.

“Let’s go get Goemon.”
Repossession

Chapter Notes

(I personally don't like the series *A Woman Called Fujiko Mine*, so I don't make many references, but there are a couple things that I like to think fall into place. If you haven't seen the series, Cicciolina is a woman that—in short—Jigen had a complicated relationship with and a badly-ending final encounter that Fujiko witnessed.)

Goemon directed his weary stare at Jianya as she stood before him with two more needles, one filled with a translucent pink liquid, one with a cottony blue.

She had kept her word; Goemon no longer possessed any fingernails. Some she peeled off with pliers, others she slowly tapped a metal nail under until the fingernail was pried off. In any case, they were gone.

Jianya seemed to have a knack for hammers and nails, having centered one in the soft part of each of his knees, meticulously tapping them in until each flat was sticking out *exactly* an inch from the surface. Goemon didn’t know how many inches had gone into his knees to get that deep, and he didn't want to know. But during this, every now and then, he thought he’d heard something, and would longingly look at the door, but soon he’d realized his mind was just playing tricks on him; auditory hallucinations from his deprived state. Visions of grandeur.

Visions of Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko coming for him.

“I wanted to have more fun with you,” she said to him, “but I’m afraid playtime is over, and I have to get back to work.”

Even if he was left strung up there, as long as she was gone, he would be thankful.

Much to Goemon’s dismay, “work” didn’t mean she was leaving.

“I have a patient, you see. This pink serum here is going to make you experience multiple symptoms of her condition. This blue one is my newest version of her cure, and we’re going to see how much I’ve improved it.”

Goemon grimaced. *Not more drugs…*

“I was going to use Metrazol to induce the intense seizures she’s been having, but I’m a little worried it might kill you in your current…position,” Jianya told him, looking him up and down. “Metrazol is an outdated method of psychiatric therapy, and the seizures often resulted in broken bones and torn muscles. It’s *crazy* what methods professionals will use in an attempt to find cures to things—or rather, experiment to try to understand said ‘things.’ Many therapies had nothing but theories to justify their use, you know.”

“You admit you are crazy, then,” Goemon finally spoke up, fighting the exhaustion—not that it mattered. She would just inject him with something else to keep him awake.

“Crazy? No. Psychotic? Perhaps.” She walked up the stepladder to become eye-level with him. He didn’t know how she could smile so contentedly. “There’s nothing wrong with that, you
know. It’s a mere disorder, not a choice. In fact, you and I might not be so different.”

“I am nothing like you,” Goemon said lowly, leering at her.

“Really? You feel no fear or guilt. No empathy.”

“Yes, I can,” Goemon defied as she uncapped the pink needle.

“Do not lie to yourself,” his clone said disapprovingly.

“I can feel those, I know I can!” the samurai argued determinedly, curling his lip as she carefully pushed any air out of the syringe. “I am not crazy.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Ishikawa, you’re right,” Jianya told him, and he jerked away from her as she patted his cold cheek. “But you’re certainly about to feel like it.” Goemon pursed his lips apprehensively as there was yet another prick in his neck. “How does it feel to be helping a person in need, Mr. Ishikawa?”

Then suddenly she let out a screech of pain, the needle bursting before she could begin injecting him with it. Goemon’s eyes widened as Jianya managed to land on her feet after falling from the stool. No, it wasn't real. It couldn't be.

The sound of gunfire bombarded his ears as the noise bounced off the barren walls. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jianya narrowly miss being hit by a bullet as she pressed herself up against the concrete pillar and out of sight, holding her bleeding hand. There were the metal clanks of weapons hitting the floor, and the firing ceased.

Goemon was speechless.

“Goemon!” a panicked call sounded out.

“L-Lupin?” the specter said with disbelief as the thief started to run over, but was stopped in his tracks as a throwing knife was shot out of the air mere inches from his face. He turned on a dime, aiming for the attacker.

“Don’t even try it,” a familiar gruff voice sounded. Jigen reached the bottom of the steps, his magnum aimed straight at Goggles to prevent her from reaching into her jacket for more weapons. She and Blondie—at the mercy of an unexpected Zenigata—had stayed seated on the couches, their legs too injured to allow them to stand up on such short notice. Boots, however, was on her feet and glaring, despite having her handgun shot from her hand by Jigen less than a moment before Fujiko had her at the end of her pistol.

“It looks like you guys got a little too comfortable,” Fujiko noted. “Try anything and you can be sure these other two will get what’s coming to them.” The She member looked pressed as ever, but it seemed she held the other two in high enough regard to obey.

“I’ll cuff them,” Zenigata said, stepping forward.

“No. This time, it’s completely personal,” Jigen said darkly, wiping the expression clean of Goggles’ face.

Deciding they had things under control, Lupin headed towards Goemon, and Jigen was about to pull the trigger—but a shock went through Lupin’s wrist as his Walther was shot from his hand by no other than Jianya.
“Let’s not be too hasty, Jigen Daisuke,” she suggested politely. “Drop your weapons, and I’m sure we can work things out... civilly.” Lupin stiffened as Jianya stared at him and as she aimed her gun at Goemon’s head, digging the nails of her injured hand into Goemon’s back and making the samurai yell out through his clenched teeth.

Jigen scowled, looking at Jianya from the corner of his eye. She was standing behind the samurai so Jigen, Zenigata, and Fujiko had no way of disarming her—unless someone wanted to shoot through him, which was a definite no—and the only part of her they could see was her legs. A shot there wouldn't prevent her from killing Goemon.

The crafty bitch did that on purpose, knowing that the now-disarmed Lupin would be the only one to have her in line of sight.

“Not a chance,” Lupin spat, flexing his knuckles angrily. “We’ve got your crew at gunpoint. Give up and get your hands off my friend.”

“It seems you cherish this ‘friendship’ that Mr. Ishikawa was so insistent on more than I do,” she said curtly, her smile never fading. “It’s too bad we’re meeting on such terms, Mr. Jigen. I’ve wanted to thank you for quite some time. You see, the She have an alliance with the Chinese mafia you worked for, so we gained an outpost with them years ago... Quite a good place for business.”

A look of vexation came over Fujiko—so, Jianya was going to try to get under their skin in an attempt to throw them off their game. Jigen seemed to be ignoring her, but Fujiko had been there at the time being mentioned, and she knew what the hitman went through.

“Don’t feed into it, Jigen,” Fujiko said under her breath, making Lupin and Zenigata glance over at the bearded man. He was callous; sometimes that meant he didn’t feel what people said... and sometimes it meant he didn’t hesitate to punish someone for their words.

Jianya was pleased with the silence she instilled. “It was much easier to take over the city after you killed Cicciolina and her husband.”

Zenigata caught a glimpse of the silent Jigen, not knowing what was being referred to... but it was clearly something that had impacted him. The three subordinate She members looked at him apprehensively, not sure what to expect.

“You want a fight that badly?” Jigen knew her type. She wasn't going to kill Goemon, not if she could get away with killing them instead. She wanted to keep her prize.

“I'm sorry, did I upset you?”

“Step out and you'll see.”

At Jigen’s words, Lupin and Fujiko knew things were about to get hectic. Lupin ran towards the couches to grab Blondie’s rifle as Jigen wrenched his arm over in Jianya’s direction. Predicting his actions, she twisted around to avoid the shot and get out from behind Goemon, firing a shot of her own. Her bullet was met in midair with another of Jigen’s, putting it out of commission before she had darted behind the concrete pillar again.

Zenigata quickly reacted to Goggles’ attempt to attack while Jigen’s attention was elsewhere—he had one of her wrists cuffed instantly and forced her arms behind her back to lock them together. With that, he pushed her onto the floor and went to do the same to Blondie before she could prevent Lupin from grabbing the AK47 on the ground next to her.
Meanwhile, Boots had kicked Fujiko’s hand just in time for the bullet to miss her head—although it did rip the lobe of her ear off, along with her gaudy earring. Boots grabbed Fujiko’s wrist with the gun and went to roundhouse kick her. Fujiko, however, twisted and drove her knee into the girl’s standing leg, ultimately throwing her off balance even if she still did suffer the blow.

Jigen ran to the back of the room to get Jianya in his sights again, just as Lupin aimed the rifle at the steel ropes attached to the weight plates stretching Goemon’s body down. The stream of bullets shredded through the strands until they were separated.

Goemon’s eyes opened in confusion at the sudden weightlessness. He had been trying to block everything out, sure that everything happening was just a hallucination from Jianya’s injection. He looked around finally, blinking doubtfully at the scene, but seeming to still debate…. Then he was gazing down intently at a space next to him, mumbling things once again.

Lupin began getting to work on the rope securing Goemon’s left arm as Jigen rounded the pillar. Jianya’s angular face displayed nothing but her mischievous smirk as her bullet was once again met with his own. She was a sure shot—too bad she hadn't been using her dominant hand to hold that needle when Jigen had hit it. Speaking of which, her injured hand was holding something—a whip. It lashed forward at the same instant Jianya took another shot. Jigen had no choice but to shoot the bullet out of the air, resulting in the whip wrapping around his wrist and yanking his arm to the side.

Lupin ran forward, shredding through the rope holding Goemon’s left arm. As soon as it broke, Goemon’s weight swung him into the other cement pillar. Lupin did his best to prevent it from happening; reaching Goemon in time, the thief could stop him from smacking into the pillar, but there was a loud, hollow crunch as the heaviness yanked down against Goemon’s secured arm. The grunt of pain only made Lupin wish he could do more for him other than begin pelting the last remaining rope to free him.

However, the She heiress spun on her heel in astonishment, just after having yanked Jigen’s arm aside. She bared her teeth and aimed at Goemon. “Oh, no, you don’t!”

Jigen brought his aim around as quick as possible and shot the woman’s hand, their triggers being pulled at the same time—or so it would seem to the regular human eye. Jigen had the slightest advantage. Just as the bullet was nearing the opening of the barrel of Jianya’s pistol, Jigen’s own round ripped through her hand, knocking the trajectory off.

Furious, Jianya jerked the whip taught and brought her foot down upon the line, staring daggers at Jigen as she pulled his arm down to the ground before he could fire again.

Goemon screamed out in pain as Jianya’s bullet dug into his back at an angle, and right at that moment the steel rope gave way. Lupin tossed the rifle aside and caught Goemon to the best of his ability.

“Goemon! Goemon, can you hear me? I’m in time, aren’t I?” Lupin said anxiously, gritting his teeth as there was no reply other than a groan. He lowered him carefully to the ground, but that didn't make Goemon bending his legs any less painful. Lupin slid his fingertips under the flat of the nail in Goemon's first knee. Pulling it out was going to open the wound and leave it bleeding more, but Goemon wouldn't be able to bend his legs otherwise... Lupin pried the nails out, feeling devastated at the obvious pain he was causing his friend, and quickly cradled Goemon up in his arms after tossing the nails aside. He yanked the stuck needle from the syringe out of the samurai's neck with revulsion. “Look, Goemon,” he said consolingly, trying to stay calm for his friend as he reached behind and down the collar of his jacket and pulled something up. “It’s Zantetsuken!” He pressed the sword against him, urging him to take it. “It's safe and sound!”
Goemon looked at him with confusion that was steadily morphing into disbelief. “Lupin? You are...not imagin—”

Suddenly Goemon was lurched forward as something hard met with Lupin’s face, knocking him backwards.

_Fuck!_ Lupin had been too preoccupied to realize Jianya was no longer being dealt with by Jigen—in fact, the hitman had an old problem sneak up on him, the goggles girl somehow having slipped out of her handcuffs and now had the whip around Jigen’s neck, strangling him as she sat on his back, biting his armed hand to prevent being aimed at. Blondie was also on a strangling streak, having her handcuffs around Fujiko’s throat as they scuffled on the floor, yelling about something having to do with disrespecting music. Zenigata was now having trouble with Boots and her relentless kicking, but he had been in this line of work for long enough to know how to handle his own.

Jianya put her foot on the AK47 and pulled it towards her, out of reach of Lupin, who glared up at her and wiped the blood from his split lip. Miraculously, even after Jigen had shot her hand, she had the pain tolerance and obstinacy to continue holding her gun, and had it aimed at Goemon, who was on his hands and knees, facing away from her. Lupin glanced down at the samurai, who was eyeing the katana on the floor in front of him, but the thief kept his own eyes fixed on Jianya.

“Give it up, Jianya. Unlike my friends, yours talk,” Lupin told her bluntly. Goemon looked up at him, seeming astounded at what he was hearing. “We know about how Pierre gave you this place as your outpost, and the feds are dealing with it right upstairs. It’s over for you.”

She smiled at him. “You think this is a major setback for me?”

Goemon stared at the ground blankly as she spoke, processing whether or not this was real...and whether or not that mattered in regards to what he was about to do.

“Are you really thinking about acting on upon this fantasy?” his specter said to him from beside Lupin.

Goemon tilted his head discreetly to look behind him at Jianya, then slowly turned it forward again. If this wasn’t just a hallucination, everyone here was fighting for him; he couldn't risk letting them down.

“Don't think so foolish. This isn’t a setback at all—”

Jianya screamed out and toppled to the ground as her ankle was sliced through, and next was her pistol. Using the time Lupin had bought, Goemon had spun around and unleashed Zantetsuken. His dislocated arm was too weak to cut all the way through, leaving her foot dangling and her gun solid, but ruined all the same.

Just following, there was a single shot from where Jigen stood, and the sound of a limp body hitting the floor. A ragged Blondie and Boots were silent upon realizing the situation they were in. The two had their wrists and ankles cuffed to each other, thanks to Fujiko’s and Zenigata’s grand cooperation, and now the girls were down a teammate and their leader was about to be bested.

Jianya had fallen back, leaned up against the shelves, unable to stand, and nothing of use within reach. Jigen stood over her while Goemon glared, his body shaking with exhaustion.
“Are you going to kill me now?” she asked, smile shifting into a grin as Lupin approached, having retrieved his pistol from the floor.

“Nope,” Lupin said with all seriousness. “As much as we’d all love to, we’re going to let Goemon have that treat.”

Suddenly there were two gunshots and she clenched her jaw to hold back a yell, Jigen having lodged a bullet right where each of her arm sockets were. “That should help make it a fair fight.”

Zenigata watched from across the room with Blondie and Boots. He didn’t like killing, and didn’t believe it was ever a suitable punishment, but he was here to help Lupin and the others, and wasn’t going to hinder their business.

Besides, after seeing the traumatizing state Goemon was in…there wasn’t much he could protest against when it came to giving Jianya what she deserved.

As Fujiko stood on Goemon’s other side and helped Lupin to stand him up after taking the bindings off his ankles, Jianya looked at the samurai with satisfaction. He took a few steps towards her, using all his remaining strength to stay steady.

“You’re probably my best piece yet,” she commented. “What do you guys think, does it compare with Biming?” The others grimaced with detestation, but Goemon’s eyes simply bore into her as he reached her, collapsing down to a kneel beside her. He placed a hand on her throat, both their skin too bloody and slippery for her to hold him back. “How does it feel knowing your life up until now was a lie? Always doubting whether or not your friends were real?” she asked, tilting her chin up as Goemon pressed Zantetsuken up against her turtleneck collar, the fabric being the only thing holding the blade steady.

“It makes killing you feel infinitely better knowing they helped me,” he snarled hoarsely.

“Good…” Jianya said with a pleased smile. “Because it’s going to hurt when you find out your new life of friendship is the real lie.”

Without another thought, Goemon dragged Zantetsuken across her throat in a swift stroke, wishing he had the strength to cut her head off completely. The section of her turtleneck fluttered to the ground to reveal the blood flowing from the gash in her jugular. She lurched at the action, her last breath being cut off, and Goemon menacingly locked eyes with her for as long as she could hold hers open. They slowly drifted shut as her head drooped to the side, and Goemon released her.

He forced himself to stand, watching with resentment as she fell lifeless onto her side.

It was over. Goemon unsteadily turned, his wide eyes traveling between Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko, his awareness having no room for anything else.

His life was different now. For so long, things had been the same, with his ultimate goal being to kill Lupin, but acting in his opposing role of helping him. His sword clattered beside him as his legs gave out and he fell to his hands and knees. It was over.

“Goemon!” Lupin ran up to catch him before he fell completely over. Jigen quickly took off his jacket and pressed it underneath him against the bullet wound in his back while Fujiko gripped his hand, careful not to hurt his wrist or fingertips.

They watched anxiously as the samurai grimaced in pain. Goemon’s exhausted eyes traveled over them, looking uncertain and guarded, like a cornered animal. Lupin wedged his hand
under Goemon’s head to lift it—making the samurai stiffen for a moment—allowing him to get a better look.

“Goemon…?” Lupin said hesitantly after a few anxious seconds, trying to keep hold of him and convince him that this was reality, and not him slip away. If anything, he could at least comfort Goemon while he was coherent, no matter how much he grasped. Lupin swept Goemon’s ragged hair aside and tried to smooth it down into place.

“Are…are you real?” he whispered, as if he were scared to ask—scared it wouldn’t be true. He strained to lift a shaky hand to Lupin.

“Yeah, Goemon.” Lupin swallowed as a thankful beam pulled at his lips. He took Goemon’s hand and brought it to his face, letting him see for himself. “We’re real.”

Goemon lips trembled. He looked over at Jigen, who was half-smiling with relief as he tended to the bullet wound, then at Fujiko’s encouraging, hopeful face. It was apparent Goemon felt all the pain because of how he was trembling, but that wasn’t going to hold back the breath of astonishment from slipping between his chapped lips.

“It really is you,” he said weakly, his gaze unbreaking as his sensitive fingertips unsteadily pushed into Lupin’s skin, just to make sure he wouldn’t disappear.

“You’ve got my word,” Lupin reassured.

Goemon’s breathing slowed down as he began looking more tired. He hurt all over, but the swelling inside his chest was something new. It was intense, but not painful or uncomfortable. It was oddly invigorating, and the only thing keeping him awake—he didn’t want to lose it.

Goemon could tell, he finally found it.

This sure bond, this feeling of trust.

His new life.

“I knew you would come for me…” For the briefest of moments, his lips upturned elatedly. “I knew you were my friends.”

Lupin looked at him, surprised for a moment, but then gave his iconic cockeyed grin. Goemon felt Lupin wrap his arms around him tighter, Fujiko squeeze his hand harder, Jigen hold him more securely.

“I always knew…”

It had just taken him a while to realize he already did.

---

I'm sorry I haven't posted art for any of the captive chapters, I'll start again soon, I just didn't know what to draw... (Not a good excuse...)

(I still wasn't sure what to draw for this chapter, but here's a painting of normal Goemon.)
“Really? You feel no fear or guilt. No empathy.”

Capable or incapable? What do you think...?
Ugh, this chapter is so fluffy, I feel so dumb writing fluffy stuff (and I am terrible at it) so if it actually does come across as dumb, just try to bear with me, haha.

Also, I really want to thank any of you who have read this far! Next week will be the last update, as I will be posting the last chapter and the epilogue. I really appreciate you taking the time and effort to read through it all, good and bad. It's almost over! (I'm actually really sad that I finished it--my friend said I'm the first person she'd met that was depressed about completing a fanfiction, haha, but it's true. My first Lupin III and multi-chapter fanfic is coming to a close and I'm going to miss writing for it.)

Again, thank you so much for joining the Lupin gang on this journey!!!

“Goemon… Goemon…”

Goemon squinted, seeing the plain ground beneath him. For a moment his pulse stopped with shock, and the following beats felt fainter as his heart filled with dread.

He thought he’d gotten away. He thought Lupin had saved him.

“Are you listening? Can you even hear me?”

“Not you again…” the samurai groaned, swallowing down his despair. “Why must it always be you…?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘not you,’ ‘always you’?!”

“Wait—what—?” Goemon’s eyes flashed open, stunned by a bright light, but he forced himself to focus. That wasn’t the ground of the torture chamber—it was a ceiling? “L-Lupin?” Glancing around, he saw Jigen and Fujiko at his other side, all of them smiling. He paused, processing everything. “It…it was not a dream?”

“Nope,” Lupin assured with a smile as the samurai scanned their faces, his blood rushing with pleasant astonishment.

Goemon worked his jaw as he began to say more, realizing something cottony squeezed in his mouth. He went to pull out the wad of gauze from between his molars, but instead something hit him in the face—his own hand…which was bandaged into a nub? Both hands, actually, wrapped all the way up his arms and set in slings—then he went rigid.

“Wait, wait!” Lupin yelled, grabbing Goemon’s wrist to prevent him from pulling out the IV drip inserted beneath the folds of bandages. Lupin’s grip shot unintentional sharp pains through Goemon’s arm, but that didn’t deter the samurai.

“No! No more needles!” Goemon spat desperately, despite the fact he couldn’t grab the IV
without the use of his fingers. He looked appalled and almost hurt that Lupin was trying to stop him.

“It’s just water,” Lupin told him, his expression encouraging as he ran a hand over Goemon’s hair, trying to get him to relax his head back down. Goemon stared at him, still unsure. “Pure H$_2$O. It’s keeping you hydrated.”

Well, pure H$_2$O with some saline, along with potassium and magnesium, but it was still water. That was all Goemon needed to know.

There were a few moments’ pause before the samurai slowly nodded, as if remembering something. “Yes…. I trust you.” The look of relief on his face was muddled, but at least he recognized their smiles. “Ugh…. So thirsty…”

Jigen carefully put an arm around Goemon’s shoulders to gently lift him up as Lupin took a cup off the bedside table. He brought it to Goemon’s lips after reaching into the samurai’s mouth and prying the cotton out. Goemon tried to ease his parched throat, gulping down the water as quickly as Lupin’s assistance would allow. He’d forgotten water was so delightful. He took a deep breath once the cup was drained, then watched as Lupin tossed the cotton in the metal garbage can next to him. It certainly wasn’t a familiar trash can, and neither were these tiles or that odd cabinet and counter in the corner…. Goemon analyzed himself. He was in a strange bed? And clothed in some ugly baggy dress?

A hospital?! They had never taken him to a hospital before, why now?! He furrowed his brow and began to sit up—

“Hey, hey, wait a minute!” Lupin told him, he and Jigen gently pushing him back down.

“No, I do not belong here! I—I am…so…weak…” he said with disbelief, realizing that he couldn’t fight against them. Looking over he saw there was a mound of pillows behind him of all shapes and colors. They must have bought them all for him…. He winced as he rested against them, becoming enveloped in the cushions. “My back…”

However, it wasn’t just his back; all his muscles from being pulled, stretched, and strained were relentlessly hurting. He couldn’t feel anything other than the intense ache coursing through his worn-out limbs. Deep in his ribcage was sore, and he felt it more now that he had tried to move.

“Now you see why?” Fujiko said as she sat next to his feet on the bed, raising an eyebrow and grinning at him. Was she really already picking on him? He groaned, half at her, half at his body.

“If you wanna sit up, use this,” Lupin instructed, going to hand him the remote that was wired to the bed. Goemon looked at him unappreciatively as the device merely rolled off of his nubby arm and into his lap. “Er…I’ll do it for you,” he laughed apologetically, pressing a button to adjust the bed to a comfortable sitting position (a few of the excessive pillows falling to the floor in the process), although nothing near Goemon’s usual perfect posture.

Goemon’s gaze passed between them wearily. He was going to have to ask it sooner or later. “What…what happened?”

It wasn’t a cheerful event, cluing Goemon in on the events, from figuring out he had been kidnapped, to their alliance with Zenigata, to discovering Pierre and Jianya’s conspiracy. They explained to Goemon that he had passed out back at the torture room, Zenigata helped carry him out, and even took them to the airport in his police vehicle to avoid traffic and get into the airport
more easily. After Jianya had showed them her endeavors with Biming via text, Jigen had contacted an acquaintance located in Italy beforehand to assure that Goemon would stay off the records and still get the treatment he needed…which was quite a bit. It made sense. What hospital wouldn't report such a criminal?

“You’ve got…I don’t even remember how many stitches on your back. Hundreds,” Jigen told him, leaving Goemon bewildered. “You’ve got some on your wrists, ankles, and knees too. And the doc said if you try anything stupid, you’re gonna open up ‘em up, which would be bad,” he clarified, making sure the samurai understood that he couldn't just do what he wanted. “Especially your bullet wound.”

Goemon’s face fell. The bullet in his back—he distinctly remembered his legs giving out, and instinctively he tried to move them. No, it didn’t, did it…?

It…it did. He hung his head inconsolably. The others glanced at each other worriedly.

“I didn’t think you’d take it so hard…” Fujiko said sympathetically. “It’s not so bad, you know…”

“I can no longer use my legs,” he said grimly, eyes glaring as if his legs may miraculously move again if he stared hard enough. Not bad? A forbidding humiliation came over him. “What sort of samurai—?”

“Can’t use your legs?”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Goemon…” Fujiko hiked up the bottom of the blankets to reveal his bandaged feet placed in heavy boot-like braces, and his knees in some sort of Velcro immobilizer brackets. “Your legs are fine.”

Lupin giggled at Goemon’s dramatic reaction. “It’s for your ligaments and tendons—or whatever’s in there. The doc doesn’t want you to strain them anymore.”

“Don’t do that,” Jigen said, pushing Goemon back as he tried to lean over curiously.

“How…how long before I recover…?” he asked, voice tinged with worry.

“Geez, don’t look so sad,” Lupin mumbled. “It’ll be…a little while—STOP.”

“I cannot wait that long!” Goemon argued, trying to sit up again. He could tell by Lupin’s voice that “a little while” was indeed “a long time.” After Wolf and Rose…he didn’t want to go through it again. The time spent complacent as he recovered was just as bad as the torture itself. “I can handle it, I assure you—”

“You can handle it if you stay in bed!” Jigen reprimanded. They looked at him hopelessly as Goemon began pouting, going to cross his arms, but the slings preventing him from doing so.

Goemon’s eyebrow twitched as he grimaced irately.

“Hey, don’t worry, we’ll protect you!” Lupin assured with a grin, seeing that Goemon was perturbed with how little he could do. The samurai glared at him.

“Where is Zantetsuken, so I can put you in this same state?” he said darkly, but then stared intently down at himself. Did he really need protecting?
Goemon stiffened. That thought—that wasn’t his, not anymore. Nonetheless, he felt a guilt welling inside him that something of the sort would even cross his mind. He wanted to apologize for burdening them…or at least thank them…but he couldn’t form the words.

*Lupin and the others have saved me; is that not enough?!* he argued with himself, but he couldn’t dwell for long without them suspecting something… “Where are my clothes? I do not want to wear this.”

Lupin frowned. “But we picked it out for you…. It’s got little cartoon puppies on it—see, that dachshund looks like little Josephine!”

“I told you to just put him in the black one.”

“All clothes should be black, according to you, Jigen.”

“Tch…”

Complying with Goemon’s upset expression, Lupin opened the drawer of the bedside table, revealing the samurai’s neatly folded clothes. “We even brought your lucky red underwear!”

“I see….” Goemon tried to suppress his embarrassment as he spotted the bright fabric on top of the pile; perhaps in the past he had no problem flaunting the scarlet fundoshi, even having used it as a signal marker during a heist, but nowadays he’d prefer to keep such information buried…

They all paused as a growling sound filled the room, bringing their gazes to Goemon.

“Are you hungry?” Lupin suspected mischievously.

“No.” Goemon turned his head away. “I have gone much longer than this without eating.” However, his stomach protested by gurgling again, making his cheeks flush a little.

“Don’t worry!” Lupin said cheerily, picking up a small insulated lunchbox from behind the bed. He was prepared. He’d been waiting for this moment. “I snuck this in. You’ve been on a feeding tube for the past couple days—”

“Couple *days*?” Goemon asked, baffled. “What—”

“—and the doc says she wants to start you off with some light food first, but I think we should start where we left off.” Lupin sat on the bed and opened up the box, then took out a container that held two filets of salmon, skin and all. Just like back in Spain… “It’s still warm too.”

“I call feeding him!” Fujiko interjected playfully.

“No!” Lupin snapped angrily, brandishing the pointy end of the fork at her. “You already called brushing his hair!”

“I hope you get use of your hands back soon.” Jigen chuckled as Goemon’s face reddened. With everything that happened, from the cuts to the strain to the fingernails, it had been decided that making sure he didn’t use his hands at all was the best route for now.

“Jigen, you know you want to open Goemon’s presents for him,” Lupin said.

“Yeah, you were *so* excited, Jigen,” Fujiko teased.
“As if,” he protested, standing up and making his way to the cracked window to light a cigarette.

“Presents?” Goemon asked, raising an eyebrow. Lupin pointed to the bedside table on his left where several presents were wrapped in colorful paper (why did they insist on puppy patterns?) and a bag stuffed with tissue paper sat. “Why?”

“To make you feel better, of course! Now, here comes the airplane! Open up!” Goemon glared at Lupin as he pressed a chunk of grilled salmon against the man’s pursed lips. The thief pouted. “C’mon, I made this special, just for you…”

Maybe it was just the famishment taking over, but that salmon smelled *delectable*… and Goemon’s stomach wasn’t taking no for an answer. Turning his eyes away, the blushing samurai gave in and took the bite off the fork.

His sense of smell hadn’t lied to him. That salmon was absolutely fantastic.

Goemon parted his lips as an enthusiastic Lupin gave him another mouthful, and before long, the samurai was opening his mouth eagerly before Lupin could get another piece on the fork. He was ravenous far worse than he ever could have imagined. Jigen shook his head, trying not to laugh—true, he didn’t think they could ever be too fervent about rescuing their friend, but *some* ways of expressing it could be toned down a little.

“You know, you owe Jigen big time,” Lupin said roguishly as Goemon chewed. “He used his IOU with his lady-friend to get you in here off the books instead of making her go on a date with him.”

“Lupin, I swear if you make one more crack, I’m gonna crack your skull,” Jigen threatened before blowing a trail of smoke outside.

“He’s just making sure Goemon knows the sacrifice you made,” Fujiko said wryly, “which was huge, considering the chance for you to get a date is so scarce.”

Lupin stiffened at a knock in the doorway, quickly hiding the rest of the food, and Jigen hastily flicked his cigarette out the window. Goemon looked up to see a pretty woman with brunette hair and glasses approaching. Judging by her white coat, this was both the “doc” and “lady-friend” they had been talking about.

“I see you’re awake,” she greeted kindly. Lupin stepped out of her way so she could stand next to Goemon. “I’m your doctor, Livia.”

“Thank you, Miss Livia.” Goemon glanced over at Lupin oddly, who was giving a devilish smile from behind her and pointing towards Jigen. “I…am sorry to have caused you any trouble.”

Goemon clenched his teeth. Saying those words to her came easy enough, why not to the others…?

The woman raised her eyebrows at his stoicism. Unlike the demanding Jigen during his appointment for his tooth, this old-fashioned man seemed to have a little respect. “It’s no trouble, really, after all Jigen did to help this place.”

Her words holding regard for the gunman only encouraged the face Lupin was making—as well as Jigen’s own face of annoyance. She was treating Goemon and keeping it confidential as a favor, but the thief just *loved* to use anything to make into a jeer about romance, didn’t he?
Livia looked down at the clipboard she was holding. “You’ll be glad to know that with proper PT and self-care, the only lasting damage will be scarring.”

“‘PT’?” Goemon questioned, not caring about the scars. He’d been cut, filleted, shot, bitten—his entire past was proof enough that he was too good for scars of any kind to last on him.

“Physical therapy,” she explained. “After so much stress on your body, your tendons, ligaments, and muscles are going to need time to recover and rebuild their strength. You could liken it as training them to function at their best again.”

“I have my own training regiment,” Goemon insisted. The other three let out hopeless breaths. After Wolf and Rose, he had been a bit resentful towards them, but cooperated—as reluctant as he was. Who knew what it was going to take to get him to comply with a complete stranger?

The doctor did not look impressed, nor to be one whose will would bend easily.

“Depending on your recovery rate, we’ll be able to start the PT in a few days—just a few stretches for starters. As for your ribs and back, we’ll be changing out the bandages daily. Lean forward for me a bit,” Livia requested, helping the fatigued man sit up, and began untying the strings behind Goemon’s neck on the back of his hospital gown—until he turned to smack—well, more so bat—her hand away.

“What are you doing?” he asked suspiciously, but the others could tell from his pink cheeks that he really was just uncomfortable being semi-undressed by a woman. Fujiko looked at him, unable to stop her amused smile. That poor man; full of sin to one extreme, completely innocent on the other.

Livia looked at him sternly. “If you’d like, you can leave right now, or you can let me do my job.”

“Good. I do not want to be here,” Goemon stated bluntly.

“No, no!” Lupin insisted to Livia. “He’s just a little…shy, he doesn’t really want to leave!”

“Yes, I do,” the samurai said as sincerely as possible, attempting to move his legs to the side of the bed, but he couldn’t budge them. It was evident how displeased this made him.

“Goemon,” Jigen said gruffly, “this woman slaved over your naked body for hours on end to make sure you didn’t die. Have the decency to listen.”

Goemon’s face burned with embarrassment at his choice of words, each one more demeaning than the last. He didn’t protest anymore—and certainly didn’t look at Livia—as she removed his slings and slipped the open-back gown down his arms to reveal his wrapped torso.

Lupin and Jigen held Goemon’s feeble arms up as Livia unraveled the bandages. It looked much better. The first day, the right side had been seeped in the blood slowly making its way out of the popped blisters, and the left side had been in the same state but with puss from the burns. Now the cloths were…fairly clean. His back had remained free of festers since she stitched him, but that was simply because he had been complacent. Now that he was awake, they hoped he would work with them to keep that good healing spree.

Goemon didn’t like being at the hands of someone he didn’t know; he’d had enough of being treated as some specimen with Jianya, but he did trust his friends. Yes, as long as they were there with him, he supposed he could put up with it…
That idea was strange to him. He usually would protest them staying around, making him feel like he was just an exhibit of weakness in these circumstances...but he wanted them here now. He knew they didn’t see him as inferior, even in this state.

Goemon’s injuries hurt, each one in different ways. The frostbite was ached at the slightest pressure, the burns feeling as if they were flaring up to the lightest touch. His back was sensitive, and it stung as Livia meticulously cleaned the wounds and applied some sort of ointment to help his skin. Then she wrapped fresh bandages around him, tied his gown back up, and fixed his arms in place in his slings.

“We can start the skin grafts on the burns in a couple weeks, but it will take a little longer for the frostbite’s semi-damaged areas to get to a point we can work with,” Livia explained, much to Goemon’s dismay. He wanted out now…. After an exchange of thanks, Livia left the Lupin gang—but not without a quick warning. “If you follow directions as well as Jigen, I can assure you that none of your wounds will heal correctly, so don’t move.”

Goemon pressed his lips together in both defiance and disheartenment. He wanted to retain his skills as a swordsman...but he couldn’t feel he was doing so if he just sat there all day until he got someone else’s approval. He knew his body best, he knew its limits!

Yup, he’s thinking right about now that his body is limitless, Lupin guessed with a slight simper. Just with Goemon’s expression, it was obvious he thought he could bend all medical rules.

It’s gonna be tough keepin’ an eye on him... Jigen thought. Dammit, Goemon, you’re like a bratty kid that we gotta babysit... But it was that bratty streak about Goemon that made him who he was, and they wouldn’t ask to have him any other way. Now that Livia had left, Lupin pulled out the salmon again, but a contemplative look came over Goemon. He was brooding on something... “Here, let’s open your presents,” Jigen said, sitting next to the bed (and ignoring Fujiko’s triumphant smirk), hoping to cheer the samurai up. “Which one first?”

Goemon blinked, scanning the gifts before swallowing. “Which one is best?”

“Mine.”

“Psh, he’s gonna like mine way better than yours, Fujiko.”

“They’re from all of us,” Jigen said firmly as Goemon loudly inhaled the next bite. Jigen grabbed the presents and set them on Goemon’s lap. “Here, you can at least pick them up.”

They almost laughed at the way his eyes brightened, despite the usual apathetic look on the samurai’s face. It wasn’t the presents though. It was the fact that he was in their minds—and he could appreciate it now. The chance he had thought he’d lost was right in front of him.

Another bite and Goemon picked up the first present, squeezing the box between his hands and lifting it up. It wasn’t too heavy, and was about the size of a square cookie tin.

He wouldn’t be disappointed if they were cookies.

“Here, take off the bow,” Jigen offered, knowing that any sense of capability would help the samurai. He held the box for him while Goemon used both hands to pinch the ribbon and pull it off with a satisfied look. Jigen peeled off the paper, revealing a cardboard box.

Not cookies. But that was okay.

Jigen opened the box and placed the present into Goemon’s bandaged hands.
“A radio?” he said, eyes lighting up.

“Yup, an international one, with a touch screen,” Lupin said, all of them grinning at his positive reaction. “Although… I guess you can’t use it right now, but you will soon!” He turned it on and picked the same station Goemon had when they were in the moving truck. The enka music seemed to lift Goemon’s spirits even more.

“And it’s solar-powered,” Fujiko added, “so you can take it with you on your training excursions without worrying about it dying.”

*Thank you,* he tried to say aloud, but the words just wouldn’t form…

“So good that you’re speechless, huh?”

Goemon was glad it seemed that way. He didn’t doubt their trustworthiness, but his own ability to trust them. He hated that he couldn’t simply accept their kindness.... He had to say *something* though. “I do not understand why you are doing this for me…”

“Next, next,” Lupin urged, shoving another bite of salmon in his mouth. Goemon picked up another gift and handed it to Jigen. The gunman ripped the paper off and untied the lid to the wooden box, lifting it to reveal a puffy ball on a stick among two jars and an oiling can.

“A new sword-cleaning kit?” Goemon beamed at the sight of a new uchiko, fresh papers, chalk, and oil.

Lupin leaned over and said quietly, “That was all Jigen’s idea, but he won’t admit it.”

“I can hear you,” Jigen said, annoyed, although he didn’t really mind Goemon knowing the fact. “As someone who values his weapon, I assume Goemon feels the same about Zantetsuken. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that.”

“Where is Zantetsuken?” the samurai asked, realizing he’d never gotten an answer. “I would like to use this now.”

“How do you s’pose you’re gonna do that?” Lupin sounded like a reprimanding mother as he fed him the last of the salmon.

“Don’t worry, it’s safe,” Fujiko reassured. “Now open your next present.”

*What exactly entails “safe”? Somewhere it will not be harmed, or somewhere out of reach of you doing harm?*

Goemon anxiously halted the idea directed at himself. That’s not how he thought anymore—at least, not how he wanted to think. He was over being distrustful—after everything that had transpired, he had to be…right?

“Here, you can take everything out of this bag,” the thief coaxed, hoping Goemon would drop the subject of the sword. They didn’t want Goemon to be overexerting himself, let alone trying to use Zantetsuken.

Goemon used both stubby hands to remove the bunched tissue paper, then reached inside and pulled out one of the many contents.

“Pocky?” His lips curled up in a smile upon seeing the box, then reached back in and pulled out a square tin. “Sakuma drops…” He eagerly held it up for one of the other to pop the top of the
fruit-drop candies.

“You want one right now?” Fujiko said as she took the tin, almost laughing at his enthusiasm. He usually didn’t let his like for sweets be shown, but it was certainly apparent now as he was too engrossed with the snacks to answer.

“Konpeito!” Goemon handed the bag of candy over to Lupin to open, then he proceeded to fish out some rice crackers, roasted nori snacks, and matcha green tea candy. There were definitely enough snacks to where no one would have to fight over who got to feed him.

Sweet-tooth satisfied with a fruit-drop and no worries about not being able to eat Japanese food, he went to grab the biggest present—but it was rather heavy…. Jigen took it for him. As the paper fell to the ground, Goemon could see a black case with a handle. Inside was a velvet lining with two daggers. The samurai looked extremely intrigued.

“It’s the Pierre treasure,” Fujiko told him. Goemon ran a nub over the glimmering flat side of one of the blades.

“For my sword collection,” he said keenly. “Is this diamond-edged?”

“Yup!” Lupin said excitedly.

“That is a horrible idea,” Goemon said, his expression becoming critical. “A blade needs flexibility, and diamond is rigid. It would most likely crack against anything hard, possibly shatter given enough force.”

“Nice observation…” Fujiko and Lupin gave sarcastic smiles, trying to act like his carping didn’t bother them. Jigen grunted a laugh; even after all the peril he’d just been through, Goemon hadn’t lost a bit of his shrewdness—or his obliviousness.

“But they will be one of the greatest in my collection,” he said, his smile returning, “since you gave them to me.”

There was a bit of silence, making him return their stares with a blank one of his own before becoming frustrated. “I—w-well, it is not as if you got them for me, I participated in retrieving—”

“Aww, Goemon loves us!” Lupin cheered, hopping up and laying on the bed next to him, throwing his arms around him.

“Ouch! Get off of me!”

“Oooo, sorry,” Lupin said, letting go of his tender sides. Goemon turned his eyes away from everyone, pouting and making sure they all saw how upset he was, hoping to convince them that he indeed did NOT love them.

“I am simply obliged to acknowledge your existence since you saved—assisted in my escape. I do not ‘love’ anyone.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I—”

“No, you do not.”
Goemon took in a sharp breath as a shock went through him. He looked over the room pensively, but the owner of that voice—his copy—was nowhere to be seen. But the voice was so clear...he knew he heard it...

"Goemon, are you alright?" Fujiko asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I..." Goemon’s lips became a straight line. He couldn’t fall prey to that clone’s mindset—not again, not after coming this far. *I have to accept what I feel*, he told himself determinedly, but when he opened his mouth, no words came out. He didn’t understand. *I know what I feel! Why am I ready to give my life for them, but cannot commit to a simple feeling towards them...?*

"Goemon...?"

"I do...feel something," was all he managed to admit, much to his disappointment. When he looked at them all, he felt it. That swelling inside his chest. He knew he wasn’t misinterpreting it.

"Goemon’s too manly to say ‘love,’” Lupin teased, quickly muttering, “That’s okay, Jigen won’t say it either—but you can say you care about us, right?”

Looking a little more content, he agreed, “I—”

*No.*

“...I—”

*NO, you do not.*

“I do!” Goemon snapped, making the others raise their eyebrows.

“Eee, sorry, don’t get mad...” Lupin averted his eyes apprehensively. “There’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I am not ashamed; I do care about you,” he replied much more strictly than those words would usually be said. He had admitted it to Jianya and his specter before, and he could admit it to Lupin and the others. “You mean a great deal to me, because you are my friends.” The samurai looked at the other three with a confident smile. “I can now accept that.”

Upon hearing those words, the others looked pretty mystified while Goemon sat with his typical show-off smirk, as if he had just accomplished something extremely huge.

And they knew he did. Their expressions showed how proud they were of him—but were quickly concerned when he seemed vexed.

He cared about them. It was odd, but fulfilling.

“Thank you,” Goemon finally said, his smile having so much more feeling behind it than they would ever know. “And...I apologize for making you worry...and for putting this burden on you. As well as—”

“Goemon, Goemon,” Lupin interrupted, propping himself up on his side to look at his friend fully, still laying next to him. “Don’t apologize.”

“But—is that not the right thing to do...?” the samurai asked, confused.
“You don’t hafta thank us,” the thief assured, putting a hand harmlessly on his shoulder. “We want to help you, no matter what!”

“Lupin’s right,” Jigen spoke up, closing the daggers and putting them aside. He smirked. “We want what’s best for you, and we’re gonna do whatever it takes to make it happen.”

“And it’s not just our duty as your friends; having you as a friend isn’t obligatory,” Fujiko reminded, scooting closer to him. “It’s a choice we make.”

Goemon blinked. They chose him as a friend.

They chose him as a friend.

“And we know you’d do the same for us,” Lupin added, his sideways grin sure as ever.

Goemon looked between them all, not sure what to say. They were here for him, right now. They were there for him while he was captured. They were going to be there for him.

“Thank you.”

He said it with hardly any effort at all. He felt so…clear. His mind, his chest, everything. It wasn’t heavy anymore, and it wasn’t murky anymore. It was weightless, and Goemon wasn’t sure exactly why or how, but it just felt right.

At least, for a moment.

“I…I do not feel well,” Goemon tried to clutch his head with his wrapped hand to hold himself steady, feeling as if he was going to spiral to floor, despite being in bed.

“Did I feed you too much?” Lupin said with worry as Goemon’s head collapsed back upon the pillows.

“I’ll go get the doctor—”

“He’s just tired—exhausted, more like,” Jigen spoke up before they could overreact. Fujiko and Lupin looked a bit skeptical, as the face on the passed-out Goemon wasn’t exactly peaceful. He looked…faintly distraught. Jigen began taking the presents from Goemon’s lap and putting them on the table. “Let ‘im sleep it off.”

Fujiko and Lupin understood this was something new for Goemon, but Jigen saw how critical the decision—a decision that took years to make—was for him. Arguably, the hitman had been through more emotional turmoil than the other two; Fujiko and Lupin were flexible, but Jigen knew what it was like to be at war with himself. However, unlike Goemon, he’d learned a long time ago to keep his self-image accurate.

Goemon had to face the conflict of who he wanted to be and how he perceived himself—the latter something that probably hadn’t altered since the day he established himself a samurai. He was finally reaching the instilment of change he had fought so hard for, but the turmoil wasn’t over yet.
“Doc, it’s almost been a week, are you sure he’s alright…?”

A week…? Goemon stirred, the words muffled, but he could tell they were being said about him. He thought it was Lupin, but he wasn’t sure…

“His vitals are fine, so I’m led to believe that all this sleep is helping him with any stress and sleep deprivation. His body is healing, but he needs his to take care of his mental health, too.”

*Mental health*… What did that mean, exactly?

“These recent events were certainly taxing, but did he happen to tell you about anything else that might have been stressing him lately? Or was he perhaps acting…odd?”

Goemon’s heart skipped a beat, subconsciously becoming defensive.

“Well…”

The samurai’s eyes flashed open and he sat up, ready to protest against any claims made. He was perfectly normal—his mental health was perfectly fine! He wasn’t stressed, he wasn’t crazy—

However, all Goemon saw around him was blackness…but he felt much more than nothing. The air…or absence of it…was so dense, making him feel compressed. Looking around anxiously, he realized he wasn’t sitting up in bed; he was standing. He lifted his healed hands to view them, his body dressed in his usual garb. This was definitely a dream.

“Look who it is,” an unpleasant voice with an unpleasant tone sounded. Goemon spotted his copy against the void, clear and crisp.

Goemon felt a dread like no other. Everything he’d worked for, that feeling of trust and friendship…the banishment of *him*…was all gone. Throat dry, the samurai had no words, just a look of contempt.

“Why are you acting as if you did not know?” the double scoffed. “You heard me, even if you could not see me.” Yes, Goemon knew he had heard those words while opening his presents… but he had hoped it was just himself being paranoid. “You may have come so far as to suppress the
“sight of me,” he said, smirking, “but I am inevitably still with you.”

“That means nothing,” Goemon said flatly. “Just because you exist does not mean I have to listen to you.”

“The fact that I exist means that you are listening to me,” he told him. “I just need to get you to act, and it should not be long before that happens.”

Goemon gave him a skeptical stare. “What do you mean?”

“Back at your ‘rescue,’ you were simply too exhausted to keep your guard up any longer,” the doppelganger explained. “You were desperate, grasping at anything to get yourself away from that torment, so you believed they were your friends for relief. But, in reality, you doubt them no less than you did before.”

“That is not true!” Goemon argued, tensing angrily. He clenched his jaw, taking advantage of not feeling the dental pain in his unconsciousness. “We are friends, whether you agree or not. Your opinion does not matter.”

“I do not need it to matter,” the clone said with a content smirk. “Your emotional exhaustion will give way to me soon enough.”

“Give way’?”

“Yes. In your disparity, you could not afford to be suspicious. But it is who you are deep inside.” Goemon felt his stomach lurch at the reflection’s words. “You are getting over this desperateness now that you are no longer captive; you no longer need to rely on the idea friendship. But you are tired, and your willpower is weakening. This friend charade will fall… and Lupin with it.”

Goemon stiffened. “What?”

“The real you will be taking over soon, Goemon,” he clarified, his smirk broadening as he approached. “Understand?”

“I am the real me, and I will never let you do that,” Goemon growled, putting a hand on Zantetsuken.

“You do not have a choice,” the fake laughed, finding the other’s boldness amusing. “Your resolve is worn-out, and you are powerless.”

“No,” Goemon said determinedly, “my friends give me strength, more than you could ever possess.”

“Oh, really?” In an instant, the copy’s katana was drawn, and Goemon speedily brought Zantetsuken up to block the strike. The clash of metal rang through his ears—but a clatter followed soon after. Goemon winced as his sword fell from his hands against the invisible plane, drawing in a sharp breath. Trembling, he looked down at his mangled fingers and shredded wrists, hardly able to close his hands at all as they began bleeding.

“Wh-what—?” Goemon bit back a yell as his legs gave out, feeling the strain come over him all at once, blood soaking into the knees of his hakama and the ankles of his socks.

“Your friends make you stronger, do they?” the specter mocked, crouching down beside Goemon, who struggled on his hands and knees to look up at him. “You have no friends.”
Goemon felt the pain returning to his sides, making his insides clench as he sat hunched on all fours. “You are wrong…”

Then he began to wretch suddenly, watching the blood he was spitting up splatter against the nonexistent ground as he felt bits of tooth pass through his lips. He coughed and wiped his mouth, doing everything in his power to make it stop, until the clone stood and jammed his foot into Goemon’s shoulder, kicking him over. Goemon grunted, feeling as if his side was shattering as he fell on it, and clutched the dislocated shoulder gingerly.

“Admit it!” the mirror image taunted, his downward stare more degrading than ever before. “You have no friends.”

Goemon could no longer move; he could hardly meet the lookalike’s gaze—and soon averted his eyes because he didn’t want to. He thought he’d finally obtained it all, everything he wanted…but no. \textit{He} wouldn’t let him. Why? Goemon just wanted to be happy…

“I hate you…”

“You hate me?” the copy sneered, entertained. “I have never heard such a pitiful statement, nor seen such a pathetic sight.” His face became grave as Goemon once again turned to look at him. “You are weak…and I have surpassed you.” He seemed to ponder for a moment as he put the tip of the faux Zantetsuken at the immobile Goemon’s chest. “You may want to say your goodbyes to Lupin, because next time will be the last time ‘you’ will ever see him, and the time after that…” He gave a satisfied, toothy grin. “…he will never be seen by \textit{anyone} again.”

Goemon’s heart raced, his thoughts rampant—he could feel it, the anxiety coming back, just like when he was captive. “No—no, you cannot—I will not let you kill him—!”

The blade wrenched a gasp from him as it dug its way through his chest. Goemon’s eyes widened as he clenched the wound—but, thankfully, it wasn’t there. He was staring up at the ceiling of the hospital, moonlight was filtering through the window to illuminate his surroundings.

His breath was shaky. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t think. All Goemon could do was try to stay quiet as he saw Lupin from the corner of his eye, sleeping slouched back in the seat. To his other side was Jigen, draped over his chair’s two arms and his hat covering his face. Fujiko was over by the window, curled up on a cushioned bench with a pillow and blanket. They all seemed to be sleeping peacefully…much unlike Goemon.

His wrapped hand rose and fell with his chest more slowly as he was able to control himself. Little by little, he was able to move his body, and eventually he sat up on his own—which was something he didn’t remember being able to do before. If what he had heard was true, then he had been sleeping for almost a week…and Lupin and the others were still here with him. He didn’t doubt it had been that long; looking down, he saw he was in a black hospital gown now and assumed it was because they had changed him.

Goemon looked between them all, horriﬁcation building inside him. They cared about him. He couldn’t let anything happen to them.

He couldn’t make them suffer because of his weakness.

Furrowing his brow, Goemon used his teeth to pull at the bandages of one of his hands, gradually unravelling it until his fingers came into view. It was a bit painful, but he used his free hand to unbandage the other, then worked his way up his arms. With a little pinch, the IV drip was pulled out and left hanging from the fluids, and Goemon quietly pushed the blanket aside and
began undoing the braces on his legs and feet.

The samurai could only pray that he would be strong enough to stand as he bent his legs and lifted them over the side of the bed. Slowly he raised himself up, sure not to make a sound. The cold floor was a shock against his bare feet, but it didn’t deter him from keeping his balance. Noiselessly, he opened the drawer to the bedside table and grabbed his clothes.

Goemon closed the bathroom door behind him before turning on the light. There was a standing shower, toilet, and sink. Placing his clothes on the counter, he opened the cabinet beneath it. There is was, Zantetsuken. Fujiko had a thing for hiding items in the bathroom, it seemed.

With his sword located, Goemon proceeded to get dressed. As the loose black fabric hit the ground, Goemon looked at himself in the mirror. He didn’t belong in all those bandages, wrapped head to toe like some defenseless frailty. Seeing his hands in the light, wrists garlanded with stitches, was an eye-opener to how brutal his injuries were, especially since he knew this was nowhere near the worst. But that didn’t dissuade him.

He unwound the cloth from around his torso, letting it pile up by his feet, feeling the chill of the fresh air against his burns and blisters, the occasional tug on the stitched skin of his back as he reached around. Goemon ran his fingertips tentatively over his ribs, one side having a rough texture, the other rubbery smooth, but both painful. He made sure to remember how it felt as he was being dealt those wounds, and to remember who saved him from it.

As he bent to undress his legs, Goemon felt the sting of the skin on his back being stretched, the stitches fighting against one another to keep their gashes sealed, but he ignored it all. If they split open, so be it.

The holes in his knees were stitched, as well as the slices in his ankles. All of it was bruised.

Wherever there was an injury on the outside, it felt just as dreadful on the inside.

But that didn’t matter. He began to dress himself in the clothes he belonged in, wrapping his kimono around him, synching his hakama over it, pulling his tabi socks over his feet and placing them in his zori.

With determination, Goemon clutched Zantetsuken and swiftly unsheathed it, careful to avoid anything in the tiled bathroom. He concentrated, forcing his grip to be steady, his stance to be sturdy, and his movements to be fluid as he tossed the hospital garment in the air and attempted to shred it to test his capability. Little black squares fluttered down to the floor, all equal in size, all cut to perfection.

Contented, Goemon looked at his reflection in the polished metal, feeling that it wasn’t just himself he was looking at, and it wasn’t just the sword, but both. They were one entity, and a twinge in his chest appeared at the thought of it being tainted, becoming twisted into someone he didn’t want to be…

Knitting his brows together, Goemon straightened and sheathed his katana. Studying himself in the mirror, he imprinted the image in his mind so it wouldn’t be lost…so he wouldn’t forget who he was, no matter what anyone told him. It was his own choice who he was, who he wanted to be.

Turning off the light, Goemon stepped out silently, but paused before leaving the room. He looked back at the other three, the three who had stayed with him through it all. Through his
betrayals, his highs and lows, the victories they shared and the mistakes he would never admit to. They would be there for him until the very end, even if it meant that end was tonight.

Goemon wished he could tell them how he really felt, but they would try to stop him, and he knew this was something he had to do. He had to keep them safe.

And as he traveled down the dark corridor, he was determined to do so.

Outside was flooded in silvery light, so he had no trouble making his way down the dirt road. The town wasn’t very big or busy, so he left without any hinderances other than his own debilitated steps.

It was so difficult to leave. He didn’t want to—but he knew there were two reasons he wanted to stay, one which he didn’t approve of. Goemon wanted to share in their friendship now that he felt it and understood it, but it was because he understood it that he had to leave. The other part of him that was reluctant to go was the part that wished to remove them from the world.

Goemon swallowed, growing tired as he reached the edge of the town. The wispy grass flowing in the wind was growing taller on either side the farther he traveled. The way the moonlight reflected off of the blades looked like ripples in the ocean, tinted teal beneath the dark sky. Occasionally the radiance would cease as the moon hid behind a passing cloud, but it would always return again—and now with a new addition.

Goemon paused at the sight of the figure standing in the distance, postured with a purpose. Finally, it was what he’d been waiting for.

He stepped off the side of the road and into the field, ignoring the weariness of his body. The loathsome double waited with a dignified air about him, arms crossed in his sleeves.

“How typical of you, to ignore your problems by running away.” The copy’s lips twisted up into a smirk as he swept his hair out of the wind’s caress and curled it behind his ear. Goemon looked at him with a straight face.

“I am not running away. You know why I am here.”

“And neither do you.”

“You wish to relinquish me because you feel that your doubt in ‘friendship’ no longer exists.”

“And neither do you.”

“You will break soon. I will break you.”

“I think not,” Goemon told him confidently. “I know you better than you think. You are the one who is afraid. You are the one who doubts friendship and fears abandonment, using betrayal as a means of detachment, as false proof that you do not care for them and remain alone by choice. I have grown beyond that, and I will not become that man again.”

The lookalike narrowed his eyes at Goemon. “So, that is what you think?”

“That is what I know,” Goemon’s face became solemn. “I have been lonely long enough. Now that I have found friendship, I will not let you take it away from me. I will not let you hurt them.”

“Tch. More foolish than ever…” the clone spat under his breath. “Do not try to use
friendship as a mask for your weakness.”

“You cannot deceive me anymore,” Goemon enlightened, satisfaction tugging at the corners of his lips. His friends made him feel more fulfilled than ever before. “I have acquired no weakness.”

“We will see,” the specter said as his lips softly turned up into a degrading smile. He unsheathed his katana. “This is what you came for, no?”

Goemon stared him down, thinking about everything concerning the copy. When Goemon had been cut by him back at the Pierre mansion, Goggles had said she saw Goemon cut himself. Tightly gripping the hilt, Goemon drew his sword, not knowing what was in store for him should the specter land an attack.

But it had to be done, and he couldn’t let that darker version of him succeed.

Goemon couldn’t let all his progress be in vain, couldn’t let that villain take over his mind and force him to regress.

“I am not one to deny a fight, despite the fact that this duel will force me to cut something worthless.” Goemon’s mirror image lifted his blade, pointing it towards the other. “Let us get this over with.”

Clutching his katana firmly, Goemon lunged forward. The swords glinted like clashing bolts of lightning with every move. They dashed towards each other, tearing through the flowy grass with their quick steps. Perhaps one move would be enough to end this fight should it be anyone else, but no such thing could be possible with their perfectly-matched skill level—despite the real Goemon’s physical state. He was determined not to let his injuries affect this fight.

The blades met crossways, each swordsman pushing all his weight into the strike, trying to overthrow the other. While Goemon could ignore the pain, that wouldn’t stop his wrists from giving out, so he parried his foe’s sword aside and attempted to run him through. However, the clone twisted aside to avoid the stab, his sword cutting down through the air. Goemon hastily turned at the waist to halt the strike, feeling the heavy reverberations through both forearms as the blades kept each other suspended.

Goemon wasn’t one to stay complacent during a fight, and neither was his copy. As soon as the Zantetsukens clashed, he took advantage of Goemon’s awkward stance and drove his heel straight into his ribs, the kick following through to launch him across the ground.

Goemon drew in a sharp breath through his teeth, feeling his blistered skin erupting from the kick, the damaged muscles beneath objecting to this event entirely. But Goemon didn’t have time to think about it; he barricaded the pain from his mind, jumping up to meet the doppelganger’s attack before he could catch him on the ground.

“Not tired yet?” the clone asked jauntily, hopping back to dodge Goemon’s swipe before returning it with vicious speed. Goemon held Zantetsuken tightly, reinforcing his grip with both hands as he blocked. “Maybe I should remind you of how impaired you are!”

The copy lowered himself and sliced across straight for Goemon’s forelegs. Goemon leapt up to avoid the attack—a useful reflex in most cases, but only bad judgement in this. With his knees and ankles unrecovered, he didn’t have the speed or strength required to get off the ground in time. In an attempt to correct things, Goemon rotated Zantetsuken in his hand and plunged it into the ground, stopping the enemy katana just in time before it could reach his legs while
simultaneously giving him a bit of stability as his feet reconnected with the ground.

Unfortunately, that wouldn’t help him much. As soon as the clone was blocked, he drove his knee upwards into Goemon’s jaw, lurching the latter’s head back before his foot plunged into Goemon’s gut.

No matter. Goemon wasn’t going to let his thoughts settle; he had to only react. He had to, for his friends.

Despite having the breath knocked out of him and his jaw aching, Goemon hooked his arm around the calf of the leg still kicking into him—much to the specter’s surprise. There was a split second where he was caught off-balance, and Goemon drew Zantetsuken up from the ground, holding the copy’s leg in place as the blade was about to drag over the latter’s hamstring.

The clone brought his own sword down to block the attack, managing to send the strike off-track as he yanked his leg from Goemon’s hold—but he wasn’t completely successful. The fake glared disdainfully as he jumped back, a tear on the inner thigh of his hakama, too loose for the blood of the cut to be revealed.

It wasn’t deep, but it was still an accomplished attack, and fuel to the clone’s anger.

They were both quick to get back into stance, never wasting a moment, but their despising expressions didn’t need time to be understood.

To any normal person, their number of strikes probably couldn’t be counted, even more so now that the mirror image’s aggression was peaking. Goemon ignored the fact that his body was being exhausted; his willpower was still strong, no matter what this fake claimed.

Goemon slashed relentlessly—he was sick of this clone, sick of everything he stood for. His foe deflected each attack, but never gained an advantage. Goemon wanted to leave him no openings, no chances in this fight and no chances for a future.

The doppelganger ducked down as Goemon struck across, but the latter brought Zantetsuken down so quickly that the specter didn’t even have time to make an attack. He was forced to block, which Goemon skillfully parried aside and followed up with a thrust just as the double attempted to stand upright.

The copy dodged to the side and brought his blade across horizontally, making Goemon retract his stab and swipe the enemy katana away as he jumped back. The specter narrowed his eyes at Goemon, feeling a sting surfacing on his cheek.

So, Goemon’s stab had nicked him as he dodged…and still had time to block the next attack.

Something was different about him—this Goemon wasn’t the same one he battled back at the Pierre mansion. His determination was enough to leave him unaffected by his injuries, and he was much more…spirited, as if fighting with a cause.

Indeed, he was. He always had been, but now he knew its entirety; he knew its true value, and he was willing to protect it. And in his mind, Goemon knew the three were there supporting him. Goemon straightened, staring intently at his assailant, watching the drop of blood slide down his face, but never slackening.

The clone smirked. “You may think you have made progress, but your energy is fading.”
Goemon knitted his brows together, glowering sinisterly; the specter was right, he probably couldn’t keep this up for long.

“Then let us finish this.”

Goemon lunged forward, striking out—but it was merely a diversion. In a split second he had dropped to the grass, aiming a slash at the clone’s midriff, which was easily blocked—but he hadn’t anticipated Goemon’s end goal to be sweeping his feet out from under him. He fell back, Goemon springing over him in no time at all, driving Zantetsuken ever-closer to his face as he tried to stave him off.

Goemon was trembling—he had exerted himself far more than he should have, but he couldn’t stop now. He wouldn’t.

“I am going to rid myself of you,” he snarled lowly, putting forth all his weight into the strike, stabilizing himself by planting a foot onto the reflection’s chest.

“This is rather familiar,” he commented with a bit of struggle, and Goemon didn’t appreciate the smirk displayed. Their positions were switched, but this was near identical to their fight at the Pierre mansion.

However, when the specter released his block to move and let Goemon’s strike fall, the latter had anticipated that. He held his blade up, halting the copy’s slash at his throat—but what he hadn’t been prepared for was the kick jammed straight into his knee, pushing his leg inward until it locked. Goemon maneuvered aside, his previously-punctured knee instantly giving out from such an abrupt force. Landing on his side, Goemon held Zantetsuken up to defend himself as the lookalike stood.

Goemon was shaky, and his leg wasn’t going to be allowing him to stand any time soon.

“Are you ready to become Ishikawa Goemon XIII once more?” the specter asked, looming over him, but he gained an unexpected look on his face. “What are you doing?” he demanded, seeing Goemon swivel Zantetsuken around, holding the sharp edge of the blade against his abdomen.

“If I defeat you, my choices become my own, and you have no influence over me. If you defeat me…Lupin, Jigen, and Fujiko will suffer from my mistake.” Goemon knew that it was near inevitable, as his fatigue was quickly catching up with him. The copy raised an eyebrow at the obvious statement, but didn’t dare make another move towards him as Goemon tensed his hold, ready to drag Zantetsuken crossways through his waist. “If I take my own life, we both disappear.”

“You would never,” he hissed spitefully, narrowing his eyes.

“I am prepared and willing to do what it takes to make sure they are safe,” Goemon stated firmly, his resolute gaze unwavering as he repositioned to sit upon his impaired ankles. “I know they are my friends, and you will never convince me otherwise. I am willing to give my life for them, even if that means I must take it myself.”

“You think suicide is going to prevent me from fulfilling your purpose?” he challenged. “You would merely be handing the victory to me; such an act would never save your ‘friends.’”

Jigen was right, he was absolutely a terrible liar.

“I will not argue with you,” Goemon told him, pursing his lips as he firmly set the base of the blade against his middle. The specter’s eyes widened, only confirming that suicide was the only
solution other than defeating him. The confirmation brought a gloominess that grew inside of 
Goemon, the thought that he would never be able to see Lupin and the others again, after all they 
had been through. In the back of his mind, he quickly cherished all those memories, even if he 
didn’t at the time they happened. He was thankful for each and every one of them. “I will not let 
you hurt them.”

A solemn glare passed between the two.

“Have you forgotten Lupin's selfishness or Jigen's diregard? Have you forgotten everything 
Fujiko has put you through?! You would give up everything you are, everything you have lived 
for...for them?” the double asked him with a type of melancholy, his mouth becoming a thin line 
as he looked down at Goemon desolately. What about me? What about everything you have ever 
worked for? Goemon paused, seeing the person in front of him with a type of understanding as 
their eyes met. He was giving up a piece of himself...but it was time to move on.

“Yes,” Goemon answered sincerely. “I do not regret who I was, but I have changed.”

The lookalike gave a look of stony despair at the answer.

“So be it.” His voice was cold as he sheathed his sword, his eyes passing over Goemon one 
last time. “I will not stop you.”

Goemon stared intently at him, both unexpectant and grateful for his compliance. He took a 
deep breath, shutting his eyes. He was ready. No longer filled with doubt or confusion, he 
could join his ancestors contently—and with a purpose. Even if his friends’ lives weren’t at stake, 
he would rather have it this way than to be slowly corrupted again over time. He only wished he 
could say goodbye, and his heart felt heavy at thinking he would not ever have the chance to again.

*Thank you...my friends.*

And with those final thoughts, he raked the blade across his stomach—or at least, he tried 
to.

“Hey, hey, what’re you doing?!” a voice met Goemon’s ears, as his arm was 
simultaneously apprehended. “Stop being so dramatic!”

The samurai blinked his eyes open, able to discern Lupin sitting in front of him in the shade 
of a cloud curtaining the moon. He was gripping Goemon's wrist to prevent him from harming 
himself. Fujiko and Jigen were on either side of him, looking just as concerned. He looked to see 
who the fourth standing among them was, but as the shadow passed and allowed him to focus, it 
revealed there was no one there. Goemon stared, perplexed, his eyes still searching.

“Thank goodness we found you!”

“God damn it, Goemon, haven't you already taken enough years off my life?”

“Let me go, Lupin,” Goemon finally said, his tone stern as he redirected his attention to 
them. “This is something I must do—”

“Like hell, you do!” Lupin said unbelievingly, staying his arm as Jigen pried Zantetsuken 
from his hand and chucked it out of reach.

“Goemon, what were you thinking?” Fujiko asked, bewildered and worried as she placed a
hand on his arm. “Tell me you were just trying to play one of your bad jokes again!”

“You do not understand,” the samurai said, looking down shamefully, Lupin still clutching his arm. “I am doing this for your own good.”

“Our own good?” Lupin with incredulity. “You bet I don’t understand! You think there’s any way our lives would be better without you in it?!?”

Goemon’s jaw went slack, holding his breath wistfully, but unable to respond.

“Do you want to explain it?” Jigen asked, seeing the unconvinced look on Goemon’s face. The samurai stiffened, his stomach churning.

“You don’t have to,” Lupin reminded, easing up on his grip and sitting back on his heels, “but we can only help so much when we don’t know what’s going on.”

“We know it’s hard to reach out, Goemon,” Fujiko told him, “but we’re here to reach out to you too.”

He was silent for a few moments. If he told them…would they understand…? Goemon looked at them, unsure what to think. “You would put your safety aside just to help me?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Without a doubt.”

“I’m ashamed of myself that you even have to ask.”

“I…” Goemon felt a worried lump in his throat, urging him to say nothing. “You…you will not send me away, will you…?”

“Send you away?” Lupin asked with confusion. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

“No matter what I say?”

“Not a chance! We’re here to help you get through your problems, not ditch you with them!”

Goemon’s eyes traveled between their genuine expressions of compassion. It made it difficult to meet their gazes, as if he didn’t want to believe it or be fooled, but he forced himself to make eye contact. There were no lies here, and he made a firm decision to accept that.

“I will tell you,” Goemon announced, mostly as preparation for himself. “I…”

Seeing that he was still trying to get his nerve, Jigen spoke up. “How about you tell us on the way back? You’re a mess.”

A bit surprised, Goemon looked down at himself. Indeed, he had opened several stitches on his limbs, and his kimono was sticking to him where fluid had begun to accumulate from his sides. Fujiko and Lupin grimaced.

“I carried him last time; it’s your turn, Jigen,” Lupin said heartily.

“Do not worry, I can stand on my own—” Goemon began to say, but quickly proved himself wrong when his leg buckled.
“Careful!” Fujiko and Lupin grabbed him to stop him from falling.

“Alright, let’s go,” Lupin said, crouching down and letting Goemon fall onto his back. He heaved him up, Jigen sheathing Zantetsuken at Goemon’s side. “Just like old times, right?” the thief laughed as he began to march on, hiking the samurai up to prevent him from falling.

“I apologize for causing trouble,” he said wholeheartedly. “I can assure you—”

“How many times do we gotta tell you that you don’t need to apologize?” Jigen joked, cutting him off. “Now, you wanna tell us what’s up, or what?”

Nervous, Goemon nodded. It was difficult to explain everything, and he ended up backtracking several times to the very beginning, all the way back to when they first met, to relay how he felt at those times and how those feelings, morals, and goals lingered. At times he felt ashamed, especially when describing the desire to kill Lupin and distrust them all, but they never interrupted him save for the few times of assuring he had nothing to feel bad about. Goemon had never imagined they would be so understanding, especially when all these situations depicted them in such a bad light, making him out to be a terrible, unappreciative person. But they listened, all the way up to the point where he had been overwhelmed with disappointment when figuring out that he had suffered at Jianya’s hand for nothing, feeling useless. He was finally able to conclude on the current night, knowing that they were the people closest to him in his entire life, and how he was ready to sacrifice himself to keep that.

“Goemon, you gotta just laugh all that stuff off, don’t feel bad about it,” Lupin said lightheartedly. “It’s in the past—time just falls away, so hold on to the good it brings you, not the bad.”

Like all our memories… Goemon thought to himself.

“We’d all rather have you here and help you through this than make you handle it alone,” Fujiko told him, “no matter the risk.”

“But… why?” Goemon asked. He didn’t doubt the words, and they lifted his spirits, but he just didn’t understand.

“You gotta stop askin’ so many questions,” Jigen said with a grin. “There’s no science or tradition to this. If you care about someone, you make sacrifices—you should understand that, considering you were about to sacrifice your life for us just a little bit ago.”

“I see…” Goemon said with revelation.

“Those little sacrifices don’t add up to anything when compared to all the great things we all share,” Fujiko added. “We’re never going to mind if you need to turn to us. We’ll get through it together.”

“The hardest part is over,” Lupin assured, his tone expressing his smile although Goemon couldn’t see it, “especially now that we’re here to help you.”

“We're gonna help you reclaim yourself, one step at a time.”

A wistful smile of appreciation came over Goemon. He was almost questioning if all this was real—but he was through being doubtful. His chest felt so light, having a definition of clarity, and while the guilt wasn’t quite gone yet, he knew he would be able to let it go.

But he would never forget how he felt at this moment, having their support, the four of
them together.

“Besides,” Lupin said as he trudged on, freeing a hand and grabbing one of Goemon’s to pat it against his chest. “It’s what’s in here that really matters in the end.”

“In your jacket?” the samurai asked oddly, wondering if it was some sort of treasure—or perhaps a surprise present.

“No, the heart, you dummy, the heart!” Lupin corrected. “But you went and made me say it, so now it sounds cheesy!”

“It was cheesy even without saying it,” Fujiko pointed out.

“Lupin, you act like everything you say isn’t cheesy,” Jigen derided.

“You know what, it’s true, so go ahead and laugh but—hey, what is that?” Lupin asked suddenly, tilting his head. “Is that—Goemon, are you drooling in my hair?!”

Fujiko and Jigen snorted, Goemon having fallen fast asleep with his cheek against the crown of Lupin’s head, spit slowly filtering down through his hair and making its way to his sideburns. It was the most peaceful sleep they’d seen him have in a long time, not a hint of troubles in his faint, unconscious smile as they made their way back to the hospital.

“Sacrifice,” the gunman said ironically.

“Ah, whatever,” Lupin huffed, regaining his slanted grin. “The least I can do is be a temporary pillow; he deserves a good sleep.”

After everything he'd been through, no one could deny he deserved that sleep, along with the newfound happiness he'd searched so long for. Getting it in sight, within his reach, brushing on the tips of his fingers until he was finally able to close his hands around it. At long last, Goemon could hold it close to him.

No doubts about it.
“Is that—Goemon, are you drooling in my hair?!?”
Epilogue: Resolve without Regression

Chapter Summary

Oh my goodness, it’s over. I’m going to miss writing for this.

Goemon sat in the back of the Fiat meditatively, arms crossed into his sleeves and Zantetsuken in the crook of his elbow. Lupin drove with the windows down, the cool wind brushing through their hair and sweeping out the smoke from Jigen’s cigarette.

It was a scene that was familiar—and missed. It had been ages since they’d had a typical Lupin gang excursion, and it was as if the day itself was celebrating their doing so; the weather was perfect, the sky bursting with sunlight and a few clouds lazily drifting amongst the blue.

“You ready to go back to Japan?” Lupin said, looking in the rearview mirror at Goemon. It had been a while, but they were there the whole time for him. Early on, Zenigata even sent him a get-well-soon card, and Ami had a video chat with him as well. Now the samurai had finally recovered and was back in commission. This was going to be the first in a long time that a job was really going to feel complete again.

“Japan?” Goemon questioned, opening an eye. “What about the heists you had planned for Spain?”

“Well, there’s a particular treasure that’s surfaced and I’ve got my eye on it,” Lupin went on, sounding both mysterious and mischievous. “Take a look. I have a feeling you’ll like it.”

Goemon raised an eyebrow and took Lupin’s smartphone as he passed it back. “This article is about Fujiko returning the Jade Dragons. You want to steal them again?”

“No, not that. What did you do?” Lupin snatched the phone, driving carefully with one hand as he returned to the article he wanted to show Goemon, whose ineptitude with technology had navigated him away from it. He handed it back. On the screen was an article about an historical exhibit—apparently some new artifact had been discovered upon excavating a centuries-old grave thought to only exist in folklore. Goemon awkwardly scrolled down, then looked taken aback.

There was a glorious katana, sleek and shiny, reflecting lights from every angle in the photo. The curve was perfect, the sheath so elaborate and shellacked, everything having been restored by professionals.

“Ishikawa Goemon’s sword?” he said with bewilderment—and disapproval. “That belonged to my ancestors, the first of my namesake—they cannot simply claim such a thing and put it on display! Such an heirloom should be in the hands of my family!”

“In your hands, specifically. It’s got your name on it and everything,” Lupin said with a broad grin. Goemon looked at the pictures—indeed, on the end of the katana’s hilt was a metal monogram seal bearing the samurai’s—well, samurais’—name. “We could wait, but I wanted you to really try on your first heist back, just to see if you’re still the greatest swordsman,” the thief said in a challenging tone, seeing that those words already sparked Goemon’s determination. “I told Zenigata he could only capture me once I made sure you were better.”
“I can assure you, my skills are honed to perfection and my strength remains—in fact, I am more powerful than I have ever been,” Goemon said with certainty. He didn’t have any lingering doubts or subconscious influences in the back of his mind anymore; he was free to think and act how he himself wanted, never bothered by the haunting delusion of his past self since that night that he so often reflected upon.

“So, if that’s the case, looks like this is going to be our last heist together,” Lupin said lightheartedly, with a hint of melancholy. “Well, for a while, at least. I’m counting on you two to break me out!”

“You should’ve thought about that before you made the deal with Zenigata,” Jigen said, flicking an ash outside as they drove.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Jigen,” Lupin said cheerily, “I’m sure you’re more than capable of figuring out a way.”

“Nah, it’s not that I don’t think we could do it,” the hitman replied, putting a foot on the dashboard and grinning. “I just don’t know if you’re worth the trouble.”

Lupin frowned, eyeing him. “What’s that s’posed to mean? You wanna leave me in there to rot?!”

Jigen chuckled with a toothy grin in response.

“Jigen, I would not expect such a thing from you,” Goemon said curtly.

“Eh?”

“Lupin, you can trust me in that I will free you,” Goemon assured forthrightly, sitting forward insistently. “Even if Jigen does not wish to help.”

Lupin laughed a bit. “I know you will. Jigen, you could use a few lessons from you on how a real friend should act!”

Jigen looked at him apathetically. “I was just sayin’ it to mess around, but now I’m not so sure.”

The samurai gained a look of surprise. He was better—physically, mentally, and emotionally—but that didn’t cure his incompetence for recognizing social cues. “A joke?”

“Yeah, I was jokin’,” Jigen confirmed blithely. “We’re gonna get ‘im out, no problem—well, maybe a few problems…but he’ll be out before you can miss ‘im.”

Goemon sat back, feeling at ease. He blinked, thinking for a few moments. A real friend. There was perfect trust entwined between the three, a reliance that Goemon could never dream of having with anyone else—a reliance that he hadn’t even dreamed of for the majority of his time knowing them.

He felt an unexplainable bubbly feeling, and Lupin and Jigen looked back oddly as Goemon tried to stifle his laughter through his teeth. However, the samurai couldn’t hold it back. The other two exchanged questioning glances, wondering what was so funny, but it wasn’t long before they joined in and their own laughs were rolling around the car.

They didn’t need a reason to laugh with each other. It could be one of Goemon’s indecipherable jokes. They could laugh out of enjoyment of a nice day, or the gloominess of a bad
one; they could laugh off all the grief that they had endured together; they could laugh just because out of the billions of people in the world, they were the lucky three that got stuck together.

There was no doubt in this friendship, and Goemon felt so happy that he had it now, their resonating laughter only confirming it for him. He had finally made it to the place and person he wanted to be, and he had only gotten this far because of them.

It was everything that he—and his friends—had worked for.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR FINISHING MY STORY! I really hoped you enjoyed it as much as I did writing it. You have no idea what it means to me that you took your time to read it and endure those horrible pictures that I was compelled to include. Through the ups and downs, unavoidable spelling errors and cheesy lines, you made it and I appreciate every second you dedicated. I have no idea how many hours I spent on this, but I don't regret any of it and I hope you don't either!

Once again, thank you for joining the Lupin gang's adventure in *Resolve and Regression* to the very end. You da best.

End Notes
Not very important, but explanatory: Since Part 1, out of all Lupin III characters, Goemon has had the most personality change not attributed to character growth. The others seem to have matured (somewhat) and realize their faults, but ultimately maintain their original personality--for example, Lupin is still overall a fun-loving guy, but he's come to recognize his self-destructive tendencies. Goemon, on the other hand, is a very different person from where he began, but he hasn't really identified his shortcomings (other than the fact that he doesn't quite understand them), like his inferiority complex, among others. He's always held on to his traditional Japanese ways and been stoic/serious, but from Part 1 to Part 4, the arrogance that was a big part of his character has been replaced with attributes along the lines of the strong/silent type. It's a change (and not a bad one, he's still just as enjoyable), but he hasn't really matured.

In this story, set directly after Part 5, it's time for him to identify his issues and face them with the help of those who support him.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!