### A Doll In His Hands

**by** signalbeam

#### Summary

AU: Souji is one hell of a mystery man, and his Shadow's a jerk and a half. Yosuke and the Investigation Team go through Souji's dungeon and confront a side to their leader they'd rather not know about--and how far they're willing to go to stay with him.

#### Notes

Written for the badbadbathhouse fill: *Souji's Shadow doesn't make any goddamned sense.*

*There's no subtext, No grimly hinted secrets. The dungeon's design doesn't seem to mean anything significant. Hell, it doesn't seem to mean much of anything at all. And when the gang finally gets to Mr. You're-Not-Me, even his speech doesn't shed any light on the situation, if they can even understand it. The worst part? It all turns out alright. The Team defeats the Shadow, Souji accepts it, and they all move on. (Even though they haven't really.)*

Warning for suicide (original character in a flashback), abusive relationships, and sexuality. Please read at your own discretion.

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Multiple Choice (i)

December 17, 2011.

What was the warning sign? Yosuke came up with a whole list of them, but it had all been in his head. He hadn’t meant any of it—no, he had meant it, but had taken it too lightly. Maybe there hadn’t been any warning. But still—Yosuke should’ve seen it coming, should’ve understood—he knew that he shouldn’t beat himself over it. It wasn’t his fault. No one was at fault. Except it was his fault. Or at least, someone was to blame. Someone had done wrong, someone, something. It hadn’t been a freak accident or spontaneous, sudden failure: it had been a choice, something that could have… his fault—

Yosuke cranked up the volume of his MP3 player. It was better to think that it was his fault than it was to think that it was Souji’s fault. If it was his fault, he could fix it. Maybe awaken a brand new Persona or something. Something fancy and flashy. Something just as badass as Susano-O, maybe even more.

But if it was Souji’s fault—then he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. And now he knew—he knew that Souji wasn’t going to do anything about it, either. So they’d be like this forever, forever and ever and—

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“No way, man,” Yosuke said. “We’re not going back in there.”

It was December 10, 2011. The day before they had captured Adachi, beat a weird disco eyeball thing, and restored peace to Inaba. Great. Peachy. Everything was normal again. No more TV World. Sure, he’d have to check the TV every time it rained at night and fog made him real antsy, but at least no one else was going to die.

Except Souji wanted to go back. Souji, who was smart but bless the guy, a total bleeding heart. He thought way too much. Who cared about any of that stuff now? They were done with it, it was over, it was done, kaput, finis. They were through.

“Yosuke—”

“We just caught Adachi!” Yosuke said. “Come on, just—”

“Stop,” Souji said. “Calm down.”

Yosuke opened his mouth. Damn it. He hated it when Souji cut him off like that. It made him feel so—so—like he didn’t matter.

“Come on, partner,” Yosuke said. “I don’t want to pull the grades card, but yours kind of have been tanking.”

“They’re fine.”

“But—”
“They’re fine, Yosuke,” Souji said. He swept his hair back. It all fell back perfectly in place. “I understand if you don’t want to help me,” Souji said. “It’s fine.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Yosuke said.

“I know how you meant it,” Souji said. “It’s fine.”

Now Souji was just baiting Yosuke. Yosuke shoved past Souji and went to the bike rack.

“Get real, man,” Yosuke said. “It’s done. I’m going home.”

“Oh,” said Souji. “Okay.”

Why did Souji always have to be so—cool-headed? It pissed the hell out of Yosuke sometimes. Yosuke knew the importance of keeping a good face, but with Souji it was more of a... it was more like he didn’t care. Or if he cared, Souji didn’t care enough to react.

Souji never called him, ever. If Yosuke wanted to talk, he always had to reach out with his phone or by catching Souji in the halls or stopping by his house. Otherwise Souji didn’t pay a damn to him, not unless Yosuke fought for his attention. Sure, Souji was busy, but Yosuke was busy, too: with Junes, with Inaba, with his own schoolwork. It was the same for all of them. It wasn’t like Souji was some superman or some god who they ought to beg for. That wasn’t—damn it.

Yosuke worked the chain of his bike. His fingers kept slipping. He couldn’t focus on the chain. He wanted to look over his shoulder. He wanted to say, Come on, Souji, come over here. Help me with this. Let’s talk over this. Or if you don’t want to talk about it now, whatever. Call me after work and dinner. Let’s— It was dumb. He shouldn’t hope for it. But he wanted to see Souji reaching out so badly. He wanted to see Souji there, he wanted to see that Souji at least cared enough to linger in front of the school gates like a dumbass for a second or two.

Stupid of him to even hope. Souji was already gone.

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Yosuke tossed his phone in the air, and caught just before it hit the floor. He should be doing his homework. If Chie knew that he was goofing off so bad—well, that was why they lived in different houses.

Besides, even she’d be put off by the rain. It almost hurt walking around in it. More like standing underneath a gigantic faucet than a gentle shower coming down over Inaba’s collective heads.

**Lift, throw, catch. Lift, throw, catch. Lift—**

“Yosuke!” Teddie cried, pounding on his door.

“No, wait!” Yosuke yelped, jumping to his feet. His phone crashed into his desk. Yosuke wasn’t sure what he feared more: that he had just busted his phone or that Teddie would break his door for the third time in the last three months.

“Yosuke, Yosuke, let me in!”

“I’m getting to it!”
The pounding and rattling stopped. Thank god. Yosuke unlocked the door and opened it, only for Teddie to barrel into him and send them both smashing into the ground. They were almost close enough to—hell no, he wasn’t thinking about that gay stuff when it was Teddie—

“Geeze, what’s with you?” Yosuke said, throwing Teddie off of him. He shut the door. His parents were still asleep, but with the racket Teddie made, that might have changed. “Can’t sleep?”

“It’s midnight,” Teddie said. “Hurry up, Yosuke!”

“Give me a break,” Yosuke muttered. What was the point of doing this anymore? They took care of Adachi and that weird… Ameno-what’s-its-name guy. Even if someone showed up, there weren’t any more Persona users around—but who knew how long that would last.

Damn it. He hated it when Teddie was right.

He settled into his desk chair, but shifted his body so he could see the TV screen. Teddie was parked right in front of it. The TV made its familiar whine. The screen filled with static. And—

There it was, an image on the TV so clear that Yosuke bolted out of his chair and grabbed onto the TV’s frame with both his hands.

No way.

No fucking way.

The picture was perfectly clear. It was a black room with black walls and a black ceiling and a black floor and hard, white light. There were stairs. At the top of the stairs was a throne, black and glossy, cut in perfect right angles—

The image jerked suddenly. Someone had grabbed the camera and spun it around so it showed his face. Souji’s face. A Shadow’s face.

For a long while the Shadow stared at the camera. His eyelids were lowered, his mouth slightly parted, as though he was about to say something, anything. The seconds slid on torturously. The Shadow’s face was so close, so close that Yosuke almost wanted to push his face against the screen of his television so they’d be touching. So close and so quiet—he ought to put his fist through the fucking screen, damn it, Souji, say something, don’t just sit there and leave me guessing what you’re thinking, don’t be an ass, we’re friends, love me, damn you—

“If you want to talk,” said the Shadow, “then you know where to find me.”

“What—the fuck’s that supposed to mean?!” he screamed, but the image was already gone, and he was now that crazy guy who yelled at his TV in the middle of the night. He gave the TV a shove against his wall, and dove into his bed. Shit, shit, shit, shit!

“Yosuke—” Teddie said. “Was that sensei?”

“Of course it was, you—” He stopped himself. He was shouting. Yosuke took a breath. Shit, what had Souji been thinking? The guy was off his fucking rocker. He hurled his pillow at a wall. He heard the first strands of his ringtone on his desk. He grabbed the phone and put it to his ear. “Chie?”

“Wh—what was that?” Chie said. “Was that Souji? What is he doing there?”

“He—” Yosuke swallowed, hard. “He said that he thought there were still things to there. I think—shit, what are we going to do?”
“I don’t know,” Chie said, plaintive. “Normally we’d ask him.”

Yeah, that was right. Except Souji was in the TV, so that left… so that left who? Yosuke didn’t want to do it. He said once that he didn’t mind playing second banana, but the truth was, he was too afraid of fucking up. Things in the TV were serious. They were for real. He messed up, everyone could end up dead.

“Shit, I don’t know,” he said. “I guess—tomorrow’s a Sunday, so we should meet up in Junes. Have you reached Yukiko yet?”

“She was the first person I called,” Chie said.

“Sure,” Yosuke said. “Great.” He was jealous of how those two were always thinking about each other. Souji—Souji wasn’t even on this side, so why bother thinking? “Well, you tell her about the plans. We’re going into the TV first thing in the morning.”

“Got you,” Chie said. “Don’t do anything stupid, Yosuke. We just have to do this like the way we did it all the other times and it’ll be okay.”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “I’ll be fine. Thanks. I’ll call the first years—damn it, Ted, I’m on the phone, don’t turn on the TV!”

“We need to know the weather,” Teddie said. He smacked Yosuke’s arm hard and said, “Stupid Yosuke. Sometimes I think that I’m the only one who has a brain!”


He was glad that Teddie was with him, though. After he made the calls he crawled back into bed and tried to sleep, but couldn’t get his eyes to close. Teddie crawled under the covers with him and insisted on hugging Yosuke’s arm for the entire night. He liked Teddie because he was completely transparent. What you saw was what you got. If he wanted something, he’d say it. If he wanted anything, he’d say it. It was annoying when Teddie wanted to do something dumb, but Yosuke was always secretly grateful. When Teddie felt bad, it made him feel good that he could do something to make someone else feel better. And when Yosuke felt bad, he could close his eyes and pretend that the person he was holding was someone bigger and taller. A person who would one day know Yosuke well enough to know when to touch him or when to hug him, because Yosuke liked hugs, and he especially liked Souji’s hugs. But there had been that one time on the floodplains, and ever since Yosuke had been waiting for something, anything. A sign of the things to come.

Damn it. When Yosuke got him out of the TV, then he’d—he’d—he’d what? Hug the guy, he guessed. Something kind of gay, but not all the way gay. Hell if he was making the first move. Not when Souji didn’t give a damn about him to begin with.
“Please pardon the intrusion,” Naoto said to no one in particular as she unlocked the door to Dojima’s house. Yosuke followed her shortly. Naoto called Yosuke earlier in the morning to tell him that she had the key to Souji’s house. Why her? Hell if he knew. Who knew what had been going through Souji’s head. Souji never told anyone.

He should’ve been the one to get the key, not Naoto. Not that Naoto wasn’t responsible and conscientious and… Fine, so she wouldn’t have lost the key. He could see why Souji trusted her. He just didn’t think that Souji should have trusted Naoto over him. Then again, if battle plans had been left up to Yosuke, it’d be just him and Souji, even though that was a dumb thing to do. There was strength in numbers, sure. But why was it that Yosuke only got Souji alone outside the TV once every other month when everyone else could come calling whenever?

“What are we looking for?” Yosuke said. He kicked his shoes off and stepped in. The house felt—damp, almost. As though it was holding something. No, more like it was waiting for something to hold. He felt like an intruder, even though he had been in Souji’s house two, five, ten times.

“I do not know,” Naoto said, audibly bristling. “He did not care to tell me before he jumped into the TV.”

“Great,” Yosuke said. “Maybe we’ll find where he keeps the porn.”

“I fail to see why that is—”

“Just trying to lighten the mood,” he said. “Geeze.”

Damn it. He shouldn’t have gotten mad at Naoto. They were both in the dark about what to look for—and, apparently, about Souji’s secret desire to launch himself into the TV to solve more mysteries. He wanted to apologize, but he didn’t want to admit why he’d have to apologize to begin with; and anyway, it’d just make things weird between the two of them.

“I’ll search his room,” Yosuke said. “You look around in the kitchen, I guess.”

Naoto gave him the stink-eye as he ascended the stairs. She was probably just bitter because she wanted to investigate the brand of Souji’s socks or something.

He had only been into Souji’s room—how many times had it been? Just once. He had been inside Souji’s house a few more times, his the room? Just that one time after school a few months ago. It looked the same as it had looked last time: neat and inoffensive, trinkets lined on the shelves—oh, look, he got a new robot thing. The calendar on the wall still displayed November. There weren’t any notes or fancy little weather symbols on the days, either. Maybe Souji kept a daily planner. Souji’s desk was clean and neat, not a paper out of place. It was so damn empty that Yosuke didn’t know how Souji could ever feel at home in it. Maybe some people liked the bare and empty look, but all those people had no imagination or creativity, and Souji had both. Or at least, Yosuke sure hoped he did. Some of his Personae bordered on the fucking surreal.

He invited Souji to his room once, but Souji smiled politely and said that he had other things to do. So either Yosuke was so obviously faggy that Souji could smell it off of him, or Souji didn’t give a
damn or was too busy. Or maybe after Yosuke got Susano-O, Souji didn’t care anymore, didn’t care because Yosuke had things under control by then—except not really, because he kept thinking about Souji, couldn’t keep Souji out of his head, wanted more of Souji’s time except Souji kept spending time with everyone but him.

The last time he and Souji hung out had been at the hospital with Nanako, and that didn’t really count because it had been the two of them sitting in a room with his dying little cousin. Before that it had been a few minutes alone in Iwatodai, a fragmented conversation in the TV, a couple of sentences here and there.

The sad fact was that going into Souji’s dungeon was going to be the closest Yosuke would get to him in two months. They were so far apart that sometimes Yosuke thought that he was clinging onto the label of “partners” because he knew what would happen if he let go of it: he’d be that kid again, with half his class’ phone number and no one to call. Sure, he had friends, but no one understood him—no, they could. He had Chie and Kanji and Naoto and even Teddie now. He never called them or talked to them much because he always thought about Souji, Souji, Souji. So maybe it was time to move on.

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Naoto found bundled bills of yen beneath the kotatsu. The total amount was something like half a million yen. Totally crazy. The dude was insanely rich. Yosuke and Naoto took the money to Daidara, bought some extra armor and weapons just in case, and trucked over to the TV. Rise and Teddie were on a hard search for Souji, but had yet to find a thing.

“We should brainstorm,” Naoto said. “Collect clues and consolidate the information we have on Souji-san.”

Ordinarily Yosuke would have protested and said that they all knew Souji well enough to not subject themselves to the humiliation of admitting that they didn’t have a clue about him, but he had done too much thinking about Souji since they “finished” with the TV to put up much of a fight. There was too much that they didn’t know. Naoto might be okay with that, but she had only known Souji for a few months. Not that Yosuke had known Souji for much longer—and it wasn’t like those extra few months had done Yosuke much good, either.

Rise and Teddie were taking breaks, drinking soda and juice and talking quietly with Kanji and Naoto. Chie and Yukiko were going through their armors and weapons. They directed their complaints not at Naoto, who insisted on caution, but on Yosuke, who knew that they had too many Shinra Robes and 1000-Stud Coats. It wasn’t his fault that Naoto used her fancy logic on him. What was he supposed to say, my flimsy intuition outweighs your detective fancy pants? He might as well have said that he could speak French. Which he could. Just as long as he knew the lyrics.

“Oh, guys,” he said when Rise and Teddie were ready again. “So what do we know?”

“He’s our senpai,” Kanji said, scratching his neck.

“He’s a good listener,” Yukiko said, rather earnestly. “He always knows the right thing to say.”

“Yeah, okay, we all know that,” Yosuke said. “But—I don’t know. Doesn’t he have some kind of complex?”
They all looked at one another a bit accusatorily. What do you mean, complex, they all seemed to be saying to one another. I didn’t have one. Nope.

“Sensei’s too cool for a complex,” Teddie said.

“Souji-san is rather opaque on his own psychological profile,” Naoto said with a sigh. “It was always difficult to get him to talk about himself. He seemed happiest when listening to others.”

“He really liked to talk,” Chie said. “I mean, we’d train together all the time, but mostly he’d stand there and point things out. Not that he was bad at it, but…”

“I don’t know if your kind of training is the kind that anyone can keep up with, anyway,” Yosuke said.

“He really cares about Nanako-chan,” Yukiko said before Chie could yell at Yosuke some more. Thank god for Yukiko. “He likes children.”

“No he doesn’t,” Chie said. “He told me he doesn’t like kids.”

“But he works at that daycare and tutors that Nakajima kid,” Yosuke said. “I’m going to have to side with Yukiko on this one.”

“Can’t see senpai hating anyone,” Kanji said. “He’s too cool to do that kind of shit.”

“No, I’m sure he said that,” Chie said. But she looked faintly troubled, as though she wasn’t sure anymore. “Okay… maybe I guessed wrong on that one. He’s an only child, right?”

“I think so,” Rise said. “Senpai never mentioned any siblings to me.”

“That doesn’t mean that he is an only child,” Naoto said.

“Well, we’re all only children, right?” Chie said. An unnatural pause fell over the group as they all looked at one another. “… Right?”

“I have an older brother,” Yukiko said. Chie’s eyes nearly bugged straight out of their sockets. “He’s a lot older than me, and he was never very interested in the inn,” she said quickly. “A few years ago he had a falling out with my parents. I don’t think he’s been home since.”

How did a person not think that her brother hadn’t been home in years?

“I’m sorry,” Yukiko said at the collective silence. “My parents don’t like to talk about him.”

“Hey, it’s cool,” Yosuke said. “We’re just glad you told us.”

An older brother, huh. No wonder she had that weird prince complex. And all that time, he had thought that she was kind of—well, Chie would kick him if he said it out loud. And Yukiko would hammer him in the face. Or maybe she wouldn’t. Maybe girls were better at dealing with people calling them homos. And, well, those two always seemed kind of…

“I have a sister,” Rise said. “She just turned four the week before. I never saw much of her because of the idol thing. I try not to mention her in interviews because my parents don’t want her to go into the business.”

“I never knew,” Chie said. “I guess I just assumed…”

There weren’t any pictures of anyone in Souji’s room. Not of his parents, not of his friends, not even
When Yosuke thought about it, he didn’t have a single picture of Souji, either: not on his phone or camera or anything.

“W-well,” Chie said, “what difference does it make if he has a brother or sister?”

“I dunno, Chie-senpai,” Kanji said. “I think it’d matter.”

There was another dull, hollow dip in the conversation.

“Okay, time to move onto the next topic,” Yosuke said before the atmosphere could get even worse. “Anyone got anything?”

“Lunch!” Teddie said. “I always wanted to get a homemade lunch from sensei.”

“Lunch, lunch, lunch,” Chie said, bobbing he head each time she said the word. “Hmm… I guess that means he likes to take care of people?”

Everyone nodded. Yosuke sighed inwardly. Great. At least they got one thing down. Attributes of Souji Seta, as compiled by his friends: motherly.

“If I do say so myself, he is an excellent cook,” Naoto said. “If I may make a hypothesis, I believe that he likes to be the best in everything that he does. Perhaps that is why he does not like to train with Chie. Martial arts are something that he has never dared to try before.”

“He can punch people just fine,” Yosuke said. His jaw smarted just thinking about it. “I don’t think he had a complex like that at all.”

“I think that’s a little out there,” Rise said. “You’re just jealous, aren’t you, Naoto-kun?”

“Naoto ain’t jealous of nobody!” Kanji said, his face going pink. “If anyone’s jealous, then—”

“Oh, come on, guys, this isn’t getting anywhere!” said Yosuke. “This can’t be all we know.”

“But what if it is?” Chie said. “I-I mean, maybe we should’ve talked to him about himself a little more, instead of always being so…”

Damn it, Chie, why did she have to go and say that?

“It’s too late to think in those terms,” Naoto said. “Perhaps now would be a prudent time to turn our attention to his Shadow. It seemed as though he was in a… dark box of some kind.”

“There was a throne,” Yukiko said. “I couldn’t tell what he was wearing. All I could see was his face. And all he said was, ‘Just trying won’t be good enough to reach me.’”

‘Just trying won’t be good enough?’ What a jerk. What a—wait.

“Hold up,” Yosuke said. “That’s not what he said. He said, ‘If you want to talk, you know where to find me.’” He looked at the others for confirmation, but judging by the looks on their faces, none of them had heard what he had. Maybe—maybe none of them had heard the same thing at all. Yosuke’s stomach slowly flipped inside him. So none of them really knew him. And Souji wasn’t who they thought he was. Except instead of finding out his true self, all they seemed to do was walk straight into a labyrinth.

Their circle had broken. Now they were all standing in their old corners by themselves. Kanzeon had
placed her ring around Rise again, and Teddie was sniffing around the stage. Souji had his own corner, all the way on the far corner, where he’d stare out at the fog for minutes, sometimes for more than an hour. Yosuke always wondered what he was looking at, because he knew that he couldn’t see a thing out there. Maybe Souji hadn’t been looking at anything. Maybe… maybe everything had been a lie.

“Hey, guys,” Rise said. “I think I’ve found it.”

Yosuke looked to Naoto, who nodded; then to Chie, who also nodded. Kanji cracked his knuckles. Then he looked to Souji’s corner: empty and bare, nothing but fog rolling around in the air, going this way and that.

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Let’s do this.”
The entrance to the dungeon was stone or metal or glass. The lights flickered from bright to dim with a sick blue-green tinge all the while. The doors were already open. As for the dungeon itself, it only seemed to go up. A long, tall staircase that went up for stories and stories, and at the top, a long, black box where Souji — no, where Souji’s Shadow would be waiting.

“I sense a strong presence at the top,” Rise said. “And there don’t seem to be any Shadows inside aside from senpai’s.”

“Do you know if Souji’s in there?” said Yosuke.

“I don’t know, senpai,” Rise said sweetly. “He could have gotten up and left, just like the rest of us did.”

“Why don’t we enter the dungeon?” Yukiko said. “We all seem to be a little on edge right now. Maybe a bit of exercise will clear our heads.”

“Yeah, a bit of ‘exercise,’” Yosuke said. “That’ll do us all a bit of good.”

“Don’t talk to Yukiko like that!” Chie said.

“Yeah, senpai,” Kanji said. “Just ‘cause you’re all antsy doesn’t mean you gotta pick on the girls.”

“I’m not picking on them, you—” Yosuke stopped himself just in time. No. He couldn’t say it. He couldn’t say it because he was afraid someone would look at him and say, *Well, what about you, Hanamura? You and your big gay crush on Seta.* But Kanji cracked his knuckles anyway and stood up a little taller. Yeah, Kanji knew. He knew what Yosuke had almost said.

“In any case,” Naoto said, “I believe we should proceed swiftly. The longer senpai is in the dungeon, the more stress will be put on his body. I advise swift and immediate action.” She looked into the open doors, and nodded her head. She adjusted her glasses, checked her gun, and said, “I am going.”

“Wait for me, Nao-chan!” Teddie said. “We’re going to rescue sensei!”

“Hey!” Damn it. He was Souji’s best friend. He was the one who needed Souji.

But was it just him? Everyone else had bonds with Souji, too. Bonds that they cherished and valued. Without Souji there as a buffer, they were all falling apart, yelling at each other and disagreeing about everything.

So who else in this group had fallen in love with Souji? Rise liked him. Kanji — was Kanji. Teddie, if he even knew what love was, might have. Chie, maybe. Yukiko, definitely. Naoto — hell no. Naoto wouldn’t fall in love with anyone. But for Souji, she might make an exception.

So that was all of them, then. Each and every single one of them.

“Senpai, are you coming with us?” Rise said.

Damn it. He should have been the only one. Why did they have to go and fall in love with Souji, too? Or maybe they just liked him without loving him, the way Rise did. Because Rise couldn’t be serious. She wasn’t serious about any —

‘Stop it.’
He wasn’t that guy who talked shit about his friends. And besides, Souji was a good guy. It wasn’t like Souji shimmied his butt around and made them all fall in love.

“I’m coming,” said Yosuke. He took a step into the black stairwell. The second his second heel cleared the threshold, the door slammed shut. “What the hell!” he yelped. There were no handles or levers. He slammed his body into the door, but bounced off and fell into Kanji, who jumped half a foot in the air and landed on Naoto’s foot.

“The— the door’s locked behind us!” Rise said. “I don’t think there’s a way for us to open it now—”

“We noticed,” Yosuke said, rubbing his shoulder. Definitely noticed.

Kanji gave the doors a good shake. “Rock solid,” he said. “Chie-senpai, you think you can punt this open?”

“You talk about punting it open, but…” Chie rubbed her nose. “That only works on downed Shadows…”

“So we’re stuck?!” Teddie said.

“… It would seem so,” said Naoto. “Souji-san did not leave us any Goho-Ms. And Teddie doesn’t know Traesto anymore.”

They couldn’t leave.

Yosuke looked up the stairs, which suddenly seemed ten times longer than they had before.

Good grief, Souji. What kind of message was that guy trying to send?

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“All dungeons were the same in one respect: they hated humans. Or at least, they hated having humans in them. Funny, because all dungeons were made from human minds, fueled by human emotions, created from their thoughts and dreams and subconscious. Dungeons rejected intruders, typically by trying to chase them out with Shadows or by barring their passage with trick doors, zigzag pathways, and floors that teleported them this way and that way. But there was another deterrent, too: the heavy, dark chains of being inside someone else’s head. A psychic kind of pressure. The more secrets there were, the worse it felt. More than the fog or the fighting, it was that awful feeling that drained Yosuke’s energy the fastest. Even without any Shadows, Souji’s dungeon was heavy: the bad lighting, the black walls and ceiling and floor, the gloomy silence they walked in and through. It all made the physical exertion worse.

“Senpai…” Rise said, just underneath her breath. According to her, they were almost a fifth of the way, height-wise. “I don’t really get what it means, but it seems like he’s been in a lot of pain.”

“… Yeah,” Yosuke said.

He never knew. All this time, he just thought Souji’s head was a big empty place. And Souji never
talked much about himself, either. Maybe this was why.

Rise smiled at him, quick and gentle. “That’s why we all have to work hard,” she said. “To make things better again.”

Thank god they were friends. Yosuke nodded, both to himself and to her. “Yeah,” he said. “Thanks.”

The light flickered on, and then off. This time they stayed that way. Yosuke opened his mouth, but the darkness rushed in on him, and on dumb instinct he hit the ground. Holy shit. Holy shit, it felt like he had just dodged a killing blow. He hadn’t even heard it coming, but there was a big whoosh of air right over the spot where his head had been.


Dead quiet. He reached out to where he had seen Rise, but there wasn’t a thing there except a wall.

A wall. A wall…? He had been standing in the middle of the stairway—but now the ground before him was completely flat and—

Someone up ahead screamed, loud and pained, that vanished into a bloody gargle. He couldn’t tell who it was, but hell if he’d let any of the girls or Teddie get hurt—and it was definitely a girl. Damn it! What was with this place? He ran one, then two, then three steps, but then stopped. Shit. He couldn’t tell where he was going. He couldn’t even see a thing, nothing but darkness. And now he was too afraid to go forward.

Footsteps from behind him. He spun around and screamed, “Who’s there?!”

No answer. Yosuke drew his knives and spun them. Had to be ready. He couldn’t help whoever it was if he was knocked down. Whatever was ahead didn’t feel like a Shadow—at least, it didn’t feel like the kind of Shadows he fought. And it didn’t feel like a human Shadow, either. But it was always hard to tell. Some Shadows could sneak up behind them so easily…

“I know you’re there,” Yosuke said. “I heard you coming, damn it! Show yourself!”

He couldn’t freak out. He had to calm down. He had to keep a cool head. What would Souji tell him? He’d say to keep calm. Evaluate his options, keep a cool head, keep calm, don’t run into action—he bet that had been Chie, because she always ran into action—

“Where are you?” he shouted. “Damn it, turn on the lights, you coward!”

“What. You found what you were looking for, didn’t you?”

“… Hey,” Yosuke said. “Who was that earlier…?”

“Who knows,” said the Shadow. “I don’t think it matters now.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?!”
“Come on, Yosuke. Partner.” The Shadow smiled—so similar to Souji’s smile, but nowhere near it. “You tell me what you think it means.”

It doesn’t matter now. It didn’t matter now. It didn’t—

“No way,” Yosuke said. “You didn’t…”

“That’s right,” the Shadow said ruefully. “I couldn’t, in the end. Maybe she’ll bleed out soon enough. I don’t know. It’s all up to you, partner.”

“Up to… me?” Yosuke’s heart skipped a beat. What did that mean? What could it mean?

“I can take you to him,” said the Shadow. “You came for me, after all. That should be… rewarded.”

“Rewarded?” Damn it. He had to stop parroting this thing! “What did she do?” Yosuke said. No, that wasn’t it. “What did you tell her?”

“I gave her the same choice I’m giving you,” said the Shadow. “She made the wrong decision.”

“Wh—so you—what the fuck is wrong with you?! You’re not—” Yosuke charged at the Shadow, knife at the ready to slash, but the lights went off and he cut nothing but air. The Shadow’s laughter, low and menacing, echoed throughout the chamber. No way. This wasn’t Souji, this wasn’t Souji, this wasn’t—

“I guess you didn’t love me as much as you thought you did!” the Shadow said. “After all that time, you pick her over me, huh? How do you think that makes him feel?”

“Shut up!” Yosuke said. “You’re not him! You’re not him! You’re not—”

The darkness pressed in again, reaching into his lungs and yanking out his breath. By the time he recovered the lights were back on and he was on the endless staircase again. His ribs felt as though they were trying to fold in on themselves. He took a steadying breath and groped the wall for a railing. There wasn’t a railing, but it was worth trying, at least. He pulled himself up to his feet and looked around. Below were the others, some further down than others. Kanji was the first one back on his feet. Yosuke leapt down the stairs, helping Teddie back onto his feet.

“You okay, Ted?” he said.

“Waaah…”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Yosuke said.

“What the hell was that?” Kanji said.

“I don’t know!” Yosuke said. “I was put in—this dark room and I heard someone scream…”

Naoto was brushing herself off now. Chie looked all right, too. So that left Yukiko and Rise, crouched almost a full flight below where the outage had taken place. Chie was at Yukiko’s side immediately. Yosuke couldn’t hear the words, but Chie made a lot of noise, and then swore—he didn’t need to hear what she was saying. That kind of anger didn’t need translation.

“What?” Yosuke said, pushing his way past Kanji. “Who is it?”

Yukiko looked up. She looked shaken up, but okay. The sleeves of her sweater were a bit singed. Coating the stairs was a long stream of dark red. Rise looked up at Yosuke with a little smile.
“I’m okay,” she said. “Yukiko-senpai patched me up quickly. Just need a moment to catch my breath, that’s all.”

Yosuke couldn’t say anything. He knew that Kanji and Naoto were making a fuss, but he couldn’t think. He couldn’t think. All he could see was the slash in Rise’s uniform, the red color—it was like someone tore out his headphones halfway through a song. Souji wouldn’t do that. His Souji wouldn’t do that.

“It’s no worse than what everyone else’s Shadows did to you,” Rise said.

“What did he say to you?” Yosuke said.

Rise for a moment looked surprised. Then she smiled painfully again and said, “He said that if I loved him than I’d follow him. But I knew it’d be stupid if I did, so I said no. And then…”

Naoto shushed Rise with a hand on her shoulder. “We must proceed carefully,” she said. “It seems as though the blackout separated us.”

“Did you see him?” said Chie.

“No,” Naoto said. “I presume that Rise-san was the only one he visited.”

“He saw me,” Yosuke said. “He said—he said that I had found what I was looking for, so I should—” He broke off. “Damn it…” If he had moved faster or acted faster, then… If only they had known—but all his thoughts broke off, snapped off by the rage in him. No, not rage. Panic.

Because this Shadow was smart. Because this Shadow knew where they were weakest. Because this Shadow was Souji’s.

Yosuke looked down at the blood on the stairs, and felt sick. No way. That couldn’t be Souji. Souji didn’t do this kind of thing to his friends. Souji would have the self-control to not have a Shadow. Souji—

“We have to keep going, don’t we?” Yukiko said. She clutched her fan to her chest.

“Yeah,” Kanji said. Naoto was helping Rise get onto his back. “Can’t do shit unless we get to the portal at the top.”

Her jaw clenched tight. He expected her to say something encouraging, but instead she snapped her fan open. Her eyes glinted with a hard light, unafraid—or too angry to be afraid. “Good. Let’s keep going, everyone.”

As they went up, Yosuke heard the sound of a boy crying. He looked around but saw no one. His skin crawled. Just his imagination. Just his imagination. Just his…

“What? You’re upset? No good. Bad boy. We’ll find something to replace you. Someone won’t salt the eggs—”

“No… no… stop it…”

“Ha… haha…”

Maybe it was just his imagination, but the walls seemed to be closing in on them the higher they went.
“Sou-chan… Hey, Sou-chan, when did you get so quiet? … Good. No one likes you anymore, anyway.”

“Kanji-kun, you can put me down,” Rise said. “I feel good enough to walk again—”

“Hell no,” Kanji said. “You ain’t getting down until we’re at the top.”

“Kanji-kun, you idiot!” Rise slapped his shoulder.

“The hell? I’m trying to help you, damn it!” Kanji yelped.

They were trying to piece together what had happened when the lights went out, but the voices kept —

“I can make them like you again. But that won’t make it better. Come on, put on a show for me. Come on, come on, let’s play a game together—”

—butting in. What the hell did it even mean? None of it made sense, none of it. And Souji had never mentioned a thing about it. It wasn’t anyone from Inaba—at least, Yosuke hoped it wasn’t anyone from Inaba. He didn’t know. Souji never talked about it. And if only Souji had talked about it, then they wouldn’t—or would they—

“I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to talk to you. Go away, go away, go away—”

From the sound of it, when the lights went off they were all taken away to their own separate little rooms. Kanji, Teddie, Yukiko, Naoto, and Chie had just heard the sound of footsteps walking past them, maybe a long, low laugh and a few whispered words. None of them were willing to repeat what the Shadow had said. Yosuke understood. The Shadow knew exactly what to say to keep them off-balance. Souji always knew exactly what to say.

Rise said that she could sense certain points where things were weird, just like they got weird when they were a fifth of the way up. They were almost at the next point, Rise said. Yosuke could tell. The voices were getting louder and louder, pushing down on them. But it was so hard to tell which one was Souji. They both sounded so much like him, one of them young and the other—

“We’ll need a way to tell each other apart, you and I. You can be Sou-chan. I’ll be… myself, of course. Haha…”

Sou-chan. Yosuke felt like throwing up a little at that.

The lights flickered, went off, and then came back on. They all let out a deep breath when they were still in the same place.

Then everything went dark again. Yosuke reached for his knives, but the Shadow didn’t even give him that chance. The Shadow was on top of him, pinning his arms down and—fuck, no, it was trying to bite him—Yosuke kicked the Shadow off of him, and the Shadow rolled away, laughing all the while. The lights came back on, and there they were again in that big, fucking black room, the Shadow just to the side.

“Where are the others?” Yosuke said.
“It doesn’t matter,” said the Shadow. “I don’t care about them. This is about us. We didn’t finish our conversation from last time.”

“Fuck you!” Yosuke shouted. He dove at the Shadow, but the Shadow stepped to the side, and gave Yosuke a kick to the back. Yosuke couldn’t even stand up anymore, never mind fight. It was like having someone throw a meteor into his spine. Everywhere around the place where he got kicked felt like it was breaking apart. Shit, he was going to die. The Shadow was going to take his big sword and skewer him. Shit, this wasn’t the way he wanted to go, no, no—

“I care about you,” the Shadow said, rolling Yosuke over. His sword was sheathed and eyes deathly serious. That was a good sign, right? Right—

“You don’t,” Yosuke choked out. “You don’t. You don’t mean it.”

“I do,” the Shadow said. “I like you.”

“You say that to everyone,” Yosuke said. “You don’t give a shit about me! You—you don’t care about… If you cared about me, you would have—you…!”

The Shadow smiled. It was so convincing. It was so much like Souji that Yosuke wanted to wrap his arms around the Shadow’s neck, kiss the hell out of him. But it wasn’t Souji, it wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

“Stop it,” Yosuke said. “Please… stop it…”

The Shadow smiled again, razor sharp. “That’s the kind of thing I like to hear,” the Shadow said. “You know what I like?”

Damn it, that thing just didn’t shut up.

“I like games,” the Shadow said. “I like making people do things. I like making them pick between A and B.” He got off of Yosuke. “Stand up, partner,” the Shadow said, just gently enough for it to be like Souji. Yosuke tried to move, but he couldn’t. It hurt too much—and that fucking Shadow had his foot on Yosuke’s back, anyway. The Shadow grunted rather impatiently, and drew his sword. “I said stand up. If you don’t stand up, then you’ll never get answers.”

“I don’t need answers from you,” Yosuke said, his voice thick and choked. “I’ll get them from Souji.”

“He won’t tell you anything,” said the Shadow. The Shadow bent down, and grabbed Yosuke by hair. “And you wouldn’t like him anymore if he did. Someone as disgusting as him… How much do you know about him, anyway? What’s his favorite color? His favorite food? Do you even know what city he lived in before he came here?”

The air smelled funny. It smelled like—ozone. Lightning. Shit. Shit, shit, shit, he was going to die. He was going to die.

“You know,” said the Shadow quietly, “this is your punishment for choosing to go after her and not us.”

And then he plunged the sword straight into Yosuke.
When he came to, Teddie was bent over him. Everyone was staring over him. He tried to smile. It felt like someone had hit him with a truck.

“Hi,” he said.

“You idiot!” Chie’s leg pulled back, almost as though she was getting ready to kick him in the head; then, thankfully for them both, she bent down and helped him up. “Are you all right?” she said. When he mumbled something about being fine, she said, “Great.”

Yosuke tried to smile. Then he said, “Well? Who did he see this time?”

“It was me,” Naoto said. Her lips were white and skin strangely pasty. “It was just as you said. He presented me with the choice of rescuing a critically injured teammate and having the opportunity to see Souji-san directly. I couldn’t… I couldn’t make that decision.”

So he hadn’t been anything special at all. The Shadow made everyone do it. Yosuke had just been the dumb, helpless girl this time. And he bet that Shadow said the same thing as he had said to Yosuke. Oh, Naoto-kun, it’s all up to you, you’re the only one who can do this, I’ll reward you by sticking my dick up your twat—

“He’ll be after Naoto-kun next,” Chie said. “That bastard…”

“It isn’t really Souji-senpai,” Rise said. “It’s his Shadow. All Shadows do this to people.”

“It is Souji-kun,” Yukiko said. “Or at least… it’s a part of us. It’s his Shadow.”

Yosuke grunted. Standing up was hard work. His stomach throbbed painfully. He could barely feel his feet on the ground, never mind anything below his waist. Chie adjusted her grip on Yosuke’s arm and said, “There has to be a way to stop this from happening. I can understand the Shadow getting Rise-chan, but you, too?”

“Fuck you,” Yosuke grunted.

“I’m just saying—”

“He was too strong,” Yosuke said. “He was—he just—I couldn’t…” He blinked fast before he could get all weepy. “Damn it.”

“It’s senpai,” Kanji said. “I dunno… Kinda hard to decide.”

“I’d beat him up,” Chie said. “I’d beat him up and then beat him up again and once he’s dead, bring him back to life so I could kill him again for doing this to us.”

“Y-yeah!” Kanji said. “You say it, senpai!”

Hey, wait a minute. “Weren’t you just saying a second ago that—” Chie stepped on Yosuke’s foot. “Ow!”

“We should continue,” Naoto said. She still looked a little shaky. “As we go up, we should think of —”

“God, Sou-chan, it’s amazing when you do that. Come on, Sou-chan, come here. Come here, come here… Yeah, that’s right…”
“Don’t hate me, don’t hate me… Please, don’t hate me… Souji, please… please—”

Holy shit. What had that been? For a moment Yosuke had thought it had been—it had been him, but it wasn’t him, it was someone else. Yosuke automatically looked to the others. Either they were all just as good actors as he was, or they were just as clueless as he was.

Good. Because he didn’t want to imagine any of them saying that to Souji—

“… A plan,” Naoto finished. But she looked even more rattled than before.

The boy was crying again. And now he didn’t seem nearly as young as he had at the beginning of the dungeon.
Multiple Choice (v)

Their brilliant plan to counteract the Shadow was for Naoto and Yukiko to light up like a pair of Christmas trees whenever the darkness took over. Maybe that’d be enough to force the teleportation mechanism to not activate or something. It was worth a try. Yosuke didn’t have any high hopes, but it was worth trying, because they didn’t have a single plan otherwise. God, this was pathetic. There weren’t any Shadows in the dungeon except for Souji’s, but they were all in such shitty shape. This sucked.

Damn it, Yosuke didn’t even remember why he was here. He wished that he could go back home and curl up in his bed and make the last few days a dream, but Chie would probably kick him if he tried any of that stuff. And now he had to know what the real Souji was like. He had been glad for a chance to glimpse at the “real” Souji—but now that he was getting closer to it, he didn’t want to know. Every few minutes the sobs and laughter would give way to sounds straight out of a porno. It made Yosuke sick, picturing Souji—but that didn’t mean that it was actually like… but it seemed like it, wasn’t that proof enough? He wanted to say something, but no one else was, and hell if he’d bring that up. He was a senpai here. He couldn’t make the others worry.

God, Souji, what the fuck had happened?

“We’re nearly at the next point,” Rise said. “There’s only a little bit more after this, guys. We’re almost there.”

“I’ll go on ahead,” Yukiko said, taking her fan out. She waved her fan in the air once, twice, and then on the third, a raging fire consumed her entire arm. It was so hot that even Yosuke couldn’t stand the heat, and he was normally okay with fire.

He looked over to Naoto, who kept fingering her holster.

“It’s okay if you’re afraid,” he said. “I mean, it’s pretty scary and…”

“Thank you, senpai,” Naoto said flatly. “I believe I am perfectly capable of handling him by myself without your dubiously qualified assistance.”

“Yeah, that’s real convincing,” he said. “Even I couldn’t take him on, what makes you think that…”

The lights went off. Naoto activated a Hamaon spell, and for a second they were all illuminated by the faint glow of runes from behind, and a stark, hot fire up ahead. On again. Off, then on—

“It seems to be—” working, was what he was about to say, except Chie smacked him before he could finish.

“Don’t jinx us, senpai!” Rise hissed.

Off—

And when the lights came back on, Yukiko, Teddie, Rise and Kanji had all disappeared. Chie nearly dropped Yosuke to run up the stairs, but now it was Yosuke’s turn to hit her.

“Don’t be stupid!” he said. “That’s exactly what the Shadow wants!”

“But—Yukiko…” Chie shook a little. “He took Yukiko! I thought he was supposed to just take Naoto-kun and… I thought we’d be… Where is he? I’m going to—”
“I don’t know,” Naoto said. “No one here has Rise-san or Teddie’s talent for finding people.” Which was an understatement. They all had combat-oriented Personae. Hell, between the three of them, their strongest healing spell was the almighty, incredibly powerful Diarama. Normally Souji had Teddie or Yukiko fix them with Diarahan or Salvation—except they were both gone now.

“He’s doing this to play with us,” said Yosuke. “That sicko…”

“Indeed,” Naoto said. She looked at the stairs with an anxious frown. “A or B… It seems as though he could have taken us away whenever he wanted to.”

So Souji’s Shadow had said that kind of thing to Naoto, too. Yosuke felt his stomach tighten. He shouldn’t be jealous about that. No one should have to deal with that guy’s crazy psycho Shadow. But still—yeah, all that bullshit. Oh, Yosuke, you’re special to me. What was so special about him compared to Naoto? Yosuke, he—

“Hahaha… That’s right, Naoto-kun. A or B.”

The lights flickered. Naoto extinguished her spell. This time when the lights went on, they stayed on. The Shadow appeared just in front of Yosuke, and shoved him to the ground. Yosuke fell onto a flat floor—good, because falling on the stairs meant that he’d break his damn skull in two. They were in a room with two doors. The Shadow stood in between the doors, holding a red headband in his right hand. He tossed it over to Chie, and it clattered at her feet.

“Yukiko…?” she said, staring at the headband dumbly. “What—what did you do to her?”

“Nothing I wouldn’t have done to you,” said the Shadow. Yosuke felt a part of him shriveling. That guy was leering at Chie. “She didn’t want to play my game. So I decided to make a new one for her.”

“What kind of games?” Yosuke asked.

The Shadow smiled and shrugged. He made eye contact with Yosuke and said, “The kind of games that boys don’t play with each other.”

“How dare you!” Chie charged at the Shadow, brushing off Yosuke’s grab and Naoto’s grip as easily as string. Wait, you moron, Yosuke wanted to yell out, but he wanted Chie to punt this asshole into neverland, and, well, the Shadow sure showed him last time who was on top—

Chie barely even made it to the Shadow when the Shadow back handed Chie so hard that her body floated in a little arc before slamming into the ground. Naoto half-heartedly aimed her gun at the Shadow. The Shadow looked at the gun, at Naoto, and then at Yosuke. Yosuke felt his chest tighten. He wanted the Shadow to say something to him, anything—damn it, he was Souji’s best friend, or at least Souji pretended—anything the Shadow would say would be painful but damn it, Souji, look at him—

“Come on, you two,” the Shadow said. “I already know that you’ll pick them over me every time, so let’s see how they feel when you pick some bitch over them. It doesn’t feel nice, does it? It’ll probably hurt—”

“We wouldn’t have to pick if you weren’t making us!” Yosuke said.

“Choices only matter if they’re hard ones,” said the Shadow. “And you guys don’t know how to make hard choices because I always make them for you. So come on. Someone’s going to die if you don’t decide soon. Hahaha…”
The lights went off, and when they came back on, the Shadow was gone again. Yosuke didn’t need to ask Chie which choice she would make: she’d pick Yukiko, no matter what. When he helped her up, she said, “We have to—”

“No. He picked Yukiko just to get to you, and you know it,” Yosuke said.

“But…”

“Perhaps we should be rational,” Naoto said. “Let us think this through.”

“There’s nothing to be rational about! Yukiko’s—”

“Rise-san, Kanji-kun, and Teddie are in the other door,” Naoto said. “Or did you forget about them?”

Ouch. Harsh, but effective. Naoto sure could be mean when she wanted to be. Chie deflated like someone stabbed her with a pin. “Well…”

“Honestly, senpai,” Naoto said. “I wonder about you sometimes. It could be that the Shadow is trying to trick us.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Yosuke said. “He’s an asshole, but Shadows are always honest about shit like this.”

“Ah,” Naoto said. She stared at the doors blankly, as though she was too tired to even think. He didn’t blame her. They were so close to the top. And they were all so fucking tired.

It wasn’t an easy choice to make. He liked Yukiko well enough, but he was responsible for Teddie, and three people against one… But how was he supposed to quantify how much he liked one person compared to a bunch of others? If it was just numbers, fine, but he couldn’t just decide, “Screw you, Teddie, go die while I save Yukiko.” He wanted to go through the other door, but he couldn’t do it. What if Yukiko was the one dying over there—and how would she feel if they picked wrong?

So was that was Souji was feeling? Damn it. Was it always like that? Did Souji make those kinds of decisions every day before and after school on who to spend time with? Was everyone always hurting where someone couldn’t see it? Well, of course they were, that was why there were Shadows. So did that mean that Souji had to decide between people who were okay and people who were spilling their guts everywhere without ever knowing it?

Thinking about it like that made Yosuke feel a little better. But the last few months had felt so bad that they left a sour aftertaste in his mouth.

“Help! Someone, please, help!”

“Rise-chan?” Chie said, her eyes focusing on the other door. She jumped up to her feet and tore straight for it. “I’m coming!”

“Hey!” Yosuke said. “What about—”

“Why do you always have to make things so difficult?!” Chie said, and yanked the door open.

Naoto chased after her. Yosuke, first, checked Yukiko’s door. It was latched tight. So then—damn it, he could only go through that one door that everyone else had gone through.

“Hahaha… you’re crying again? I liked you so much better when you were quiet…”
“Shut up, you fucking creep!” he yelled at the walls. But the Shadow kept laughing and Chie and Naoto had vanished behind another door ahead. There was a commotion up ahead, and then silence. Yosuke caught his breath, in ragged and sharp mouthfuls of air, and went forward again. He opened the door. Everyone was there in a small room. Rise and Naoto were awkwardly patting Kanji on the back. Kanji’s throat was an angry, raw red, so red that it might bruise later.

He stared. God, this was straight out of one of those shitty public awareness movies about domestic violence or smoking or something. “What happened?” Yosuke said.

“The Shadow was choking Kanji-kun,” said Rise. “We were all put in different rooms, and when the light came back on…”

Kanji grimaced again, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Fucking coward didn’t even say anything to me,” he said. “Jumped me like a pansy.”

Teddie was off to the side. Even though the costume he wore never changed expression, the guy was seriously glum. He hadn’t said much of anything for nearly an hour. Yosuke opened his mouth to say something to Teddie, and then decided to not say anything. Now wasn’t the time to force Teddie into a spotlight.

“How do you know?” Chie said. “How do you think she’d feel if I…” Her voice broke a little. “Even if she’s strong now, I have to at least…” She wet her lips. She looked down at the ground. Then she looked at Yosuke in the eye and said, “You understand… you get what I mean, kind of?”

No, he didn’t. Because he knew that he wasn’t the first person on Souji’s mind. Because what he felt Souji was one-way. No matter how much Yosuke thought about Souji or wanted Souji, he knew that Souji wouldn’t be sitting there thinking, Oh, where’s Yosuke? Maybe a part of Souji was thinking that—but from the sound of it, Souji thought that about everyone. And sure, Yukiko probably wasn’t sitting in a chair thinking, Oh, whence shall my prince cometh? or something lame like that—but god, Yosuke would bet his left arm that Yukiko was thinking, “Gee, I hope Chie hasn’t done anything dangerous again” or something like that.

It wasn’t fair. Why did Yukiko have to like Chie of all people? He didn’t see—well, he kind of saw—fine, he did understand why Chie. He wasn’t jealous or anything, he just didn’t see why not him—or even why Souji would—and what if Souji did feel…

The lights went off and when they came back on they were on the stairs. There were scattered bits of ice all around them, all up and down the stairs. Yosuke looked down at his feet—hey, that doesn’t really look right, what happened here—and then up at Yukiko, crumpled face-down on the stairs, still half-encased in ice.
“—I’m tired of games. Let’s do this for real now. Haha…”

“Stop it… stop it… stop it…”

“Something real, something real—”

The voice screamed, and the lights went on and off and on and off—and when it stopped the lights steadied again. They were all still there standing on the stairs with the ice all around them and Yukiko above them, frozen like a dreamer ready to jump down into—into what, exactly?

“You want real? I’ll give you real, you—!”

There was air rushing in Yosuke’s ears, a loud whistle or a howl, the sound of someone’s voice in the wind—“C-come on… that was good for you, too, right?”—and then it ended with a sick, horrible smash into the ground. A sack of meat. Or something else, something Yosuke didn’t want to think about.

“Yukiko,” Chie said. “We have to…”

“Right,” Yosuke said. “Yeah, we have to check up on her.”

“I think she’s okay,” Rise said helpfully. “She’s been knocked out, but she’s still alive.”

No one said anything after that. They were used to the laughter and crying from the dungeon filling up the empty spaces, but now there was just that quiet. He knew that he should be more worried for Yukiko, but everything felt so far away and they had been through so much already. He couldn’t stand it. Any more of this and he’d kill himself.
“We’re really here… right?” Rise said.

“What, does your radar dish say something else?” Yosuke said.

“You’re so mean, senpai,” Rise said. “All I meant was that it feels like we’ve been walking for a really long time.”

It had been hours since they entered the TV, maybe longer than that. Yosuke didn’t know. His watch went haywire in the TV, and his phone didn’t have the right time displayed, so it was impossible to tell how long it had been, and he knew it was the same for everyone else, too. But they were at the top of the stairs. Just between the door and the final step at the top was a gap in the stairs, maybe two feet wide. No trouble to jump over, but looking down made his stomach jerk up into his mouth. Naoto, in turn, was staring down at the gap, apparently unruffled by the distance between where they were now and the ground below.

Yukiko had Chie’s jacket wrapped around her shoulders, and was sitting with Kanji. Kanji had forced his jacket on her, too, but the end effect was that she wound up looking like giant poisonous mushroom growing on the stairs.

As though sensing his thoughts, Yukiko said to Yosuke, “Are you all right, Yosuke-kun?”

“I’ve been worse, I guess,” he said. “Have you thawed yet?”

“Yes,” Yukiko said. She bundled herself a little tighter with Chie’s jacket. “All that’s left is the final hurdle.”

“Yeah,” Kanji said. “Just gotta beat up the Shadow and get it done and over with.” His neck had bruised a little. They’d have to get Teddie or Yukiko to heal it later—except both of them were incapacitated. Just in different ways.

“Let me take care of that,” he said to Kanji. Well, he had to play the part of a good senpai every now and then. Couldn’t let Souji get all the credit.

“Huh?” said Kanji, rubbernecking at Yosuke. “You hit your head or something?”

“He’s right, Kanji-kun,” Yukiko said. “If you walk out of Junes with that around your neck, people will talk.”

“Screw ‘em,” Kanji said. “sides… I want to show this to senpai.”

“Kiss and make up, huh,” Yosuke said. He winked, but it didn’t really turn out that well. Normally Yukiko would smile or giggle at his winks, but now she seemed a little short-tempered. Come to think of it, he hadn’t asked her what had happened between her and the Shadow while he and the others were in the room.

Best not to ask. It probably hadn’t been anything pretty, anyway.

“No,” Kanji said. “So I can whoop his ass for being a fucking moron.”

“It’s not his fault,” said Yosuke, but they all had said that so many times that the formalities were just a way of shutting conversation down. Anyway, it looked like Yukiko and Kanji still had some things
to talk about. He wasn’t sure why, but Kanji and Yukiko were pretty friendly with each other. Kanji would make nice boyfriend material, and the two of them looked pretty nice with each other. Not that he bothered thinking about stuff like that too often.

He left her and Kanji alone again and looked around. He was nervous, so he was going to everyone and trying to eke out a bit of conversation out of them. It wasn’t like he was much use or like anyone wanted to talk to him. But without Souji to grab their brains and direct their minds to their goal, they were all standing around listlessly, trying to work up the energy to psyche themselves up for the upcoming battle. And there would be a battle. It was like a ritual now: Oh, nice Shadow. You don’t have issues? Great, let’s hear them. Okay, everyone, get ready, we’re going to have to intervene in five, four, three, two…

“… level,” Naoto muttered. “Taking into account of the American players who will be attempting to complete the challenge…” She trailed off when she spotted Yosuke staring. She shifted her weight from her left foot to her right. Then she said rather plainly, “Hello, Yosuke-senpai.”

“Planning something?” Yosuke said.

“I am merely making plans for the future.” Optimistic of her. That was assuming that they’d have a future. Naoto yawned behind her hand, and said, “Yukiko-senpai has nearly recovered. We should head out soon.”

Chie, Rise, and Teddie were having a pretty tense conversation a little while down. It looked like the girls were trying to cheer Teddie up. Well, the fastest way was to let Ted be a perv for a while, but he wasn’t going to tell that to the girls.

“Hey,” Yosuke said. “Why do you think the…?” He gestured at the walls. “Have stopped?”

“I do not know,” Naoto said. “But it certainly seems as though there’s been a narrative of sorts, hasn’t there? From senpai’s youth to a more… recent time, from before we knew him. One does wonder what happened. When I was looking up information on Souji-san over the summer, I noticed that he was sent to some sort of children’s clinic for a time, about this time last year.”

“Yeah?” Yosuke said. “In what city?”

“The clinic itself is in Minato-ku, but Souji-san was referred there from somewhere else,” Naoto said. “Presumably his hometown. I didn’t mention it because I assumed he had been referred there for a physical injury. But perhaps…” She looked at the walls, and then at the doors ahead. Yosuke did, too. He didn’t know if he wanted to hit Naoto for hiding the information or for knowing it in the first place. But he didn’t want to be one of those slime balls who went around hitting girls, so he stood there, staring at the doors as though they’d open by sheer force of will.

The conversations had all stopped, and they were all standing by the door, so now seemed as good of a time as any to go through it. Everyone was looking at him, too, like they were waiting for him to say something. Or maybe like they pitied him—but they couldn’t have, because they didn’t know what Souji meant to him, they didn’t know that he wanted… Goddamn it, he couldn’t keep any of it straight, the lies and the truth, what he saw and what other people were seeing, what he felt and what he thought he should be feeling. It was all jumbled and messed up.

What was the truth behind all this, exactly? And what would happen after this? Some parts of Souji’s Shadow were so straightforward; and other parts were completely weird.

Like, with all those games, for example.
It was one thing to make choices, but why did it have to be like some sadistic twist on a morning quiz show? And why no other Shadows as... contestants, so to speak? That had to be easier than hacking them all to death with his sword. But maybe if all Shadows were as smart as Souji’s, they all would’ve been dead before making it halfway up Yukiko’s dungeon.

And why a suit and tie? For a Shadow, it sure was... respectable, especially compared to Kanji and Rise’s bare-it-all approach to things. But the suit and scarf and coat didn’t go with the game theme. And the game theme didn’t go with the dungeon, with its stark black walls and the two—there were two speakers, right—speakers. The one who laughed and the one who cried.

Maybe Souji’s Shadow was too cool to play by the normal rules. Or maybe the way it all came together was so sick that Yosuke wouldn’t even be able to twist his brain around like that. He got all messed up when he thought about things he read or heard about on the Internet or from his parents. Not stuff in history, but stuff like, “Toshi Yamada-san (age twenty-four) stabbed ten elementary schoolers to death and then killed himself.” What kind of creep would think about killing little kids? It was so far out of the realm of “normal” that it didn’t even pop up on the list of things Yosuke would consider abominable crimes on humanity on the first run through. Today’s agenda: burn down a city, murder everyone I see, drown kittens and puppies in a bucket, rape someone’s mom... And oh, yeah, stab a bunch of third graders. Can’t forget about that.

Maybe they were all thinking of stuff like that, about the Toshi Yamada-sans in the world who did fucked up things that they couldn’t even wrap their heads around. The Toshi Yamada-san who did this to their leader. To his—

“Oh,” he said, to warm himself up for the upcoming motivational speech he hadn’t prepared, but it was too late.

“You’ve ruined the moment,” Chie said with a sigh. Yukiko still had her jacket. It was weird seeing Chie without it—but it wasn’t bad, either. She rolled up her sleeve to the elbow and said, “All right, everyone! This is our last chance. Let’s go!”

With a brave nod, she jumped across the gap and opened the door.

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The final room was completely dark, which made their reckless charge into the dungeon more stupid than brave. They all stopped moving, but at different times and for different reasons: Chie and Kanji because they realized it was too dark to go on, Naoto because she slipped trying to avoid running into Kanji, Rise because she tripped over Naoto, Teddie because he didn’t need a reason to fall, Yosuke because Teddie slammed right into him, and Yukiko because Rise grabbed onto Yukiko’s ankle for support.

“What the hell?!” Yosuke squawked, moments before someone poked him in the eye. “Ow!”

He tried to curl up, but Yukiko hissed, “Your elbow’s in my hair!” Naoto was trying to summon her Persona—he could tell because she told Kanji so as much, and she’d appreciate it if Kanji would please remove his knee from her solar plexus—to light up the room, but then there was more movement and someone’s shoe squashed his face.

“Hahaha...”
The Shadow was applauding them, from wherever he was. Great. Fuck it. They all sucked.

“I should have known that you would have tried making a heroic charge,” said the Shadow. “The lot of you always have more fun when I’m not around.” The lights came back on. Yosuke instinctively looked around for the enemy, and found him sitting on a smaller chair next to the throne. And on the throne itself was Souji, blindfolded and gagged.

“Sensei!” Teddie rolled up onto his feet. “What did you do to sensei?”

“Not much,” said the Shadow. “Tied his hands and feet together. Made bets. Did some things to him…” The Shadow ran his hand along Souji’s leg, creeping up to the thigh, and Souji’s leg jerked up. He smiled at Yosuke—or maybe at everyone. “Well,” he said, “you always have to be careful with guys like these. They might try to talk their way out of the blame. If I let him say anything, he’ll have me back inside that head of his before the hour’s up. And I can’t have that happening, can I? Not when there’s a job to do. A last game for us all to play.”

With a wild laugh, he tore the blindfold and gag off of Souji, and threw him off the throne. Souji hit the ground and actually bounced, but he bore it stoically, with a muffled grunt and barely a cry at all.

“He’s okay,” Rise reported. She was already back on her feet and was going around helping the others. Yosuke didn’t wait for her: he took off for Souji, grabbing him maybe a little too roughly by the shoulders.

Souji didn’t look too bad. A little roughed up. His lips were dry and his hair was messed, but Souji still smiled and said, “Hey.”

“Don’t ‘hey’ me, you idiot,” Yosuke said. He was halfway into the hug when he decided that it could wait for later, a time when they weren’t in front of everyone and a Shadow. “We’re taking you out of here.”

“Leaving so soon?” said the Shadow.

“Like hell we’re waiting for you to mess everything up,” Yosuke said. He put his arm around Souji’s, and pushed off the ground. Kanji had evidently decided to wait until later to punch Souji in the face, because he took Souji’s other arm and lifted him away from the throne and back onto ‘their’ side by the door. Yosuke was ready to tell them all to pull out, but Souji’s fingers curled around Yosuke’s jacket.

“Wait,” he said. “Let him say his thing.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, senpai,” Rise said. “The Shadow is getting stronger. We should leave while we still can.”

“He won’t let us go,” Souji said. “And we don’t know what will happen if I leave without facing him. So… I’ll face him.”

But wasn’t that playing right into the Shadow’s hand? Or was there some secret plan to do some fancy psychological—something. Souji could do it—at least, Yosuke thought he could do it. He held Souji a little tighter to him, and felt comfort in the warmth and hardness of the line of Souji’s body.

“You sure about this, partner?” Yosuke said. It felt a little bold saying that they had all spent the last few hours having their brains scrambled by Souji’s Shadow, but now he knew for sure that this was his Souji, strong and smart and good.
“I’m sure,” Souji said. Yosuke nearly jumped out of his skin when Souji rubbed his spine, a careful, but firm, circle. “Let me stand by myself,” he said, his mouth so close that Yosuke could feel the hairs on his neck shifting aside to make room for Souji’s breath. Yosuke and Kanji let him up. Souji nodded to himself once, twice, and then faced the Shadow.

“Won their favor back that quickly, huh!” The Shadow didn’t seem bothered by Souji’s little show of strength. Damn it. Of course it didn’t. The Shadow fingered the lapels of his coat, smirking downwards all the while. Then he looked up at them and said, “Aren’t you a bit ashamed of yourselves, hating me behind my back and then changing your minds once you look at my face?”

“Don’t talk to them,” Souji said. “Talk to me.”

“Oh, no,” said the Shadow. “I want answers, too. I want answers from these friends of mine who like to hang out with each other more than they like to hang out with me. They don’t like you. They don’t like me, either.” The Shadow brushed some dust off his coat. “Well, they would have liked me if I had the chance,” he said. “They’d like me even if they don’t want to.”

Yosuke’s mouth was open to reply, but he couldn’t say anything. Souji was standing just in front of him, proud and—but god, Souji, it wasn’t like that. If anything, it was them who felt abandoned by him.

“I… have a tendency to ignore them,” Souji said. “It’s all—”

“’Right?’” The Shadow chuckled. “You’re so cute when you try to be strong.” Then he became serious. “That’s the way you like it—or pretend to like it. You don’t trust yourself around intimacy. Sure, you want it, but you’re afraid of—”

“Being hurt,” Souji said.

“No,” said the Shadow. “But wouldn’t that be a convenient narrative! No, you’re afraid of losing control. Just like you lost control of that poor little boy—”

“Shut up!” Yosuke shouted, but his words barely seemed to reach the Shadow.

“It—it’s getting stronger,” Rise said. “Souji-senpai…!”

“I know that it’s important to let loose every now and then,” said Souji. “But I’m not afraid of losing control.”

“You are.” It wasn’t just any old statement or bunch of words. It was said as a proclamation of fact. It went straight into Yosuke’s mind and echoed in there. Was it true? It had to be true, right? But—

“No…” Souji shook his head. “That’s not true.”

“It is,” the Shadow said. “Hahaha…”

Yosuke, on impulse, put his hand on Souji’s shoulder. Souji threw it off violently, so fast that Yosuke felt his shoulder wrench a little. “Don’t touch me,” he said, icy cold. And then his face settled back to its normal expression—god, it was so much like the Shadow’s for a moment—and he said, “I’m sorry. I can’t… I can’t concentrate, if you’re…”

“Oh,” Yosuke said. “Fine, then. Be that way.”

“No, don’t step back,” said the Shadow. “Because I like it when you’re near me. Too bad that you don’t like boys, right?”
“I—”

“Don’t say anything to him,” Souji said, but it wasn’t clear who he was speaking to. Yosuke pulled back anyway. Not because things were too confusing, but because he didn’t want to deal with it if Souji was speaking to him. Damn it, Souji, why did he always have to be so— “It doesn’t matter who he likes. He’s still my friend.”

“What does it really mean to be a friend, anyway?” said the Shadow. “That’s not all you want, right?”

What?

“If you’re going to make a statement,” Souji said, “maybe you shouldn’t phrase it as a question.”

“If you want to make a demand, how about not using ‘maybe’?” The Shadow said. “You like just about all of them, but that Yosuke is special—for now, at least. You want to take him, just as long as you don’t think about his nice, warm mouth around your dick.” The Shadow cupped his hand around his ear and turned his head this way and that. “Hey, what’s that I hear?”

“You want something real? I’ll give you real, you bastard—!”

“Reminds you a bit of him, doesn’t he?” said the Shadow. “Boyfriend number one, that is. Poor Sou-chan. Poor you.”

“Don’t…” Souji’s face was pale. “Don’t bring him up…”

Souji had a—Souji liked—oh, god, what the fuck was going on, Yosuke couldn’t keep his head on straight, the Shadow seemed to be getting bigger and bigger—

The Shadow shrugged. Then he removed his coat. The suit was part of a school uniform. The crest on the left breast had been hidden by the coat, and the uniform itself fit so well that it was easy enough to guess that it had been tailored to fit. The coat vanished into the floor. The Shadow, carefully, swept his bangs out of his face, and wrapped the scarf a little tighter around his neck. “It’s like looking into a mirror, isn’t it! Hahaha…” Then the Shadow, more seriously, said, “You lost control of that relationship, didn’t you? I warned you what would happen if you pushed too hard. You were going to hurt him. But not as much as he could hurt himself. Hahaha…”

“Don’t bring him up like that…”

“Souji, don’t let—”

“Yosuke,” said Souji. “You—I can’t—” His face was so pale that it looked to be about the same color as his shirt. “If you say anything, you’ll make it worse.”

“Oh, no, don’t gag the poor boy,” the Shadow said. “Let him bask in the glow. Let him have his little moment of happiness before you go and break it. That’s why you stayed away from her, isn’t it?” He pointed right at Rise. “You liked her, too. But you couldn’t let her get too close in case you broke her, too. And Naoto-kun—so close to being someone who could counter you without any effort, but not good enough. But Yosuke—he’d never like you back, anyway, so why not… just let yourself take a little risk?”

Souji made eye contact with Yosuke for just a moment, and then, turning a faint shade of pink, turned away. Yosuke wished he could have shouted something like, “Hey, man, it’s cool, I love you!” but not now. And not like this. Not when everything was like this.
“The question is,” said the Shadow, “is if you fell in love with him, or if you made him fall in love with you, and then said, ‘Hey, that’d be pretty interesting, let’s try to do this without fucking it up this time?’”

“I didn’t…”

“Poor Sou-chan, always getting jerked around, left and right,” said the Shadow. “So fragile and soft. But hey, you knew how to control that boyfriend of yours, couldn’t you? You could make him cry. Hahaha… but we liked him better when—”

“Don’t twist things around,” Souji said, but his voice was smaller and kept breaking. “It wasn’t like that. You make it sound like we were fighting all the time.”

“Awfully one-sided for a fight, huh!” the Shadow said. “Oh, you never liked him much… but that wasn’t a problem when you got rid of him, was it?” The Shadow sneered. “Better not fall in love, Souji, you never know how dirty your hands—”

Souji screamed. It wasn’t a word or a sentence, but an angry howl of rage that seemed to come from someone else. The Shadow watched with an expression of mild surprise—maybe even boredom. When Souji stopped, too tired to continue, the Shadow smiled unpleasantly and said, “I think that was your ‘you’re not me’ moment.”

“No,” Souji said, his breathing ragged. “That’s not—that’s not what it was, you have it wrong, you have everything wrong, you—”

“Hahaha… Look at it from my perspective, won’t you.” The Shadow spread his arms. “That was a rejection of me, wasn’t it! It doesn’t matter if you can use words or not, because I still know what you meant. Because we’re the same, aren’t we? Haven’t changed a bit on the inside, even after all that.” The Shadow crossed the distance between him and Souji with clear, decisive footsteps. “You know, I thought coming here was going to be fun. A nice little vacation while the parents were out. But what do I get? Nothing. No friends. No one to fuck. Just people who need me to be something for them. All they do is take—but I get nothing in return. She gives me her fucking ID card without telling me where she’s going? That rich whore dumps me and has the gall to pretend that we’re still friends? He gave me a mug and that makes me family?! And these guys—” The Shadow glared at them, hard enough for it to be like an actual push. Then he grabbed Souji by the collar and gave him a little shake. Souji shoved the Shadow’s arms away, but the Shadow did it again, yanking Souji back and forth, and then shoved him onto the ground. “All they want me to do is to make choices that they’re too fucking cowardly to make! So you know something? Fuck that. They’re not my friends and they’re not my family. It isn’t me who’s not you. You’re the one who isn’t me.”

“That’s not true,” Souji said, trying to stand. “You’re wrong, you’re wrong… I hate you, I hate you—you’re not anything, you’re nothing—what the hell makes you think that you could ever be… You’re the one who has it all wrong. I’m not—I’m nothing like—I’m not you, I’m nothing like you, I’m not me, goddamn it, I’m not you!”

The Shadow burst out into a wild, giddy laugh. Then its face split in two and—something big and dark, without a face or a head, nothing but a large, hungry mouth with teeth, exploded from the shell and grinned over all of them.
“So,” Yosuke said. “Am I your type?”

“Hmm?” Souji said.

No time to wimp out now. He made a grab for Souji’s hand, and curled his fingers. Souji blinked down in surprise, and Yosuke did his best to not go red. “Just so you know, I don’t mind. If you. You know.”

They were taking the bus back to Souji’s house. Yosuke figured that biking back would be torture for both of them, especially since Yosuke had just gone up a million flights of stairs and Souji couldn’t walk without falling on his ass. Neither of them were too beat up after the fight. It was sad to say it, but he got knocked out of the fight pretty early. He meant to beat the shit out of the Shadow, sink his fist into the Shadow’s face and tear the sucker a new one—but, well, it didn’t work out that way. By the time he came to, the battle was nearly over. Then Souji had his big “yeah, you’re me” moment and that had been the end of it.

Souji had cried for a long time before he could say it. His eyes were still all puffy, too. But Yosuke figured that Souji was still embarrassed over it, and didn’t point that out.

“Well,” Souji said, “I like older guys, mostly. Especially ones with beards.” Beards? Yosuke rubbed his chin. No. Smooth as hell. “I don’t mind the skinny type, either.” Yosuke, briefly, had the urge to remove his own shirt and poke at his ribs. Souji seemed to mistake that for distaste, because he laughed and said, “I don’t—”

“You know something?” Yosuke interrupted. He tried to keep eye contact with Souji, but he couldn’t stop blinking, so he turned to look at the window and said, “I like you, too.”

“Oh,” said Souji.

Oh? Just that? Yosuke squinted at Souji’s face in the reflection of the window, and saw that Souji wasn’t smiling or frowning. It was his usual face, untroubled and calm.

“Wait,” he said. “That’s it?”

“I’m a little tired,” Souji said. “So…”

“Right,” Yosuke said. Still, even admitting that he liked Souji required a lot of courage on Yosuke’s part. Souji could’ve at least pretended to be shocked. Something like, “Oh my” or “I never knew” or “Hey, want to make out?” would’ve been appreciated. Geeze.

Souji leaned against Yosuke’s shoulder and Yosuke felt his heart jump up to his throat. He closed his eyes and said, “Sorry, but I need to close my eyes for a bit. Let me know when we’re there?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll let you know.”

Yosuke couldn’t look at Souji without getting dizzy, so he stared out the window a little more. For the first time he was glad that it was winter. It got dark early, so windows reflected them in the bus’ brightly lit interior. He could look at Souji without feeling like he was. Souji’s hand curled around the sleeve of Yosuke’s uniform, and he saw himself go dark and then a faint pink. He had to force himself to sit still, because every part of him was tingling, as though he had jumped out of a window and was flying out on the wind.
There had been a lot of tears. As in, a lot of them, especially right after they beat the Shadow. It was so awkward that for a while they all stood like morons in between Souji and his Shadow, on one hand listening to the dead quiet and on the other listening to their undefeated leader moaning and sobbing like someone had just died. Yosuke hadn’t been brave enough to listen to what Souji was saying; and anyway, none of it seemed to make any sense. Or, it made sense, but Yosuke didn’t have enough context to figure out what Souji was so sorry about. Sorry about what—this entire Shadow incident? Or for whatever happened to his boyfriend?

Either way, it had been a long day. They were all exhausted, and a little weary of pressing their previously sobbing leader for more information. They agreed that it could wait for another day or two, but it was clear enough that just about all of them wanted everything to return to normal as soon as possible. There probably wouldn’t be a confrontation—and anyway, a part of Yosuke wanted to be selfish and make everything go back to how things were before, only without the “sorry, can’t spend time with you today. I have to hang out with some woman you’ve never even heard of” parts.

Come to think of it, it had been so long since Souji paid any attention to him that it’d be weird if they started hanging out with each other again. Yosuke had all sorts of plans, but he hadn’t thought of how to accomplish them or what he’d actually do. And anyway, the dungeon and all… of this wasn’t the way he wanted things to happen. Sure, it made him feel a little better. But everyone else…

Souji had just barely made it into the house before collapsing onto the couch. Yosuke let him sleep. No point in waking the guy up now. He was horribly hungry, but he got a call from Chie saying that she’d be coming over soon with some food for them, since she figured that there wouldn’t be much in Souji’s fridge. Dead true: he opened the fridge door and found nothing but weird moldy stuff. He considered sampling—didn’t they have healing properties or something? At least he knew where Souji got his Odd Morsels—but then his common sense kicked him in the pants. He did make some rice, just enough for tonight and maybe lunch tomorrow. It had been a while since he had taken care of anyone except Teddie. The first years had their stuff together pretty well, better than he did on most days, and, well, Chie? He treated her on his own dime all the time. Yukiko could take care of her in his place.

It was kind of nice doing things for other people. He could see why Souji liked doing this stuff for people. It kept his mind off of things.

‘Like boyfriend number one.’

Damn it. He had been hoping to not think about that. But hey, at least he knew that Souji was a little —well, at least Yosuke knew that he and Kanji weren’t the only guys in the school who wanted to have his cock fisted by some nice, Japanese guy with arms like a sculpture and amazing hands—

Rice. He was thinking about rice. Damn it.
“You sure are late,” Yosuke said, opening the door for Chie. It was just past midnight. Ordinarily he would’ve said, ‘it’s too late for a girl to be out at this hour,’ but seriously, he pitied anyone who tried to pick a fight with Chie. Tired or not, Chie could still knock out a guy’s teeth with her finger.

“Well, we didn’t get out of the TV until just before closing time,” Chie said. She had biked to Souji’s house from the shopping district. “Yukiko and I went with the first years to make some food.”

“If you cooked—”

“Shut up, Yosuke,” Chie said, going red. “Kanji-kun did most of it. He’s really good. Almost as good as Souji-kun. I never knew that bread was just flour and water and yeast.”

What did she think it had been? Never mind. This was one part of the Mystery Food X duo. Answers were for people who didn’t plan on reproducing in this life. “Did Ted get back home all right?”

“He’s back to his normal self,” said Chie. “He won’t stop asking for you.”

“Great,” Yosuke said with a grimace. Way to go, Ted. Way to make him feel guilty. Granted, Yosuke had been selfish when he asked to be the one to take Souji home, but… “Was he too clingy?”

“He’s just a… well, he’s like a kid. It’s cute, you know? When he’s not being creepy.” Chie peered into the house. Souji was still asleep on the couch. Yosuke found a blanket from one of the linen closets and covered Souji so he wouldn’t get cold. When Chie looked at Yosuke again, there seemed to be a—well, knowing look. “So how is he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Yosuke said. “I think he’s all right, but he’s been asleep for a while…”

“Good,” Chie said. Good? What was so good about it? “It’s normal,” she clarified. “Yukiko was like that, too. He’ll feel more like himself if he sleeps for a while.”

 “… Yeah.” He hoped so. Chie slipped out of her shoes, and Yosuke helped her take the food to the kitchen. “Thanks for bringing the food.”

“Thank Kanji-kun,” Chie said. She was bouncing around as usual. How did she do that? Just walking made Yosuke’s butt scream in protest. Guess all that training came in handy. She checked the fridge and the quality of Yosuke’s rice (just fine, thanks) and made a note of something under her breath. Then she stopped hopping from one foot to another. She looked exhausted and small in the dim, yellowed kitchen light. Yukiko must have kept Chie’s jacket—no, that wasn’t… “You two haven’t done anything, have you?”

“So?” Yosuke said.

“I was talking about this with Yukiko, and we think…”

“Yeah, because you two were such a nice example of—”

“Yosuke!” She actually stomped her foot in frustration. Yosuke shut up. He didn’t want to hear it. He had thought this to himself, but he didn’t want to actually hear it from someone else. “I don’t want you to get hurt, okay?”
Damn it, he didn’t want to listen to her. But he couldn’t not listen to her—well, he could, but Chie would never talk to him again outside the context of massive, brainbreaking pain. He was sulking a little, but that never stopped Chie from talking to him before, and it wouldn’t stop her now.

“Don’t start anything yet, okay?” Chie said. “I mean, I know that it’s really tempting to, but there are still things you two have to work out. Just because he’s faced his issues doesn’t mean that he can deal with them now.” When Yosuke didn’t react, she rolled her eyes and said, “Fine, Yosuke, be a baby. Don’t listen.”

“I’m listening,” Yosuke said. “Geeze.” Because things felt good now. He didn’t want to go back to how things were before, but he didn’t know how to go through things the way they were now. He wanted Souji, but he didn’t want the Souji who ignored him. He wanted to know more, but he didn’t know if it was stuff he wanted to know. He crossed his arms over his chest and hunched inwards. Damn it. She was right. “So what, you waited all of a week before jumping Yukiko?”

She rolled her eyes even harder than she had the first time. “Look,” she said, “be careful, all right? I know you want to bang him into the sofa, but show a little restraint. Besides, Naoto-kun brought up a good point about Souji-kun’s boyfriend.”

He didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to hear this. He should bring up Yukiko again, see how that made her feel—

“She thinks that Souji-kun might still be in love with him.”

“He’s been here since April,” Yosuke said. “And they’ve broken up already. I think he’s moved on by now.”

“Has he?”

“Oh, come on!”

“I’m not trying to break you two up or anything!” Chie said. “All I’m saying is that I want you to be careful. All of us do. And I’m sure Souji-kun wants you to be careful, too.”

“You don’t know what he’d want!” But the second he said that, the petulance and anger that kept his back straight went MIA, and left him off-balance and afraid. Sure, she didn’t know what Souji was thinking or what Souji would want, but Yosuke didn’t, either. Nothing had changed between him and Souji, not yet. Not when Souji just—or when Yosuke—they hadn’t even—he couldn’t do more than blink at Chie. She was right. She was right. She was…

She hugged him, just long enough that it almost became uncomfortable.

“I have to go back to Yukiko’s place,” she said. “I told Mom I was staying there for the night, but if I don’t get there soon, Yukiko might call my house and…” She trailed off. She went back to the door and fit her shoes back on. It didn’t feel right to let her go in this awkward atmosphere, so he opened the door for her, and before she stepped out, awkwardly put his arms around her.

“Thanks,” he said. “Be safe on your way back on your mom’s old bike.”

“It is not my mom’s bike,” Chie said, her voice muffled by his shoulder.

“You keep telling yourself that,” he said, and saw her off.
“Souji. Souji.” Yosuke tapped his shoulder once, then twice.  

“Mm… not now…”  

“Souji. Souji.” It was no good. Souji was determined to play dead. Yosuke sighed, and removed the blanket. Souji curled up in protest. “C’mon, eat something before you go to bed. You’ve got to be starved.”  

Souji opened one eye. Then he rolled towards Yosuke and said, “Kiss me.”  


“Not until you kiss me.” Souji, jokingly, puckered his lips. “No one’s going to see,” he said. “I’ll even close my eyes.”  

“Man, you’re so embarrassing,” he grumbled, but he bent down and kissed the side of Souji’s mouth. Souji turned into it, and—oh god, he was going to faint or something, he couldn’t believe—but a thin fire was spreading under his skin, and damn if he wasn’t planning on eating Souji’s face right here, right now. His hips bucked forward as Souji’s hand slipped under his shirt and—  

Souji broke away with a little, high breath that made Yosuke want to spring out of his skin and kiss him all over again. Just as he had promised, his eyes had been closed the entire time. Fuck. Souji’s bangs were messed up from sleep and his cheeks were a little pink, right near his eyes, and it set off—  

“God, you have a sexy face,” he blurted out.  

“Good to hear,” Souji said, a little too mildly for Yosuke’s taste. He lifted the hem of Yosuke’s shirt, frowning to himself. “Does it still hurt?” he said.  

Yosuke looked down at the place where Souji was staring. Oh. That. The place where the Shadow had made shish-kebab of him.  

“Ted’s a good healer,” he said. “Barely even noticed it was there.”  

“I see,” Souji said. He pressed his palm against the scar. Yosuke bent down, ready to start again, but Souji sat up. No, damn it, couldn’t they keep— “Well,” Souji said, “I guess it’s time to eat.”  

Souji passed out almost immediately after dinner. Since it had been so late, Yosuke figured that it wouldn’t do any harm if he stayed the night.  

He couldn’t sleep. He was so tired that he thought if he laid down he might die, but he couldn’t sleep. His brain was too heavy, full of everything Chie said, everything the Shadow said, what Souji said, what Souji had done, Souji’s mysterious ex-boyfriend, whether he should be doing this to himself—because, hell, what if Chie was right, what if rushing into this was going to blow up in his face—but Souji didn’t seem worried, and Yosuke… Even after all this, he trusted Souji and his
judgment because Souji always seemed to do everything right, but…

He was so miserable about this all that he couldn’t sleep until it was almost morning.
Fill in the Blank (ii)

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean… I’m sorry, I’m so sorry… Please, say something, please say something, I didn’t mean… oh god, you’re not me, you’re not… you can’t be me, I didn’t… I’ve changed, I’m not that guy, I’m not him, we’re not…”

Yosuke woke up to the sound of the doorbell. He wanted to ask his mother to get the door for him, but this wasn’t his house, and he had fallen asleep on the couch and holy shit, he had the worst crick in his neck ever.

“I’ll be there in a second,” Souji said, from the top of the stairs.

“No, wait,” Yosuke said. It came out more of a croak. “I got it.”

He swung out of the couch, banged his shins against the kotatsu, and tripped over a cushion. Souji was coming down the stairs anyway, wearing nothing but his boxers and a ribbed tank top. Souji, for a moment, looked puzzled by Yosuke’s presence in his house. Then he clasped Yosuke’s shoulder, as though testing if he was actually there. Then his hand slipped beneath the sleeve of Yosuke’s shirt, and spread across the back of his shoulder. He did all that without saying anything for a bit. Then he said, “Kiss me?”

“Okay, okay,” Yosuke said. He made it a fast one. Whoever was behind the door was probably getting mad. “Why do you keep asking?”

“Because it makes it easier for me if you say no.”

Yosuke paused, just before turning the doorknob. Souji smiled at him and stared pointedly at Yosuke’s butt. “I’ll go back to my room. Need to put some actual clothes on. You might want to put on your pants.”

… Yes. Yes, he did want his pants. Yosuke swore and dove back to the couch to look for his pants. Yes. They were buried underneath the blanket, caught in the chasm between the arm of the chair and the cushion. He hopped over to the door, still zipping his fly when he got the door open. It was Rise, carrying two bags of tofu. Great. Yosuke hated tofu.

“Hi, senpai!” Rise said. “Chie-senpai told me that you guys didn’t have a lot of food, so I thought I’d bring this morning’s batch of tofu before my shift starts.”

“Thanks a lot,” Yosuke said. “Partner loves the stuff.” Weirdo.

“It’s no problem,” Rise said. Oh, god, she was so chipper. Yosuke felt as though he had some weird post-dungeon hangover. He squinted at her, trying to decipher if she was an alien or if she really could bounce back that fast. When he looked closer, he saw that her face was a slightly different color than her neck. Foundation, he guessed. “Wow, senpai,” she said frankly. “You look terrible. Did you sleep at all last night?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” he grumbled as Rise giggled. She didn’t seem upset or angry with him—but then again, why would she?

Well, she did have a lot of reasons. But not all of them made a lot of sense to Yosuke. And he wasn’t really sure if he understood what was going on in Rise’s head, anyway. Her Shadow gave him headaches, and the way she swept people along with her made it hard to pin down what she was thinking because he was normally too busy going. “Hey, wait!” to reflect.
“Can I come in?” she said. “I have another hour before my shift starts, and I wanted to check up on you two.”

It felt a little weird making the decision to invite Rise in when Yosuke was a guest himself, but he said, “Sure,” because he knew Souji wasn’t going to have anything to say about it. Souji would welcome her. That was the kind of guy he was. Yosuke bit down on his lip. Damn it. Jealous again. Why the hell was he so easy?

“Senpai, are you okay up there?” Rise called.

“I’m fine,” Souji said. “But I think I could use a shower. Mind giving me a few minutes?”

“Okay!” That done, Rise turned her attention back to Yosuke and said, “You and senpai are together, aren’t you?”

He opened his mouth. Yes? No? “Uhh,” he said.

“I know that you might not trust me,” Rise said. “But I never saw you as a rival or anything. Souji-senpai never really wanted me to begin with.”

“That’s not true,” Yosuke said. He wanted to say, the Shadow said so, but that was a pretty cold comfort. Yeah, his subconscious wanted to fuck you through a wall, and then he cut you with a sword, but hey, at least he wanted you! Nice of him, right? Yeah, definitely. “I mean—he’s a guy, you know? And you’re… Risette. Not that it’s a bad thing. Or that people want you because you’re —”

“Aww, you’re so cute when you’re being awkward,” she cooed, pinching his cheek like some old granny.

“Wh—let me go!”

“But that’s not what I’m here to talk about,” she said, still holding onto him. “Geeze… didn’t you listen to what Chie-senpai say to you last night?”

“That’s—how did you—you never mind.” He went red, and swatted her hand away. She dropped it to her side with a little giggle. “What happens between me and Souji stays between me and Souji,” he said. “We don’t need you sticking your nose—”

“Are you two fighting?” Souji said, eerily reminiscent of Nanako. Yosuke caught a glimpse of a naked Souji covering his groin with a towel standing in the hall connecting the bathroom and stairs.

‘Not now not notnownotnow!’ Yosuke mouthed, half in a panic and half ready to run up the stairs and join Souji. Souji ducked behind a wall just as Rise, who had her back to the stairs, said, “Not at all, senpai! Enjoy your shower.”

He could’ve sworn that there were hearts floating over her head. And that she didn’t mean for him to enjoy getting clean. Souji laughed and then a door closed. The water started running a second later.

“—sticking your nose,” he said, trying to recapture the same anger and emotion that pushed him earlier. He took a breath to steady himself. He knew that he was throwing a tantrum, but that didn’t stop him from saying, “Why can’t anyone just be happy for us?”

“Well, how about this?” Rise said. “Why don’t you step out of the house for a little? Put some distance between you and Souji-senpai.”
“No way,” Yosuke said. “I’m fine right here.”

“Well, I think you should go for a walk,” Rise said firmly, evidently trying to channel Yukiko’s steeliness. It was a pretty good imitation, too. Yosuke half-expected her to pull a fan from a secret pocket hidden in her skirt. “Let someone else take care of the house for a while.” Lowering her voice, she said, “Naoto-kun’s coming over soon, and she says that she wants to talk with senpai alone for a while, so it’d be nice if you’d give them some space.”

“What does Naoto-kun want?”

“I don’t know,” Rise said. “But Naoto-kun’s been brooding a lot more than usual. I guess the entire Shadow thing bothered her more than she’s letting on. Kind of the opposite of you, senpai.”

Geeze. She sure didn’t beat around the bush. “I need to go back home, anyway,” Yosuke said. He shrugged on his coat, put his keys in his pocket, and headed out for home.

---

He returned to the Dojima house with a few changes of clothes, his own toothbrush, and his phone charger. He told his parents that Souji had come down with a flu of some sort or another and with Dojima and Nanako in the hospital, someone needs to take care of him. If his parents think he’s a little obsessed—well, fine. They weren’t going to figure out what was going on between him and Souji, anyway. If anything, they thought Teddie was his illicit mail-order bride from France. His ass was still sore from the climb up the dungeon, but he rode it back to Souji’s house anyway. He’d recover soon enough, and it was always convenient to have a quick, free mode of travel.

The door was unlocked, so he let himself into the house. There was a strained air in the house, although it was hard to tell why. Yosuke tugged at the collar of his coat and said, “Hello?”

Souji’s shoes were still by the door. Naoto’s weren’t there any longer. Well, good. No reason to keep her around. The Shadow’s words were in his head—so close, but not good enough—sure, Souji said that he liked him but wasn’t Naoto a little closer to—god, Yosuke hated this, the way even the slightest wind would blow right through him. Was it always going to be like this, always being tossed around by one emotion to another—or was it his fault that he couldn’t keep himself steady?

He knocked on the door to Souji’s room. “Hey, I’m back,” he said. Nothing. The door wasn’t locked. Souji was sound asleep in his futon. Yosuke looked over his shoulder, as though someone might burst through the door. He tapped Souji’s shoulder.

“Mmm…” Souji rolled over. “What time…?”

“A bit past four,” he said. “Naoto-kun’s visit went okay?”

“Mm. Returned the house keys. Asked me if I wanted to say anything to Nanako or Dojima-san.” He sighed a little, looking vaguely remorseful. “Don’t think she was too happy with me.”

“Screw that,” Yosuke said. “She’s probably just mad you were reckless and dumb enough to toss yourself into the TV.”

“That wasn’t it.”
So what was it, then?

Normally, if someone said, “No, you’re wrong,” they would try to issue a correction. But Souji didn’t say anything else on the subject, so Yosuke was left knowing he was wrong, but not knowing why. It was more than a little annoying. Hadn’t Souji learned anything from his Shadow—namely, that it pissed them all off when he ignored them? Or was the only thing that got through Souji’s head was that he had Issues to get through?

Souji ran his hand through Yosuke’s hair, and the anger lessened a little. “You showered at home?”

“Yeah.” Yosuke sat down to make it easier for them to touch. It was kind of embarrassing to be pet like this, but hell, he wasn’t going to stop Souji, either.

“It’d pretty sexy if you showered here.” Souji’s eyes were a little cloudy, and his voice was thick with sleep. Yosuke felt the last of his anger try to resist it, but a little shiver rippled through it, then broke it altogether, shooting through his spine and then sitting right between his legs. God, he swore his pulse was right there in his cock, and he hadn’t even touched himself yet. “You’d smell like me. We could shower together now, to wake me up.” Souji stuck his hand up Yosuke’s shirt without any preamble, and slid his hand around Yosuke’s torso to grope Yosuke’s ass. Yosuke’s brain helpfully took off on an express train to hormonal lust. “Fuck, Yosuke, you need to get dirty again—”

“Hell yeah,” he moaned. “God, I need to go—I don’t know, crack some eggs on my head now—”

Fuck eggs, he needed—he wanted to—never mind wants or need, he was going to kiss Souji anyway. But there wasn’t a response. Yosuke frowned. This was what Souji wanted, right? So why wasn’t he doing anything? Yosuke pressed his hand on Souji’s chest and massaged the skin, but Souji shoved Yosuke off, so hard that Yosuke landed flat on his back on the floor. “Hey—!”

“Sorry,” Souji said. “Sorry… Not sure what came over me.”

He looked completely shaken, went pale. Yosuke went hot—not with arousal, but with shame. Had he forced Souji into—he didn’t think he was. Souji was talking to him like that and… But what if that hadn’t been an invitation to… He was short of breath, even though he hadn’t done anything.

“I—what did I…”

“It wasn’t you,” Souji said. “It’s not you, it’s me, it’s…” He sat up. His hands gripped the futon. They were trembling. Souji hid them beneath the blankets. “No, it’s my fault,” he said. “I shouldn’t have pushed you that far. Shouldn’t have. It was bad of me.”

“Are you…” Obviously he wasn’t okay, he was curled up beneath the blankets talking to himself. Yosuke swallowed, and said, “Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

“Why didn’t you just stay home?” Souji said.

“Wh—what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can take care of myself. I didn’t need you to—why did you stay the night, why are you taking care of me—”

“Because!” It came flying out before he was ready to say it. Because I love you, I love you, partner—but he couldn’t get his voice to say it. “Because,” he said. “I—I don’t know, because…”

“You can’t stay here,” Souji said. He stood up, swaying slightly. He leaned against a wall and stared down at Yosuke. Damn it. No, no, no, he was going to throw Yosuke out, he was going to dump him right here, and over what? Yosuke didn’t understand it, he couldn’t—he couldn’t get his head
around it, it was all *what the fuck you’re dumping me over this?*

“What did I do?” Yosuke said. “I—at least tell me. Damn it, Souji, don’t…”

“It’s not… it isn’t your fault, it’s me, it’s my fault, it’s—” Souji shook his head sharply. “You can’t stay here,” he said. “You can’t.”

So that was it, huh. Yosuke tried to not be angry but—but what the hell? What had it been, the eggs? The kiss? It hadn’t stopped Souji before, so—what, what had it been? Yosuke didn’t know if he was angrier with Souji or himself or the ex-boyfriend who hung over their heads like an axe ready to fall. It was that ex’s fault, all of it. God, what a number that asshole had pulled on Souji. If that jerkass was nearby, Yosuke would—he’d—he’d—

“Fine,” he said. “Fine, I’m going. You sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Just—just go already,” Souji said. “It’s already getting dark.”

“Yeah, well, I wonder whose fault *that is,*” he said. “Whatever, dude. I’m out of here.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, _fuck_, he hated his life.
December 17, 2011.

The next three days went by so miserably that Yosuke figured he might as well just roll over and die and be done with it. He tried to pretend that nothing happened, and Teddie for once picked up on the cues and didn’t blab about Souji all day and night long. Yosuke took double shifts at Junes, but he couldn’t focus on his work. He was too angry: angry about Souji, angry with himself, angry over the dungeon and the Shadow and everything that had led up to it. He spent the entire damn time slowly coming to a boil in his head, or thinking about Souji and plunging straight back into a pit of self-loathing and ‘I hate Souji, I hate him, I hate him’, whether he was sullenly scanning items in at the registers or staring at the wall when he should have been doing inventory.

It had been one whole day. One whole day of having Souji before it all blew up in his face. And—damn it, Chie had been right. What had really changed between them in a day? Great, they wanted to suck some cock and fuck each other until their dicks chafed, but that didn’t change the reasons why things couldn’t work. The second Yosuke left Souji’s field of vision, Souji shut him out all over again. So whose fault was it—god, had it really only been five days since all this shit started?

He hated it that Chie was right. Hated, hated, hated it. Yes, Chie, you were right, I fucked it up—he bet that she would, he didn’t know, grab Yukiko by the shoulders and suck face in front of him. He wanted to do that. Not with Yukiko. Not that there was anything wrong with her, but his type tended to be a little less lady-like and more pushy and—no, shit, he was about to describe Chie.

He was planning on ignoring Souji for as long as Souji was planning on ignoring him, but that plan ended in miserable failure when Souji made his glorious and triumphant return to school. Souji practically got mobbed at the gates as a bunch of people creamed their pants. Yosuke wondered what all the fuss was about, but no, it was just Souji. No, not just. Souji was special to… everyone. He wasn’t owed a piece of Souji’s time, but still, he deserved it, didn’t he? He deserved some part of it—maybe not deserve but he should have at least a little piece of it or something…

He thought that Souji caught his eye as he walked into the school, but a second later, Kou Ichijo shouted, “Hey, you’re back!” from just behind him.

Yosuke hated Kou and Daisuke and everyone in their class. Goddamn it.

---

Chie took one look at Yosuke and Souji in the same room, and made a pained kind of face at Yosuke. ‘What? Seriously?’ she seemed to be asking. Yeah, seriously. Yeah, fuck his life. But to his surprise she seemed more sympathetic than usual. She sent him a little note asking him to join her for lunch with Yukiko, and, well, it wasn’t like he had anything better to do. Souji went to have lunch with Yumi Ozawa, of all people. The only thing Yosuke knew about Ozawa was that her father was in the hospital and on death’s bed.

… All right.
Yosuke could see how that warranted some special attention.

But damn it, Souji, at least tell him that he has to spend time with another friend because she keeps crying in the middle of the day over her dying dad instead of ignoring Yosuke straight out. And Souji was taking a particular relish in it: didn’t turn to look when he passed papers down to the back of the row (wait, he never did that—), sat ramrod straight in his seat (just the same as always), took good, solid notes as though it didn’t bother him that he had Yosuke, he could’ve done anything to Yosuke and Yosuke would have let him, he would’ve loved it, he would’ve loved any of it, even the egg in his hair—

God, some things never did change, do they?

---

Lunch was a terse, sullen affair. Yosuke kept opening his mouth and Chie kept offering new and increasingly violent ways to shut it again. He left halfway through it because he was afraid that they might actually start a fight. He couldn’t stand the sight of the two girls being all chummy anyway. They probably were laughing at him on the inside or something—

He was so mad that when Chie approached him later that afternoon and asked if he wanted to hang out, he blew her off, just because he could. It made him feel both strangely empowered and incredibly ashamed. Thank god it was Chie he was blowing off, because she’d beat some sense into him, just as soon as he stopped being a jerkass. He didn’t feel like stopping being a jerkass, either. It made him feel better. He made sure to steer clear of the first years because hell, they didn’t need to get caught up in things—and anyway, Chie had probably blabbed to all of them how she thought him and Souji was a piss poor idea that ought to be shot down and never allowed back up, so they’d probably be gloating over their new opportunities, fuck, he hated thinking like this.

He had taken notes in class, but after a while he just started holding his pencil really hard and stabbing at the page. He wasn’t sure who he was mad at, but it sure did feel nice.

‘That’ll teach him to forget about me,’ he caught himself thinking, and was too angry to disagree.

---

Souji was waiting for him at the bike rack. He looked a little sheepish for all his seriousness. Once he saw Yosuke, he immediately stood up a little straighter. The sheepishness vanished, replaced by a grim determination. Yosuke walked up to Souji, close enough so they could talk without too many people overhearing them.

“Well,” Yosuke said, “waiting for someone?”

“You, actually,” Souji said. “You’ve been ignoring me all day.”

“You’re the one who’s been ignoring me,” Yosuke said. “You couldn’t have called?”

“Unless you forgot, I was sick, partner,” Souji said. “It was hard enough getting out of bed in the
morning.”

“You seemed fine the last time I saw you.”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“So it’s my fault—”

“I didn’t say that.” Souji grabbed onto Yosuke’s arm with one of those pale, white hands of his and—and then he let go. “You’re the one who left me,” he said. “I just—I don’t want things to be this way forever. Please, just let me talk to you for a few minutes.”

_Yosuke_ was the one who dumped Souji? No, it was—it was definitely the other way around. Yosuke was the one who was waiting, he was the one who… He couldn’t even fit it together in his head anymore. So this was a dumbfuck case of miscommunication and misunderstanding? It couldn’t be, because he felt like absolute shit. In movies these kinds of things ended with a, “Oh, it was all a case of crossed wires!” and a make out and a happily ever after, but he wanted to deck Souji in the face.

“I didn’t,” he started, ready to bare his fangs and tear into Souji, but no. Now wasn’t the time for what he meant and what he didn’t mean. Anyway, this was one of the few times Souji asked _him_ to talk. If he didn’t say yes, there might not be another chance. “Okay. Where should we go?”

“Let’s go to the floodplains,” Souji said. “There shouldn’t be too many people at this hour.”

Yosuke unlocked the chain, freed his bike, and tossed the chain into his backpack. He rolled his bike out of the rack, and slung himself on it. Then he looked over his shoulder and said, “Want to ride with me?”

“… Okay.” Souji put his hand on Yosuke’s shoulder and with a grunt, straddled the bike. He let out a little hiss. “This is—”

“You okay?” Yosuke said.

“A little unsteady. Don’t know if your bike’s meant for it. You ever tried doing this with anyone else?”

“Nope. You’re the first one.” Yosuke eased forward, and Souji grabbed onto his chest, mumbling an apology into Yosuke’s ear. The gates to the school were build at the top of the hill, and while it was a pain in the ass to go up it every morning—well, he always had a blast going _down_ the hill. Didn’t look like he’d be able to do that now. The mood wasn’t right, and he didn’t know if he’d be able to control his bike with two people on it. “Hold on tight.”

They biked over to the Samegawa in a numbingly cool silence through the winter afternoon.

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They settled at the bank of the Samegawa. No one was around except some old guy with a fishing pole and the occasional mangy cat. Souji always bent down to pet them and if the cat was really noisy, would produce a dried fish from his bag and feed it to it. Souji sat on the grass, and plucked at the grass, occasionally taking the care to shred it neatly in halves or thirds or quarters. Yosuke chained his bike to a tree and joined him a second later.
He wasn’t sure how he felt about the cat petting habit. They were strays and some of them looked seriously ratty. Souji was going to give himself fleas.

“Rise has a little sister,” Yosuke blurted out.

“I know,” Souji said.

“Oh.” No, wait, what? “She told you?”

Souji shook his head. “A few months ago, her grandmother let it slip,” he said. “And I once met a Ryuji Amagi-san at the bus stop. He and Yukiko-san have the same air around them. Very… proper.”

“You really do know everything,” Yosuke said, not sure if he had meant it meanly or not. He didn’t think he did, but the way it came out made Souji’s hand tighten around some blades of grass.

“There are a lot of things I don’t know,” Souji said. “Why did you leave the other day?”

“You told me to go,” Yosuke said. “What was I supposed to think?”

“I didn’t want you to go,” Souji said. “Once you left, I sat there with my phone—I wondered if I should call you, but you were gone and I didn’t want you to say no… and I was sick, so half the time I had a fever and wouldn’t have been able to say anything coherent, anyway.” He shrugged. “But you didn’t call either, so I thought you were done with me.”

“No,” Yosuke said. “I wasn’t. I thought you were the one done with me. I thought that I reminded you of—of that other guy, from before.”

Souji laughed at that, but he didn’t actually seem to think it was very funny. It was the kind of laugh people had when they were crying, all choked up and painful. “You’re nothing like him,” he said.

But his Shadow had said otherwise. Yosuke wanted to bring it up, but couldn’t. Besides, Shadows said all kinds of shit. And just because they revealed one thing didn’t mean that it was the whole story, either.

“What was he like?” Yosuke said.

“Okay, I guess,” Souji said. He said it with a particularly bitter expression, as though he disliked even thinking about the ex. “He wasn’t a bad guy, but I never really liked him that much, either. We were more… rivals than friends. Or at least, I saw him as a rival. He was two years older than me, so I think he found the rivalry more silly than anything else.” Souji shivered a little. “I… I hate being second best,” he said. “I don’t mind being really bad or mediocre at something, but if I’m going to be the best, I don’t want to be the second or third or fourth best. Do you know what I mean?”

“Kind of,” Yosuke said. “I can’t say that I’ve ever been the best at anything.”

“… Mmm,” Souji said. He seemed to be okay with that answer. “My parents would sometimes go overseas for a few weeks for their work, and when I was a kid they’d send me over to his house, since our parents were pretty close. I think our mothers went to the same university and our fathers were from the same village. So we knew each other for a long time. Funny thing was that we had the same name. ‘Sou’-’ji’. Different kanji, same pronunciation.”

Incidentally, Souji added almost as an afterthought, his boyfriend’s name was written with the kanji for ‘bright’ and ‘child’.
‘God, Sou-chan, you’re amazing—’

Yosuke’s brain came to a stuttering stop. No fucking way.

“Wait,” he said. “Wait a second. If you had the same name, what did you call each other?”

“We weren’t that friendly with each other, so I used his family name most of the time. He was Aoyama-san, his parents were Aoyama-obaasan and Aoyama-ojiisan,” Souji said. “He asked me to go out with him the second I graduated middle school. I never had anyone say they were in love with me before, so I said yes. I didn’t mind it at first, but after a while it got a little irritating. We were at the same high school, and he kept overcompensating in order to hide our relationship. It was annoying… He was my senpai. He shouldn’t have done that.” His expression was dark, as though there was a cloud over his head. His eyes glinted, clear as the river water and somehow—somehow, it looked as though they should have been a different color. Then he sighed, smoothed his bangs out, and said, “Well, it’s over now.”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said, relieved. Souji seemed like his normal self again. Something about the story of Souji and Aoyama made him uneasy and nervous. It didn’t seem that bad, but he kept hearing the Shadow and the dungeon in his head. “Sounds like that sucked, man.”

“It did,” Souji said. He smiled bitterly and said, “It really did. After a while it drove me crazy. I called him ‘Sou-chan’ to get back at him. It was almost fun after a while. The more he tried to hide, the more I pushed things. And, well, after a while he stopped.”

“Because you two broke up?” Yosuke said.

“That’s one reason,” Souji said. He laughed again, and then hid his face with his hand. “I shouldn’t laugh… It isn’t funny, it’s not funny…”

Naoto had said Souji got checked into a clinic about a year ago. But for what, exactly—

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” Yosuke said, putting his arm around his shoulder and patting it awkwardly. “It’s okay. It’s done now.”

“Yeah, it’s done,” Souji said with another laugh. “It’s really, really done. Aoyama-san’s dead.”
After declaring his ex-boyfriend to be dead—as in, really, really dead, not in-a-coma or moved-somewhere-far-away dead—Souji went off into the bushes to dry heave for a few minutes. Yosuke wanted to follow, but Souji said that he really didn’t want Yosuke to see him like that. He said that his stomach was still a little weak from throwing himself into the TV, anyway, and had spent a good deal of the past two days vomiting all over his house. So Yosuke let Souji go off by himself. Yosuke needed some time to think things through, anyway.

“Real? You want real? I’ll give you real, you bastard—!”

Yosuke knew that he wasn’t going to like the rest of the story. There was no way it could have, when it ended with Souji wanting to hurl every time someone brought up the ex and the ex in question being a dead man. And when Souji said push—pushed what, and to where—

“I’ll give you real, you bastard—!”

The sound of wind in his ears, the body hitting the pavement at the end—damn it, he couldn’t let himself start coming up with weird stories, either, not when he still barely knew anything.

Souji emerged from the bushes, breathing heavily. He was drinking from a canteen that he had brought with him. Smart thinking, Yosuke thought dully. Then again, Souji always came prepared. Or at least, it seemed like Souji came prepared. When Yosuke thought about it, there had been times when Souji screwed things up: forgetting to bring Goho-Ms in the dungeons, forgetting to tell people to guard against their weaknesses… When Yosuke thought about it, those incidents happened more often than not. So why did he always assume Souji had his stuff together? Because Souji never had a Shadow until last week?

Or maybe because he had never seen the real Souji before now. Funny thing was that Souji looked the same: muscled, but more along the veins of a swimmer than a wrestler. Walked with his chin tucked a bit down and eyes staring through the bangs. Head cocked off-center. Yosuke realized that he was staring, and averted his eyes.

“Sorry,” Souji said. “Sorry, I…”

“It’s okay, man,” he said.

“Not really,” Souji said. “But I want to finish this story.”

“Don’t you think we should—”

“I… I don’t think keeping this from you is good for us,” said Souji. “Besides, once you find out, you might decide to go. And if you’re going to leave, I want you to do it now.”

“No, don’t say—”
“I’ll understand it if you do. What I did was too—”

Yosuke felt a big, oily bubble inside him, something that demanded action, but Souji was standing just outside of touching distance, and right words weren’t coming to him, so all that happened was that his hands made a grandiose, violent gesture. “Quit it,” he said. “I—I won’t go anywhere, okay? You mean something to me, and I’m not going to stop that, no matter what you think you did.”

‘You mean something to me.’ Way to go, Yosuke. Why didn’t he just say it straight? His ears were smarting, as though someone had given them a little poke with a hot iron. Souji, as always, shrugged away the declaration of—whatever it had been. Yosuke was getting used to it, but it didn’t make it any easier to deal with. The question was, did Souji mean it in the sense of, No, you won’t love me and you’ll leave and that’ll be it, I know it or did he mean it in the sense of, What you’re saying is complete bullshit, Yosuke, why would I believe you, why should I?

“Dojima-san’s house isn’t so far from here,” Souji said. “Think this will take a while. Want to come back home with me?”

“Okay. Want to ride with me again?”

“I’ll pass,” Souji said. “Your steering scares me.”

“Oh, oka—hey!”

---

Their first meeting didn’t go on so well. They had moved into the city a month prior. From the sound of it, his parents were making plans on settling in the city for a good amount of time. It was near an airport with quick, cheap flights back and forth to China, the school systems were good, and took the car to the Aoyamas, and the entire time, Souji’s mother kept talking about how he and Aoyama-kun would get along, of course they would. Their parents were already so close together.

The first thing Aoyama said to him after the ritual greeting was, “You’re kind of weird, aren’t you? I don’t like talking to girls.”

---

Aoyama was two years older than Souji, a second year in the middle school that Souji’s parents wanted him to get into.

Aoyama played basketball, practiced the piano and flute, and took calligraphy lessons from an old master. Souji played basketball, too. He took lessons in piano and the French horn and oboe. And he did Japanese painting.

“Strange how similar the two of them are,” said his mother.

Souji didn’t think they were anything alike.

“They’re nothing alike,” said his father. “Aoyama-kun doesn’t know when to stop speaking.”
“Oh, he’s young,” said his mother. “You know how boys are at that age. They say the most awful things in the most awful ways. Perhaps we should sign Souji up for conversation lessons?”

“At my school, only girls have to get conversation classes,” Souji said.

“And it shows,” said his mother. “Just look at the way Aoyama-kun speaks.”

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“That’s gay,” Aoyama said when Souji told him that he took classes in conversation and etiquette. “Only girls take those kinds of classes. What’s next, flower arrangement?”

“The way you use the word ‘gay’ bothers me,” Souji said, borrowing something from the lessons. They couldn’t be completely useless, after all.

“What, because you’re a fag?”

Souji had befriended boys like Aoyama before, so he knew that the best way to make them stop bothering him was to punch them in the face.

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Souji scored twenty points higher than Aoyama on the middle school entrance exams, a fact that seemed to go over his parents’ head entirely.

“If we had sent him to cram school, he could have gotten a perfect score,” his father said.

Souji didn’t bother pointing out that his score guaranteed him a scholarship to one of the most prestigious middle schools in the city, a middle school affiliated with the one of the best high school in the prefecture. The exam had been hard, but he was proud of his work. Parents never seemed to understand that kind of thing.

“Well,” said his father, “make sure you do better next time.”

“I did better than Aoyama-san.”

“Since when did we ever pit the two of you against each other?” his mother said. “Well, he’ll be a little nicer to you now that you’re going to the same middle school. He can’t be seen being a bad senpai in front of his peers.”

“You don’t remember middle school very well, do you, darling?”

---
His mother was right: Aoyama did treat him better in middle school. Aoyama was a third year and popular for reasons Souji couldn’t fathom. His main charm was a mystery. It seemed to be being so clumsy as to become endearing. Souji saw little of Aoyama, but when he did, Aoyama would go characteristically pink at the ears and push past him without a word. Souji didn’t mind it. He had better things to do at school than to follow Aoyama around; and anyway, he liked his friends better.

He joined the basketball team, or rather, he was forcibly recruited into it. Aoyama one day appeared in Souji’s class while Souji was cleaning the room and asked for Seta-kun. He was in his basketball jersey, and was maybe half a foot taller than the messenger.

“C’mon,” Aoyama said. “Coach wants you for basketball.”

“Sorry?” Souji said.

“Coach—he says he wants me to bring some recruits since I’m lieutenant this year,” Aoyama said. “But I can’t think—come on, help me out, Seta-kun.”

“No,” Souji said. “I have to finish cleaning.”

“Forget about cleaning! My neck’s on the line.”

“I’m sorry, senpai,” Souji said. “But I’m busy now. If that’s all, then please let me be. You coming here is irritating. You’re making a scene.”

Aoyama actually went red. It was so fast that his shoulders and chest were pink, too. “Don’t make me beg you for it,” he said. “Please, Seta-kun, don’t make me—don’t push me… If I don’t bring someone, I’ll have to step down. Hayato-kun isn’t strong enough to lead the team by himself, and Kei’s still out with a broken foot…”

It was unexpectedly pathetic, having Aoyama be so desperate.

“Senpai,” he said, “I never said that I wouldn’t go after I’ve finished.”

“So you’ll go?!” Aoyama said eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Souji said. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up, if I were you.”

“Please, I’m begging you—”

“I meant ‘yes,’” Souji said. “Don’t be so serious.”

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After the first basketball meeting, Aoyama walked with Souji back home.

The coach looked at Souji and said something along the lines of, “Well spotted, Aoyama-kun! He has a good build for the game.” The coach pressed Souji into filling out a club application, and when Souji was practicing hoops with the rest of the recruited first years, had one of the second years run down to the office and submit it before Souji could change his mind. It was a pretty ugly way of getting people to join. Souji could understand why people avoided the basketball club, if that was the way they got their members.
Unexpectedly, Aoyama took Souji to an ice cream store and treated Souji. Well, since it was free, Souji got something a bit bigger and more extravagant than he normally did. Aoyama grumbled about it, but shelled the cash out without complaints.

“What are your classes like?” Aoyama said. “Do you have any friends? Do they treat you well? Are you in any other clubs? Is anyone picking on you?”

Souji answered the questions honestly, but he didn’t see any point in varnishing his school life for Aoyama. One part was because they were both going to the same school and had the same teachers. Another reason was because he liked seeing Aoyama go pink with embarrassment, or try to hide his facial expressions. He was a completely transparent person, and very, very sincere.

Souji could understand Aoyama’s popularity now. Aoyama was a little clumsy and rough, but he was honest and naïve. He was easy to tease and easy to trick. Even Souji, two years Aoyama’s junior and just in middle school, could sense that. It was disrespectful, but Souji found Aoyama to be almost cute. Not that anyone had to know that.

At the end of the questioning, Aoyama looked straight at Souji and said, “We’re going to be in the same club now, so I’ll protect you. If something goes wrong, tell me.”

It was almost funny, because Aoyama wasn’t nearly as kind to him the week before, or the week before that, or in the months before.

“You don’t have to take everything so seriously,” Souji said. “I don’t think it’s necessary for you to protect me. I can take care of myself.”

Aoyama flushed again. “You’ll get in trouble one day and beg for me,” he said, trying to be intimidating and coming off instead as a touch embarrassed. Souji had to laugh, and Aoyama went even redder.

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It was a nuisance having Aoyama hovering over his neck like some mother hen all through his first year of middle school, although it worked out all right for Souji in the end. Aoyama was popular with the upperclassmen, and well-regarded by the first years. Souji fit neatly into Aoyama’s social circle and began to cultivate friends across the grades and school. The basketball team was all right. They weren’t particularly accomplished or remarkable, but Souji got in some nice games and made some good friends, and developed a solid reputation. The more he established himself in the school, the more irritating Aoyama’s constant fretting got. Souji could understand a relative or close friend getting worked up over him, but Aoyama’s heavy involvement was just plain irritating.

He spent a lot of time with Aoyama outside of school because of his parents’ work, and Aoyama seemed hell-bent on treating Souji like a little brother at home as well as in school. Even when the two of them were alone, Aoyama treated Souji nicely, giving him food and help with his homework (“I don’t need your help,” he said to Aoyama, and it was true, but Aoyama always became flustered and embarrassed), and always asking about how Souji was doing.

Souji was glad when Aoyama graduated middle school. He was tired of always having to factor Aoyama into his school life—and Aoyama insisted on inserting himself everywhere Souji went. He thought he’d be done with Aoyama in school then, but he forgot the part where they went to the
same elevator school: admittance into the middle school made it dead easy to get into the high school, and the high school campus was all of two blocks away from the middle school campus. On the first day of school, Aoyama showed up at the end of the day in Souji’s classroom to pick him up.

Souji took Aoyama out to the hall and said, “Shouldn’t you be doing things at your own school?”

“Huh?” said Aoyama. “Yeah, I guess.”

“If that’s the case, then please don’t bother me here,” Souji said. “I made plans with another classmate.”

“I’m…” Aoyama was red again. “If that’s the case, then let me come over to your place when you get back.”

“If you don’t have anything to say to my parents, please don’t bother,” Souji said. “I’m tired of looking at your face.”

Souji thought that he’d be rid of Aoyama, but Aoyama kept coming to the middle school. He’d never talk to Souji directly or even position himself in a place where Souji could see him, but his presence was everywhere. In the middle of November, he confronted Aoyama and argued with him again. Souji didn’t think that he had lost his temper, but one moment he was ready to make a reasonable, sound argument, and the next he had decked Aoyama, and just barely stopped himself from throwing a second punch.

Except this time Aoyama didn’t hit back. He toppled onto the ground and stared up at Souji as though Souji had cut him. Souji didn’t know what to make of it. Certainly, he wanted to be left alone, but he didn’t expect Aoyama to fall over like that. It was confusing. Even worse was how hurt Aoyama looked.

“Don’t talk to me,” Souji said. “I’m sick of you…”

But it lacked conviction. And what he said—it wasn’t really an appropriate thing to say to someone older than him. It left a bad taste in his mouth, too. He didn’t like Aoyama and mostly tolerated his company; but ending things this way didn’t make him comfortable, either.

“Fuck you,” Aoyama said. He picked himself up. He was red again. “Fuck you, Seta, fuck you.”

---

They didn’t speak to each other for almost four months after that. Souji found excuses (homework, housework, cooking, cleaning, TV, conveniently not being there) to not visit the Aoyamas. When seeing Aoyama was unavoidable, they settled for pretending they didn’t know each other. Around their parents, they would find things to talk about, such as the weather, basketball, and their teachers. Souji didn’t miss him. As far as he was concerned, this was the way things ought to go. He never kept his indifference about Aoyama a secret, and now that Aoyama knew that Souji wasn’t politely reserved but instead politely annoyed, he reacted with passive-aggressive anger and barely tempered frustration.

It wasn’t so bad. Souji was happy that at the very least he and Aoyama were on the same page now. That was, until their parents decided to take a week-long trip to the country together on their spring break.
They rented a house near the mountains over spring break. The town itself was pretty quiet and unremarkable. It seemed to be in another world of its own, far away from the city and its constant din and low rumblings. Souji liked the trees and the long pathways, but the weather was still a little cold and icy. Their parents went off on a tour of the local shrines and left him and Aoyama alone to walk around the town. Souji would have gladly gone with the parents, but his parents said that it would be best if the two of them stuck together. And in any case, Souji didn’t want to go to the shrine. He and Aoyama walked on a trail, but Aoyama broke ahead of him. By the time Souji decided to turn back, Aoyama was nowhere in sight.

He went to the town center and looked around. Some girls sat with him at lunch and talked with him. They spent rest of the day showing him around the town and having dinner. They exchanged phone numbers, and promised to meet again tomorrow. It was certainly better than staying stuck with Aoyama, who was determined to keep a distance of twenty feet from him at any given moment.

He returned to the house just after sunset. Their parents were sitting in the living room drinking wine. Souji said hello to them and went up to his room. Aoyama was in it—no surprise, since they were sharing the room. Aoyama was going through some exercise books. When Souji came in he looked up and said, “Where’d you go?”

“Met some girls,” Souji said. “Went with them.”

“You ever thought they could’ve hurt you?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should’ve.”

“That’d make you happy?”

“Yeah, it would,” Aoyama said. “Bet you couldn’t get laid if you tried.”

“Maybe you should be there with me,” Souji said. “Three girls, two guys. They might feel better with a guy who might take the reins—”

“Stop it—”

“Wrap his arms around her shoulders, put his mouth to her ear—suck her face like she’s a whore and he’s the luckiest bastard alive—”

“I’m gay.”

“Oh,” Souji said. “Never mind, then.”

Aoyama was red again. His mouth was open. “That’s all you got to say?”

“Yeah,” Souji said. “Guess I should go ask the girls if they have any guys who don’t have anything better to do than fall over you.”

“Fuck you,” Aoyama said. “You’re short.”
“That’s the best you can think of? ‘You’re short’?”

“I can think of other things,” Aoyama said.

“Like what, cocksucker?”

“You—”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Souji said. He smiled coolly and said, “Guess between the two of us that makes you the fag, doesn’t it?”

Aoyama slammed his books on the desk and sprang up to his feet. “You don’t know shit what that makes me,” he said, his voice low. “I’ve treated you like my little brother, and all you’ve done is treat me like an asshole. And I thought you’d be safe to talk to and—” He tossed the book onto the floor. “Fuck you!”

“I don’t want you to be my big brother,” Souji said.

“So what do you want me to be?!”

Well, it didn’t matter to Souji, really. But Aoyama’s distress was distressing him. So Aoyama was gay. So what? “I don’t know,” said Souji. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know! Fuck—what do you know? You’re thirteen, you’re too dumb to tie your own fucking shoes!”

“You need to get a boyfriend,” Souji said.

“Don’t you try to be my friend now, Seta—”

“Yeah, because you have so many of them,” Souji said. “Because you’ve told so many of them. Some friends you have.”

“Blow off.”

“Why don’t you just tell someone now?” Souji said. “Call them up, tell them what you just told me.”

“Fuck off.”

“Haha…”

“What’s so funny?”

“You’re slow,” Souji said. He lobbed his cell phone onto the bed. “Go on, make the call. I’ll even let you use my phone.” Then slipped out of the room. He needed to shower, anyway. But it was nice leaving Aoyama to stew by himself in a panic. When he came back from the shower, he’d ask Aoyama what his friend had said. It wasn’t like Aoyama would call, anyway. And it’d be fun watching Aoyama trying to be cautious and considerate.

Just a bit of fun, after all. He could apologize later.

---
Aoyama followed Souji to meet with the girls the next day. Souji wondered what he should do with his new information, and decided to keep it to himself. No reason to make Aoyama too uncomfortable, after all. Besides, their current dynamic would look weird to outsiders.

“Oh, we have a Souji-kun and a Souji-chan,” said one of the girls.

“Oh?” Aoyama said. “Yeah.”

“I don’t want to be Souji-chan,” Souji said with a little frown. “I’m not that little.”

That made all the girls laugh.

“I’ll be Souji-chan, then,” Aoyama said, so eagerly that the girls giggle even harder. The tips of his ears were a bright, vivid red. “B-besides, Seta’s—I mean, he’s…”

“Sou-chan and Souji-kun?”

“I like that, I like that!”

“That’s good, then,” Aoyama said, relieved. He patted Souji on the back a few times and said, “Right, Seta?”

“Yeah,” Souji said. Poor boy, Souji thought faintly. He really has no idea that they’re laughing at him.

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“Sou-chan’s a bit odd, isn’t he?” said Michi. “He doesn’t seem to be able to talk to girls that well.”

“That sounds about right,” Souji said.

Yuna ruffled Souji’s hair, and then put a finger to the side of her mouth. “Hmm,” she said. “Do you think he’s ever been kissed by a girl before?”

“I don’t know! Souji-kun, has he?”

“I’m not sure,” Souji said. “I never thought to ask.”

“Ah, that’s right, that’s right.” Yuna hummed a bit to herself, and then said, “Well, there’s a way we could check, isn’t there?”

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Of course, he shouldn’t have let the girls be so mean to Aoyama.

Still, Aoyama was older than him. So Aoyama should have been able to stop Souji if he really wanted to.

Ah, he really was a terrible person. Just to Aoyama, though. Everyone else, he did all right by them.
But with Aoyama—ah, well. It got a little tiring being so kind to everyone. There was no reason for him to be kind all the time, after all. He wasn’t a saint. He didn’t have that obligation to be kind.

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Souji’s last year of middle school went by uneventfully. Aoyama mostly left him alone, but didn’t avoid him, either. They met on Souji’s terms: he would call, and Souji would go, or he would say he’d go and wouldn’t show up, or he’d show up and take Aoyama away on his own whims.

He really was a terrible person. But that wasn’t really him. It was another side of him, a side of him that wasn’t Souji Seta. It was—well, who was it? If it wasn’t him, then who was it? If it was a part of him, but not him, then was it still him, or just a bit of him?

For example, his hands were definitely his own. But it’d be wrong to say that his hands were his. Similarly, when he got his hair cut, the hairs that were swept up and thrown away at the end of the appointment weren’t him. He was the same person, whether or not he had hair (but an accident in elementary school taught him that he looked much better with hair, so that point was a bit irrelevant, anyhow). So the mean Souji-kun who showed up when he was playing with Sou-chan wasn’t Souji Seta, class president and captain of the basketball team and exemplar son.

Yes, that sounded about right.

Besides, it wasn’t like he was hitting Aoyama or beating him up. Even if it made him feel a little uneasy, it wasn’t bad. Not too bad. Not that bad, at least.

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“Aoyama-san went to my middle school graduation ceremony. Right after the ceremony, he took me to his house and said that he was in love with me. He couldn’t figure out how or why. He said that he wanted our friendship to stay the same, so if I was bothered by it or found it gross, I could hit him, beat him up, do whatever.

“But—like I said, I never had anyone fall in love with me before. We spent our spring break together. When I look back on it, I wasn’t very excited and didn’t enjoy it very much. But once we settled into a rhythm, I thought that it really was quite nice, having someone you could push around.” Souji picked up the teapot and poured empty air into his cup. He blinked. “Oh, it’s empty,” he said. “Well, never mind that, then.

“It was—I don’t have any excuses for what I did. I was… I was younger. I was immature. I could manipulate people so easily. All I had to do was say one thing or another and they’d fall all over me. Girls, boys, teachers, strangers—it didn’t matter. I could make them do what I wanted them to do. It was almost like a game to me. People will just—open up, tell you their secrets, if you say things nicely enough.

“I could make Aoyama-san do anything I wanted. Kiss me, blow me, fuck me—any of it. The voices you heard in the dungeon weren’t—they weren’t of me asking him to stop. It was him asking me to stop. But all I had to say was, ‘I thought you loved me, Sou-chan’ or some other bullshit like that,
and he’d do it. If I had asked him to eat glass or quit from all his clubs, he would’ve done it. I caught some flak from the guys he tried turning against me, but it was easy enough to make them dislike him right back.

“I don’t know if he loved me, per se. I think… I think I manipulated him too well. He didn’t love me, he needed to think that he loved me. I don’t… I can’t believe…” His hands curled around the cup. Souji stared into the bottom of it, and seemed so—far away. “Anything I wanted,” he said softly, so soft that Yosuke was sure that he was dreaming it. “Well… I didn’t really care, just as long as I came out on top.” Souji looked into Yosuke’s eyes, and did something strange with his mouth. It almost looked like a smile. “I guess,” Souji said, “one day things went too far. He wanted to come out to his parents, but I didn’t have any intention of being dragged into it. I liked men, sure, but I wasn’t about to say that I liked this one. So I called it quits. I told him that I had been jerking his chain, screwing around with him, fucking with his brains, and he snapped. Screamed at me, said he hated me and that he couldn’t stand me and what I had done, that I was a liar and he’d kill me in my sleep. Well, I told him to go fuck himself and went back home.

“I was at my apartment when he called me and said that he was going to kill himself if I didn’t come back. He was already on the roof of some building and he’d jump if I didn’t see him. I didn’t think he was serious. I told him to go fuck himself again. Try to bend over and suck his own dick. Or maybe grab a nice cucumber and pretend it was my dick up his ass if he was that much of a—of a slut.

“He called me again and said that he meant it, he was really going to kill himself. Well, both of our parents were out that day, so it wasn’t like I could call his house and check on him. I was irritated with him, and said that if he didn’t stop calling me I’d tell all his friends that he sucked my cock and that I had the pictures to prove it. And I did, because I wanted some… insurance. He kept on blabbing that he was going to kill himself and I got so fucking annoyed that I wanted to…” He took in a breath, and swore softly under his breath. He put his elbows on his knees and closed his eyes. He pushed his hands over his mouth. Then he opened his eyes and started speaking again. “He called me for the last time and told me that I should look outside my bedroom window. I was living in a high rise apartment, on the twenty-eighth floor. It goes up thirty-four stories. If you jump from there…

“He said to me, ‘This was all a game to you? This wasn’t real? I’ll show you real, you bastard…!’ And then I saw a dark blur falling past my window. I moved closer to see what it was, and there was Aoyama-san. And then it was over, all of it.”

He laughed, the same laugh Yosuke had heard in the stairs, the same laugh the Shadow had: rasping and cool and so cold that Yosuke wanted to throw up.

“God, how sad is that,” he said. “What a way to go. I can’t believe—of all the ways to die, jumping to death like that. I had something of a mental breakdown. It was almost winter break, so my parents put me in some healing clinic until classes started again. And after that it all disappeared. No one else knew. It was just me and him. I never even went to his funeral.” He laughed again, and stopped himself. Then the laughter resumed, only this time wilder and desperate. “I don’t know—what I was doing, it was all so stupid, and… I don’t know, I don’t know, I fucked it up so badly. I shouldn’t even—I can’t…”

“Hey,” Yosuke said. “Come here, come here…”

“No, don’t—don’t say it’s okay.” Souji tried to push Yosuke away, but Yosuke restrained Souji easily enough. Grabbed both of Souji’s hands, and Souji fell apart. “Oh, god, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I swear I’ve changed, I’m sorry…”

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It was all so sad that Yosuke didn’t know what to say. He held Souji until Souji muttered something about needing a shower. Then he went home. Someone would need to bring Souji dinner, and he didn’t want any of their other friends seeing Souji like that. Someone needed to protect him. Someone needed to watch out for him. Yosuke didn’t even know if that was the right thing to do, but he couldn’t do nothing, either.

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“Oh, you’re back,” Souji said when Yosuke returned. He looked… surprisingly okay, for a guy who had been crying his eyes out a few hours ago. And the entire house smelled like food. Really tasty food. “You brought food.”

“Were you cooking?” Yosuke said in disbelief.

“It keeps my mind off of things,” Souji said. He took the bag from Yosuke. Their hands touched for a moment. Yosuke thought Souji might try to pull his romantic crap and grab a kiss or a grope or something, but all Souji did was hesitate for a fraction of a second, then brought the bag to the kitchen. “Hmm. Fresh vegetables. That’ll come in handy. … What’s this?” He took out a small lunchbox and raised an eyebrow at Yosuke.

“That’s the Teddie box,” Yosuke said with a grimace. “Just—just open it, okay?”

Souji opened it, and then burst out into laughter. Inside the box was rice, dyed blue to match Teddie’s fur, and pickled plums for eyes and buttons, and dyed radish and meat for the main costume. “What is this?” he said, crying all over again. He dabbed his eyes with his apron, and then laughed even harder. “He made this?”

“Don’t laugh at it!” Yosuke said. “He worked hard on that.”

“I know, I know, it’s just—shit—I can’t stop crying.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m cutting onions and a bit of juice got onto the apron and my hands, and now…” Souji grinned behind the apron hiding his face. “Vicious cycle.”

“Hold on, I got a handkerchief in my pocket,” Yosuke said.

He was prepared to just hand it over to Souji, but Souji shook his head and said, “My hands, remember? You’ll have to do it.”

“Seriously? That’s gay.”

“I’ve touched your nipples. That’s gay.”

“Just one of them! Okay, stay still or I’m going to end up poking your eye out or something.” He reached out, ready to wipe Souji’s face, but Souji fell into Yosuke instead, and hugged him, hard. Yosuke, awkwardly, returned the hug. His face was going a little red, but that was because—well, it was so mushy. He thought everything was going to be grim and somber after this, but Souji was right back to being his usual self. “Dude, don’t use my shirt.”
“You came back,” Souji said. “I thought—I thought you had left me.”

“No way,” Yosuke said. He patted Souji—was it okay to do that, what was he doing, god, this felt so weird. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Souji let go of Yosuke, and turned away before Yosuke could say anything. “Sit down and make yourself comfortable,” he said. Damn it, Yosuke hated how Souji did that. “Need to finish making dinner. We still need to talk later.”

“Fine, fine.” Yosuke settled into the couch and turned on the TV, but nothing good was on, so he said instead, “Want to make out later?”

“Sure. Before or after bed?”

“How about in your bed,” Yosuke said and winked. “Bet you didn’t think of that one. –Ow!”

Souji had thrown the salt shaker into Yosuke’s head.
Yosuke washed and dried the dishes after dinner. It went without saying that the Dojima house felt more like “his boyfriend’s home” than his own home, so he felt a bit as though he was intruding. Plus, Dojima and Nanako were still in the hospital, and it wouldn’t really feel right sleeping over like this until they were back. That had its own sets of complications. Souji wouldn’t be able to indulge in his habit of trying to divest Yosuke of his shirt nearly as often.

Maybe they could say something like, “Oh, it’s so hot here so I decided to take off my shirt” but the house was actually a bit chilly. His nipples were already stiff. And the dumb part was that Souji wasn’t even watching him do the dishes. Souji had passed out on the couch again, curled up with Yosuke’s shirt in his face. He couldn’t get his shirt back without waking the guy up. He looked… innocent when he was asleep. Yeah. Something like that. Yosuke didn’t want to wake him up, but he wanted his shirt back eventually. Like, now.

The doorbell rang just as he finished drying the last of the dishes. Well, shit. He grabbed his uniform jacket from the closet and buttoned it up as far as he could without making the person on the other side wait too long. God, he hoped it wasn’t one of Souji’s neighbors or something, because then he’d have to explain why he was—aw, screw it. He opened the door.

“Yo, senpai,” Kanji said. Yukiko was there, too, standing just behind him. She seemed to be talking to someone Yosuke couldn’t see.

“Kanji, Yukiko,” he said, nodding to both. “What’s up?”

“We came to check on Souji-kun,” Yukiko said. “Um… Kanji-kun was running some errands at the Inn, and since we have a lot of leftovers today, I thought I’d bring some to Souji-kun.”

“So where are they?” Yosuke said.

“They’re in the car,” Yukiko said. There was a fraction’s second of a pause as Yosuke imagined Yukiko running the car through a tree. “Oh, I didn’t drive it, of course.”

“Good to hear,” Yosuke said. He worried enough about Teddie’s mishaps without having to worry about his other friends, too. “You guys want to come in?”

“I can’t,” Yukiko said. “I have to go back to the Inn. It’s almost Christmas, after all. We have a lot of people making reservations.”

“I can stay,” Kanji said. “Gotta get home before Ma starts worrying, though.”

“Man, there’s something wrong about a guy like you being worried about what your mom thinks. — Not that I was thinking that or anything.”

“Yeah, well, if your Ma was the only family you had, you’d care about her, too,” Kanji said. “I’ll go get the grub.”

Yosuke and Yukiko watched him stomp off. Yukiko wasn’t wearing her usual cardigan—Yosuke wondered why for a moment, and then remembered that it was because most items of clothing didn’t survive being frozen in a block of ice and then kicked around by Souji’s Shadow. The new one was a creamy white color. It looked nice but—well, as Chie said, Yukiko looked best in red. Around her neck was a hound’s-tooth sweater that had a handmade look to it. A gift from the Inn, he guessed.
“So,” Yosuke said, “sorry about lunch today.”

“Hmm? Did something happen?”

“… Never mind.” Right. Of course she forgot. Then again, that might be Yukiko’s way of letting him off the hook.

Yukiko smiled a bit as she stared at his chest. “I see that you and Souji-kun have made up.”

Yosuke did the highest button of his uniform and coughed. Nothing to see, nothing to see. “Yeah, we talked for a while,” he said. “We… we really talked.”

“I’m glad,” she said. “It was a bit of a strain.”

“What was?”

“Having you two fight.”

“Oh.” Right. That. Yosuke guessed that the two of them had been pretty… obvious. Out by the driveway, Kanji was trying to find the best way to carry what looked like a small mountain. “Sorry for making you worry.”

“It’s no problem,” Yukiko said, blushing for some reason. “You’re both our friends, after all.”

By ‘our,’ she could have meant the entire team, but Yosuke suspected that she really just meant her and Chie.

“You—you understand that I can’t tell you anything, right?” Yosuke said. “What we talked about is just between us.”

She stared at him for a moment, and then— “H-hahaha—Yosuke—”

“I mean it!” Yosuke said, over the clatter of Kanji dropping a few items and swearing loudly in the background. “It’s just between me and… You know.”

“Of course I know that,” Yukiko said. She looked at him with a rather critical eye, and said, “You’re not very bright, are you?”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Honestly, I think… it might be better if not all of us find out right away,” she said. “Not that we don’t want to know, but there was a lot of trauma. What his Shadow did to us in the dungeon… It was different from the other Shadows. None of ours were ever so… confrontational.”

“—Wait, you’re mad at Souji for what his Shadow said?” Yosuke said. “What did it say?”

“… That’s personal,” she said. “What happened with me and the Shadow definitely made me question my time with him.” She drew the scarf up to her chin. “It’s… it’s frustrating. I know that Souji-kun is gentle and kind and brave. He wasn’t lying when he helped me with the job licenses or with that TV Station, but I also know that his Shadow meant everything he said, too. Even if it’s his Shadow, it makes you wonder how much of it was Souji-kun, as well.”

Now Yosuke was really curious. But he said nothing. Like Yukiko had said, it was personal. He didn’t think it was fair for her to blame Souji for what his Shadow said, but he guessed it would depend on what the Shadow had said. And he’d be lying if he didn’t say that Souji’s Shadow had hit a few sore spots.
“I’m sure I’ll feel better once I talk to him,” she said. “But I’ll be busy until the Christmas and New Year season is over. If you can, please tell him I’d like to talk.”

“Yeah, sure,” Yosuke said. “I’ll do that.”

“Thank you, Yosuke-kun,” Yukiko said. She and Yosuke stepped aside so Kanji could bring the plates and platters of food over. “I’ll see you in school on Monday, then.”

“You’re leaving already?” Yosuke said.

“Yes,” she said. “I really am quite busy. Kanji-kun, are you staying here?”

“Yeah,” Kanji said. “Don’t worry about me, Yukiko-senpai. Ain’t gonna have any trouble getting back home.”

The three of them said their goodbyes and Yukiko left the Dojima house in the family car.

“White ain’t her color,” Kanji said. “Makes her look washed out.”

“What?” Yosuke said.

“Dunno,” Kanji said with a rough shrug. “Thought you were looking at her sweater kind of funny. I’m fixin’ up her old one right now. Nice material. Wonder where she got it.”

“Guess you’d have to ask Chie,” Yosuke said. “Come in. You ate dinner already?”

“Yeah, but if you’re gonna offer, I won’t turn down a free meal.”

“Forget it. I just washed the dishes.”

“Then I’ll eat off the table!”

“God, no! Then I’ll have to clean the table, too!” He hit Kanji’s shoulder. “Geeze, get serious here for a minute. What were you at the Amagi Inn for?”

“Senpai called me over. Needed a consultation for a damaged yukata. Nothing major,” he said. “I could fix it up in a day. Better than leaving it for her to do.”

“She’s bad with needles, too?” Yosuke said. Great. One more thing to make him worry for his life.

“She’s fine. Just thought she had better things to do than sit and fix shit at this season.” Kanji sat at the kitchen table. He put his jacket on the back of the chair and stretched his legs. “Guess Souji-senpai’s real knackered, huh.”

“That normal?”

“Sure,” Kanji said. “Getting tossed into a dungeon’s nothing like going in that TV in Junes. You ain’t got your bearings, your brain gets all fuzzed, and all your nerves get raw. Then there’s some shitass who looks like you yelling in your face like he knows everything. And then the Shadow goes berserk and these punk kids are all, ‘oh, gotta get you home’ when all you want to do is keel over and die. Felt like that time I got hit by a dude’s motorcycle once. Busted my head on the pavement. Dumbass doctors wouldn’t let me go home for three days.”

“You—never mind, don’t need to know, don’t need to know.” Kanji settled at the table and yawned. Yosuke wanted to tell him, ‘dude, don’t spread your legs that far apart, your junk doesn’t need that much air,’ but that would mean that he had noticed it in the first place. “Hey, how are things with
“Not bad, I guess,” Kanji said. “You takin’ a survey or something?”


“Naoto thinks senpai’s stupid, and Yukiko-senpai doesn’t talk about it. Guess it doesn’t matter. They still care about him, y’know?” He gestured at all the food in the kitchen. Yosuke looked, and realized: there was no way that these were just leftovers. Yukiko must have asked the Inn for a special favor. “Just because they’re kinda pissed don’t mean they don’t want him to eat well. ‘Sides, it ain’t our business. Just something they gotta work out by themselves.”

Well, why the hell not, Yosuke wanted to say, but it wasn’t like he was going to get an answer out of Kanji aside from ‘you stupid?’

Everyone’s relationship with Souji was different. He knew that Kanji and Souji had more of a senpai-kouhai relationship than Souji had with Rise or Naoto, but when Yosuke thought about it, he wasn’t really sure how Souji and Yukiko interacted with one another, or what Souji and Naoto did with each other aside snark at bad detective mysteries.

He wasn’t jealous now. Not when he knew how hard Souji had worked to not be a crazy, manipulative bastard.

“You’re pretty mature for a first year,” Yosuke said. More like, ‘for anyone, ever’ but if he complimented Kanji too much, he’d get a big head.


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About ten minutes after Kanji and Yosuke put everything into the fridge, Souji woke up, got off the couch, banged his shins on the kotatsu, and tripped over a cushion.

“Careful there,” Yosuke said. “That happens to me every time.”

“And even worse, it throws out your back if you stay on it too long,” Souji said, making a face. He smiled over at Kanji and said, “Kanji-kun. Good to see you.”

“S’up?” Kanji said. He embraced Souji briefly, and then pulled away. “Yukiko-senpai sent some leftovers.”

“She didn’t need to,” Souji said. “I can cook for myself.”

“Yeah, well, she thought you looked a bit green today,” Kanji said. “Didn’t want you passing out in the middle of the kitchen and cracking your head on the floor.”

“Ah, I fainted the last time she was here, didn’t I. I don’t remember it.”

“You did what?” Yosuke said.

“Like I said, fever,” Souji said. “I was… a bit dehydrated. I think she came over for a bit with Rise-
chan and Chie-san on the... fourteenth or fifteenth.”

“Oh,” said Yosuke. So everyone else had been visiting Souji, too. Well, that was obvious enough. Of course they were. Why wouldn’t they? He was all of their friends.

“Well, I’m gonna play nurse a bit,” Kanji said. “You still feeling woozy? Sick to your stomach?”

“I’m fine,” Souji said. “I don’t need you to take care of me.” He put an arm, loosely, around Yosuke’s shoulder and said, “That’s what he’s for.”

“Yeah, but Yosuke-senpai’s shit at taking care of people,” Kanji said. “He’s the kinda guy who thinks soup stock’s on the Nikkei or Topix.”

“—Shut up! You don’t even know what the Nikkei is!”

“sides, the girls were all worried about you,” Kanji said. “Rise won’t stop yapping about how she thinks she should do something for you. She’s real worried ‘bout you, senpai. ... Worried enough to cook.”

They all wisely decided to avoid thinking that they just barely missed a bullet. Never knew when they might pop back into the dungeon and accidentally think too hard.

“We’re going to need to call a group meeting,” Souji said. “Everyone keeps fussing over me. I’m happy that you all care, but I have so much food to cook already and not enough people to eat it. Maybe I’ll invite you all for dinner.”

“I’m down for it,” Kanji said. “Gonna be Sunday tomorrow, anyway.”

“Dude, don’t just invite yourself in,” Yosuke said. “Geeze. Not unless you’re gonna cook something.”

“Always up for a challenge, aren’t you?” Souji said, smoothly cutting into the conversation with a little laugh. “I don’t mind, but we’ll have to call everyone.”

“Leave it to me,” Kanji said. “You and Yosuke-senpai look like you’re busy right now, anyway. Not that, uh, I noticed or anything—”

“I was sleeping,” Souji said.

“Yeah! I noticed!” Kanji jerked his head up and down. “Anyway, gotta scram. Ma’s gonna be pissed with me.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yeah. Real better now the fog’s gone. Business is back to normal and everything. Now I just gotta stop making her worry and things will be great.”

Souji saw Kanji off to the door. They talked a while, and then, laughing, said goodbye. Souji returned and sat at the table, his hands falling in his lap.

“I wish they wouldn’t worry over me like this,” he said. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Hey, if I had cute girls bringing me meals to my house, I’d be happy,” Yosuke said.

“I know,” Souji said. “I’m happy they care. But a part of me is thinking... Why are they bothering, this annoys me, I’m going to have to repay their kindness and...” He trailed off. “I don’t like... I
don’t like having to work so hard to be a good person sometimes.”

“I think everyone’s like that,” Yosuke said. “Every time I talk to Kanji, I think I’m an asshole.”

“That’s not it,” Souji said. “It’s more… it’s more like I’ll be having a conversation with someone and they’ll look at me like they want me to… wave my arms and make everything okay. And in my head I’m thinking, ‘I can’t do anything, go solve it by yourself. Stop bothering me all the time…’” He rested his head against the back of the chair and opened one eye. Then he opened both of them, and stretched his arms. “You’re angry.”

“Not angry,” he said. “Guess it’s… I dunno.” Well, what was he supposed to say to that? No, you should feel bad—well, Yosuke had thought that about people before. But he never really said it. And it was—disappointing that Souji felt that way, but in a weird disappointment. Not in the, ‘you did something bad and now I don’t like you’ but in a ‘I’m not sure why I even thought that way to begin with when he’s not that guy.’

“I don’t think—I wasn’t lying. When I was being nice.” Souji, shook his head. “Sorry. Sorry, I don’t know…”

“Dude, you’re going to have to stop apologizing. You said you wanted to talk after dinner?”

“I guess,” Souji said. He reached over to Yosuke, and pulled him forward by the jacket. “You skipped a button. It’s all crooked.”

“Wh—dude, let go of me, I can fix it myself.”

“I like seeing you shirtless,” Souji reached over to lick the exposed skin of Yosuke’s stomach. “You have a nice chest.” Then he patted Yosuke’s shoulder and said, “About talking—”

“Arrgh!”

“… I guess… I wanted to know if you had any questions.” Souji helped Yosuke out of the jacket, and then beckoned Yosuke to come closer. “Closer,” he said, when Yosuke stopped just in front of the chair. He put his hand flat on Yosuke’s stomach, and pushed a little with his fingertips. Yosuke took the hand and set it aside. He was trying to have a conversation here. Hard to do that when the blood was pooling out of his head and into his dick. “Questions?” he said. “Not really.”

Souji couldn’t stop touching him—was he always this clingy?—and pulled Yosuke a little closer, urging him to come and sit on his lap—great, now he was sitting in Souji’s lap, and it was hellishly uncomfortable because he had to spread his legs pretty far because of the chair’s back and he swore their cocks were an inch apart from each other—wait, were they going to have sex? Right now? “Okay,” Souji said. “I don’t know. If you think I’m pressuring you or—if you don’t want to, then…”

“Uh-huh,” Yosuke said. He turned his head to catch Souji’s mouth, and pressed forward with his tongue because, damn it, he didn’t want to listen to Souji talk like this anymore, he wanted to grab Souji’s cock and make him shut up about—damn it, he wasn’t going to let Souji do all the pawing this time. He set his hands on Souji’s waist, and— he was actually touching Souji, holy shit. From waist to hip, and then he gripped the edge of Souji’s pants.

“Fuck, Yosuke,” Souji said, his hands joining Yosuke’s. It took two tries to undo his pants; then came the problem where they tried to get his pants off of him without taking off the belt. Yosuke kept thinking he had the buckle undone and yanking on it, only to throw Souji into his own body. The first time he did that, Souji broke the kiss with a gasp, his eyes hazy and—no, belt was still on—
Damn it, how do I get this thing off?!” Maybe he ought to give up. He slid his hand lower between Souji’s legs, and made a grab for Souji’s cock through the cloth.

“Oh, god, Yosuke—” Souji curled up in the chair, thrusting his hips out towards Yosuke. They seemed to have forgotten about the belt altogether now. Yosuke kissed Souji’s jaw, and then went back to trying to give Souji a handjob through his pants. He had Souji’s cock now, he was pretty sure he did. Even through two layers of cloth, he was sure he had it. The second he touched it, Souji gasped and grabbed onto Yosuke’s back, fingers digging into the space between his shoulder blades and ribs. Yosuke’s hand felt hot. He held onto Souji’s cock, rubbing it through the cloth, and with the other hand finally got that fucking belt free. There was hardly any space between them now. Souji hitched his leg up, tossed his head back, and moaned. It was so sexy that Yosuke didn’t notice the chair tipping backwards until Souji jerked forward and nearly smashed his forehead into Yosuke’s nose.

“Let’s—” Yosuke looked around. Not the couch, he hated that fucking couch. “Futon,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” Souji said. “Mm, yes. Get off the chair, get off of it—”

“I’m trying to, but your leg’s—”

Kissing didn’t make it any easier to get out, but hey, he didn’t mind it.

“I used to jerk off to this,” Souji muttered. Yosuke had climbed off the chair and read ready to turn away and be done with it, but Souji insisted on keeping the kiss going, breaking only to run speak. “I’d bust out the lube and—”

“Uh-huh,” Yosuke said. While Souji was getting up, Yosuke helped him get rid of those pants. The boxers could stay—for now.

“And I’d grease up my dick and pretend that you’d be—and then I’d pump it, just like…” Souji’s hand found Yosuke’s nipple, and gave it a little tweak. Then he did the same to the other one.

“There,” he said. “Both of them now.”

“You dork,” Yosuke said, and gave Souji a little push. They were at the stairs now. Yosuke figured that if they kept trying to make out all the way to Souji’s room they’d never get there, so he moved fast, Souji quick on his heels.

“I pretended that I’d fuck your mouth until you couldn’t speak anymore,” Souji said. “Then I’d pretend that you were there, going, ‘yeah, partner, it’s my turn now’ and—” His eyes rolled back up into his head, and a little shudder ran over Souji’s body. Yosuke practically kicked the door down, and—fuck, the futon was all rolled up, they couldn’t use it—except Souji shut the door behind him and reached under one of the couch’s cushions and came out with a small bottle. He dabbed a bit of it onto his fingers, and then licked it off his hand, staring at Yosuke, his eyes slightly unfocused. “I’d smear this all over my hand,” he said, “and finger myself, pretending that was your cock up my ass and your hand getting me off. I’d close my eyes, just like…”

“Oh, fuck,” Yosuke groaned, nearly jumping onto the couch.

He wanted to go for a kiss, but Souji shook his head and said, “Suck my fingers first.”

He wasn’t about to question why. But while he was licking the lube off of Souji’s hand (“starfruit flavored personal lubricant, sold by—” actually, who gave a fuck), Souji undid Yosuke’s pants and slipped them down Yosuke’s thighs. He touched Yosuke’s cock first with his thumb, then wrapped his other fingers around it. It was like someone jammed a hot iron into Yosuke’s brain. He stopped
sucking on Souji’s fingers and settled for staring at Souji stupidly. Souji. His cock. Souji was touching his cock.

“Mm,” Souji said, pretending to sniff it. “Smells nice. Smells like you.” His other hand now free, he rubbed the meat of his palm against the point where Yosuke’s leg met groin, massaging the skin until Yosuke was flat on the couch, legs spread as far as he could get them. Souji shoved Yosuke’s pants down the rest of the way, and got between them. “Sorry,” he said. “Been a while since I’ve done this.”

“Dude, I’ve never done this,” Yosuke said, a little breathless. “Don’t even know what it’d feel like.”

“Oh,” Souji said, putting his elbows on either side of Yosuke’s hips. “It’s no big deal, really.”

_Fucking liar_, Yosuke would think later. _Fucking, fucking liar._

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His hands still smelled like Souji’s cock. Or at least, they still smelled like the lube. Yosuke didn’t think he’d ever be able to eat starfruit with a straight face ever again, but whatever. There were better things in life than starfruit, anyway.

Souji was still cleaning himself off in the bathroom. Yosuke didn’t fall asleep, per se, while he was waiting, but he did doze off a bit, and woke up again to the sound of rain. He stood up, stretched, and caught his reflection in the TV—geeze, he looked weird and—why did he still have his socks on, he looked like a moron.

“Like the view?” Souji said, stepping back into the room. He was still naked—except for his socks.

“Next time we do this, socks are going to be the first thing to go,” Yosuke said, pointing at Souji’s feet.

“You didn’t say anything while we were doing it, though.” Souji peeked out the window and frowned. “Raining again…”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Think we’re going to have to watch the Midnight Channel.”

Souji checked his watch, and said, “Well, we still have a few minutes. Don’t think anything’s going to show up, anyway. Not unless there’s another Shadow in there.”

“Think one’s going to show up in Magatsu Mandala?” Yosuke said.

“Doubt it,” Souji said. “If anything, we’ll see something from my dungeon.” He smiled a bit humorlessly at that. “I’m looking forward to it,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“Honestly, it was a little disappointing that I wasn’t able to fight in the last battle.”

Yosuke would never want to go back to Saki-senpai’s place. Never. And he knew that Naoto got seriously trigger happy in the labs. He didn’t know if Souji was putting on a brave face or if he really did want to hit some stuff in the TV.
“Have you seen Naoto-kun lately?”

“No,” Souji said. Yosuke was about to ask for clarification, but Souji stood up and walked away. For a moment Yosuke couldn’t think of what to say—hey, what, wait, I’m not done speaking—but when Souji came back, he was carrying a blanket in his hands. “Naoto-kun is… the fussy type,” he said. “She’s… prickly. When she feels like she’s been hurt, she curls up and avoids the person or thing that offended her. So if I want her to speak to me again, I’ll have to see her. It’ll be fine. When I apologize, it won’t just be… convenient words without emotion.”

“… Huh.”

“What?”

“I never thought of her like that,” he said. “That’s all. What am I like?”

“You? Cute, mostly.”

“Funny.”

Beneath the blanket, Souji curled a little closer to Yosuke, resting his head on the space between the couch and Yosuke’s ribs. “Mm. Bony. Better get the barbeque sauce.”

“Come on, I was serious.”

“… I’m not telling you. It’ll be weird.”

“Wh—fine, be that way. How about Chie?”

“No. The two of you are too close. You’ll make her angry and then she’ll be angry at me. And if you want me to tell you anything about Yukiko-san, then you have to promise me that you won’t tell either Yukiko-san or Chie-san.”

“Because Chie will punt you?”

“Yeah. But Yukiko-san’s pretty scary when she’s mad, too…” Souji sighed. One of his arms curled, lazily, around Yosuke’s chest. “I don’t know. When I think about it, I haven’t spent much time with any of you lately. There were so many people I needed to help. Then suddenly I wasn’t seeing much of anyone.”

“Yeah.” Yosuke had expected the moment when Souji said, “Oh, right, I guess I’ve been neglecting you all” to be more… triumphant. He was expecting some sense of vindication or a moment where he could stand back and say, “Yeah, that’s right, but it’s too late now, I’m gone and out of here.” But now that the moment had actually come, it didn’t really seem to matter. Souji had his hand on his cock. “Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“We just spent—seriously, my dick’s going to chafe—”

“Haha…” Souji buried his face into Yosuke’s shoulder. His hand slipped away from Yosuke’s cock and drifted over to his balls. “Well, it’s a nice penis—”

“How many have you seen, anyway?”

“Mine, yours, Aoyama-san’s. A couple of others. I forgot how many.”
What was *that* supposed to mean, Yosuke wondered, but he turned around so he could kiss Souji.

“What?” Yosuke said.

“You know how after the fog sets in,” Souji said. “Sometimes there’s another Shadow inside the dungeon. I want to go inside. Check around. That okay with you?”

“I mean,” Souji said patiently, “I want to go back into the TV.”

“Yeah, but…” It didn’t seem like a good idea. It really didn’t seem like a good idea. Yosuke couldn’t put his finger on it, but he felt like everything would go to shit if they did. But he couldn’t think of a good reason to not go. So he nodded and said, “Okay.”

“Yeah,” Souji said. He kissed Yosuke, long and slow. When he pulled back, there was a cool, collected air to him. It was fragile, though. Everything was. Souji ran his fingers along Yosuke’s sides and said, “Come on. Let’s go for another round.”
"Were you—while we were…?"

"Uh, no. What makes you say that?"

"…"

"…"

"… I mean—you know—"

"Well. I’m going to bed, then."
The first person they saw at Junes was Rise, who was trying to pet the fox without much success. She looked a little annoyed with it, but when she saw Souji and Yosuke, she smiled and said, “Hi, senpai! Looks like we’re the first ones here.”

“Yes,” Souji said. “Do you know if everyone else is coming?”

“Everyone can come today,” Rise said. “Although, senpai, are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Whatever,” Yosuke said. Well, not whatever, but it was important to not worry the others. He winked and said, “I mean, Souji’s dungeons don’t have any other Shadows for us to worry about. I figure we’ll be okay.”

“Yo!” Chie called, jogging over to them. “Yukiko’s gone to pick up Teddie on her way, so she’ll be a little late.”

“Oh yeah?” Yosuke said. “You sure she’s not—”

“You realize that no matter how you finish that sentence, I’m still going to hurt you, right?”

Souji put a hand on Yosuke’s back, and then smiled at Chie. “Are you going to stretch?”

“No, I wasn’t running long enough to have to worry about any cramps,” she said, taking a seat. She looked weirdly disappointed at that prospect. “Although, are we going to get lunch or something, because I’m starving.”

“Chie-senpai, you’re always hungry, aren’t you?” Rise said. “No wonder you and Kanji-kun get along.”

“Yeah, that’s… what?”

“Someone said my name?” Kanji said. He was holding Teddie by the collar. “Sorry, senpai, found this guy tryin’ to mack on some poor girl—”

“She said yes!” Teddie wailed. “She saaiiid yeeesss!”

“Come on, Ted, get serious,” Yosuke said. “What happened to Yukiko?”

“Yukiko-senpai’s talkin’ with Kagami,” Kanji said. “Something ’bout needing t’be back by the afternoon to greet the guests.”

“I thought her name was Kasai-san,” Yosuke said. “You know, the cute spinster in the kimono?”

Kanji stared at Yosuke blankly. Then he said, “They got more than one person working at the Inn, senpai. Dumbass.”

“I don’t need to hear that from you, of all people,” Yosuke said. “Who needed help with his midterms last month?”

“I believe you needed assistance as well, Yosuke-senpai,” Naoto said. Yukiko was walking with her, pink at the cheek. “Hello, everyone. We apologize for our tardiness.”
“You’re right on time, actually,” Souji said. He checked his watch and then nodded. “Yes. Eleven o’clock on the nose.” He waited for Naoto and Yukiko to finish greeting everyone and sitting down. Then he leaned forward and said, “Well, why don’t we begin?”

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After everyone got settled down with their food, shuffled their seats around to their preferred positions, and finished the usual rounds of gossip, Naoto finally broached the subject: “Senpai, why are we going into the TV today?”

She was right. Because there wasn’t anything else for them to do. The Shadow who had taken residence in Souji’s dungeon wouldn’t bother anyone unless that person got tossed into the TV—and that probably wouldn’t be happening for a while, if ever again.

“Because I want to,” Souji said. “If you don’t want to come with me, that’s fine. I thought we’d have lunch together. Whoever wants to come with me can come. And if no one will go, then I won’t go. We can go to my house and cook dinner together.”

“How unexpectedly straightforward of you,” Naoto said. “You’re feeling better, then?”

“Yes,” said Souji. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Naoto-kun. I mean it. I understand if you feel as though you can’t trust—”

“I don’t think the issue is that we can’t trust you anymore,” Yukiko said. “We do. We always will. We’re just a little reluctant to go back.”

Souji frowned. And then like a petulant child, he said, “Before, if I said, ‘let’s go,’ you all would have followed me.”

“It isn’t necessary to go into the television anymore,” Naoto said. “You yourself said that you’re being selfish. And by flinging yourself into the TV, you compromised your credibility as a rational decision maker.”

“Come on, guys,” Yosuke said. “It’s just a short trip and—”

“It’s just that—you’ve been feeding all these different images to us,” Chie said. “We’re not even sure who the ‘real you’ would even be like. I mean, I don’t even know if you like kids or not.”

“I like my family and my friends,” Souji said. “Which can include children between the ages of nine and thirteen, or children under the age of four. Little kids in general get treated like everyone else.”

“Ooh, and how does sensei treat everyone else?” Teddie said.

Souji looked taken aback at that. “I’m… not sure,” he said. “I try to be kind. I can’t say that I know what I mean by that.”

“Hmm,” Teddie said. “So all you do is try to be… kind? So sensei’s not normally kind?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Everyone has their own needs. I was trying to… anticipate them. Be what… you needed to be.” He looked hurt at that. “I thought that was what you needed.”

“It might have been what we needed,” Rise said, “but it wasn’t what we wanted.”
“Yeah, senpai,” Kanji said. “All we wanted was to get to know you. Same way you know us. Might’ve taken a little longer for us to work through our issues, but that ain’t what it’s all about anyway.”

Yosuke wanted to butt in with some nice joke, but the mood was good—and besides, Souji looked… so pleased with the way things were going. It’d be dumb to ruin that over a bit of fun.

“Whatever’s in there, it’s not going to shake us up,” Yosuke said. “So we’re all ready to go?”

There was a chorus of nods and ‘yes’s from everyone. Souji looked at all of them, and then nodded.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s finish lunch and go.”

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“So you’re not going to go and stare at the corner over there for half an hour again?” Yosuke said.

“Do I really do that so often?” Souji said.

“Uh… yeah,” Yosuke said. “The girls once gave you a makeover while you were spacing out over there. Why else do you think Yukiko knew what color eye shadow looked best on you at the beauty pageant?”

“She put eye shadow on me?”

“It was on your face! How do you miss stuff like that?”

“I don’t know,” Souji said. “My mind blanked. Yukiko-san made me close my eyes the entire time. She didn’t say a thing. Wouldn’t let me breathe through my mouth.” He smiled slightly. “Or nose.”

… Go, Yukiko, for being completely creepy. Yosuke once heard that she made a joke about ghosts to a bunch of high schoolers from out of town, in Inaba on a school trip. And, well… When Yukiko wasn’t laughing her head off, it could be a little hard to tell if she was completely tuned in with the rest of the world or not.

“Anyway,” Souji said, “my current spread of Personae is pretty good. Well-balanced. We won’t have trouble going through the dungeon. Although I shouldn’t jinx us.”

“We’ll be fine,” Yosuke said. “What’s the worst that can—”

“Yosuke,” Souji said, quick and sharp. He pressed their foreheads together, to soften the harshness. “Don’t.”

“What?” Yosuke said, wincing a little as Souji’s hand curled in his hair.

“I don’t know,” Souji said. “I think—I keep thinking everything’s going to turn out badly.”

He looked over his shoulder to the rest of their friends, talking amongst themselves. Some of Souji’s sobriety had rubbed off on them. No one really seemed to be laughing or joking around. But things were going to be okay—at least, Yosuke hoped so. He didn’t know. Things felt good. He felt good. Jumping back into the TV had cleared some of his earlier doubts. Their friends still planned on standing behind Souji—and Yosuke wasn’t going anywhere, either. And for Souji to suddenly turn
around and say, “No, I got a bad feeling about this” felt like—a betrayal. Goddamn it, Souji, whose idea had this been to begin with?

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“We’ll go in two groups,” Souji said. “Teddie, Naoto-kun, and Chie-san, you’re up with me. Rise-chan, you stay behind with the other group.”

“Hey!” Yosuke said, but didn’t know why. No, he did know—but he didn’t want to say, “Hey, aren’t I entitled to a spot at your side?” It didn’t sound that bad until he actually thought about it.

“I want to have a strong back,” Souji said.

“Yeah, well,” Yosuke said. “… Fine.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Souji said, but it was almost a warning. An invisible, ‘or else’ lingered, just at the edge of his voice. “I want to have all my bases covered. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh,” Yosuke said. “Okay, I get it.”

Souji turned his attention to the dungeon’s entrance with a little frown. He put his hand on the door, and moved it an inch or two, then shut another inch or two. He stuck his head inside, and then said, “No point in loitering. Let’s go in.”

And with that, Souji strolled inside. Everyone else followed a bit slower—mostly because the last time they came into the dungeon they had been trapped there with their leader’s Shadow, who was determined to carve them a new one. Souji sure seemed to be handling it all pretty well now. So did everyone else. Actually having Souji there made this feel… normal, almost. Just like any of their other runs. But there was a reason why they preferred to crawl around in dungeons that hadn’t been from one of their own minds. Going into a place like this, even after accepting your Shadow, was uncomfortable for just about everyone. That heavy, psychic pressure never really left, just echoed instead of screamed.

“Coast is clear,” Rise reported. “I sense a strong presence on the… well, there’s only one room here to begin with. The fluctuations are still happening, though.”

“Fluctuations?” Souji said. Their two groups were still close enough for them to talk normally, but soon enough Souji would order them to push forward and away from Yosuke’s group.

“The fucking transports,” said Kanji. “We told you, about those times when the lights would get all wonky and split us up.”

“I thought that was because of the Shadow,” Souji said.

“Well, I guess it’s just a regular feature,” Chie said. She made a face and muttered, “Great.”

“We’ll worry about that when it comes,” Souji said. “I’m going on ahead. You guys stay alert for anything that might happen.”

“Roger that,” Yosuke said.

“Rise-chan, when is the next flux point?”
“I’d say it’s another ten minutes away, at the current pace we’re going,” she said. “Be careful, guys. There’s no telling what might happen there.”

Souji’s back was already becoming smaller and smaller. Yosuke watched it almost resentfully. He didn’t have a clue—or at least, he had kind of a clue, but he wanted to be up there with Souji. Not down here, with Rise and the others…

“Let’s go a little faster,” Yosuke said.

“Dunno,” Kanji said. “Senpai needs us to be back up.”

“There aren’t any Shadows,” said Yosuke. “What does he need back up against? He’s just splitting us in two groups for no reason! What do you think, Yukiko?”

“I’m sorry,” Yukiko said. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“But—you want to go up with Chie, right?” Yosuke said. “Come on, don’t tell me you’d just leave her there…”

“Chie is strong,” Yukiko said. “I’m not worried about here. Maybe you should have more trust in Souji-kun’s abilities.”

Yosuke trusted Souji, all right. But Yukiko didn’t know Souji like he did. But maybe—that side of Souji, that crumpling, jittery, guilty side of him, was one that was only a small part of him. Maybe Souji was… letting go a little around Yosuke, even though he hated showing that side of him. Souji liked to look put together, but some “together” that was. All Yosuke had to do was push and the veneer cracked.

But that fragile Souji wasn’t this Souji, Souji the leader, Souji the strong one, Souji the Mr. Perfect. So who was—that wasn’t the right question. He knew who Souji was. But what he didn’t know was why he felt that weird need to be—not protective, but… smothering.

They walked up the stairs in silence. Rise was focused on what was ahead, communicating with the others telepathically and scanning ahead.

“It’s weird,” she said quietly to Yosuke. “I never questioned why senpai’s mind was so hard to read before.”

Yosuke looked up ahead. Souji’s back was the size of maybe a pencil. “You just started to wonder now?”

“You’re mean, senpai,” Rise sniffed, pushing past Yosuke. “See if I ever sign anything for you again.”

“No—hey—wait!” But it was half-hearted, and he knew Rise didn’t mean it anyway. Besides, they both knew why she had never questioned Souji. They had trusted him—and still did. Although Yosuke was beginning to wonder why. Maybe it was just the dungeon. He looked at the walls and remembered Souji, almost in the same way he remembered his own Shadow.

In a way, Souji’s Shadow had been all of their Shadows. At least Yosuke’s Shadow only made a point of tormenting him. Souji’s was a sadistic motherfucker. Free pain for everyone.

“They’re almost there,” Rise said. “Let’s pick up the pace a little so we can have a clear view.”

It wasn’t like Souji and the others were going to disappear the second they passed the checkpoint.
The lights weren’t even flickering.

“Don’t think stuff like that,” Rise said. “You’ll jinx them.”

“—Can you not do that mindreading thing when I’m right next to you?”

“I can’t help it if you think so loud that they can hear you in China.”

The lights did seem a little odd, though. Greener, maybe. A little cooler. And a lot brighter than he remembered it being. Actually, it was too bright. It was—

“Everyone, cover your eyes!” Rise said. “Cover your eyes!”

“Wait,” said Yosuke. “What are we—”

He found out soon enough when the light bore down on him like a truck flattening him over. He actually fell onto ground, clutching at his eyes like someone gave them a good, hard poke.

“The Shadow’s immune to physical attacks,” Rise said. “It’s gotten past senpai and the others, and heading right to us. Only use spells!”

Wait, so where was it, then? Yosuke picked himself off the ground, forcing his eyes open, but all he saw was white—which was wrong, because he knew everything in this place was black.

A second after he thought that, something really big and heavy smashed into his face.

“I got it!” Kanji said.

“That was my face, you idiot!”

“Don’t use Agidyne now, Yukiko-senpai, you’re still facing me!”

“Oh! I’m sorry, which way should I be—”

“Not that way, that’s where Yosuke-senpai is!”

“But Yosuke-kun has a resistance to fire, so it should be all right—”

Except for the part where Yosuke would be on fire. “No, don’t hurt me!”

“The hell is the Shadow?!”

Yosuke squinted through the white light, and saw a black shape waving its arms, just a few feet from his face. He summoned Susano-O, kicking up a windstorm to knock the shape back. A plume of white flames blew through the black branches—a second later, lightning split the branches in two, and the thunder knocked Yosuke into a hard wall. His vision darkened, just slightly. Yosuke used the wall to pull himself up and blinked hard. No one else was throwing spells anymore, and the tension had leeched away.

“It’s gone?” Yosuke said. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping for his vision to return even a second faster.

“Yup,” Rise said. “And it only took twelve hits to do it.”

“Good work, everyone,” Souji said smoothly before anyone could complain about Rise’s snark. “Is everyone down there okay?”
“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Nice Ziodyne, partner.”

“You knew?”

“Yeah.” Everyone had their own way of using their elements. Kanji summoned his Zio spells into his hands and threw them like javelins, so the blows to the enemies were almost always horizontal, or came at an angle. His attacks whistled and howled, but they weren’t like real lightning from the sky, smashing down on the enemy. That was Souji’s Zio: strong, powerful, and… comically inaccurate.

Yosuke opened his eyes, and saw Souji standing, maybe a flight ahead of him.

“I think we should go together,” Yosuke said.

“No,” Souji said. “We’ll go in sets of two. Now we know what to expect. The dungeon is too narrow for us to go in groups. We go staggered.”

“Then I’ll go—” Yosuke said.


“Oh, yeah?” said Yosuke. “And who’s with you, partner?”

“I go alone.”

“Hell no,” Yosuke said. “What happens if you—”

“If I what?” Souji said. He stepped down, one, two steps, then three—four—stepping past Teddie, then Naoto, Chie, Yukiko, Kanji, Rise—until he stood just three step above Yosuke. “You think that I’m going to get hurt, or injured—how is this any different from what I did before?” Another step down, down, until they were nose-to-nose, then grabbed Yosuke by the front of his uniform and pulled them so close together that Souji’s lips rested on Yosuke’s ear—so close that Yosuke had to bite his lip, not because his fucking erection was jumping up, but because he wanted to smash Souji’s face against the wall. “You can’t even lay a hand on me. What makes you think you should—that you even can protect me?”

“Souji—”

“So step down,” Souji said. “I don’t need anyone at my side to lead, partner.”
Of course, it probably didn’t mean anything at all. Blahblahblah, teamwork, blahblahblah, position, blahblahblah, I don’t need someone at my side, it was all just—not really what Souji thought, only partially. Misplaced resentment or anger, oh fuck, he liked Souji better before Souji thought it was okay to be bad-tempered and stupid and fucking dumb—

idiot idiot idiot, Yosuke was never going to forgive Souji, never.

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The second checkpoint went by without much of a problem. Souji’s staggered approached work well enough. Everyone had enough room to move and attack. Souji switched Teddie with Kanji after Yukiko and Teddie complained about the overlapping radii of their spells. Everyone agreed that Teddie putting Yukiko on ice would be a bad thing, and the switch was made without Yosuke noticing it until Teddie bit his arm. The first thing he had thought was, “When the fuck did that happen?!” And then he had to ask Teddie for the details of what happened—hard because getting a straight answer out of Teddie was like melting steel with a Zippo lighter.

“We’re almost at the next checkpoint,” said Rise. “The first one was a Nyogen and the second one was a Gigas.”

“Yeah, I remember fighting it.”

“I’m making small talk,” said Rise. “Your crankiness is painful.”

“Why are you so—” Yosuke grumbled quietly to himself. “Geeze.”

“Because I care, senpai. But if you’re going to be such a jerk about it, maybe I shouldn’t.” Rise tossed her hair over her shoulders and pushed ahead to make conversation with Teddie, of all people. Yosuke could’ve sworn that she shot a glare at him as she did so.

Well, what was he supposed to say? He wasn’t the jerk here. Souji was. Obviously. Duh. Everything was Souji’s fault.

“Everyone, close your eyes,” Rise said. Yosuke obligingly covered his eyes with his hands. Even through his eyelids and palm, he could see it. Rise gave the all-clear, and Yosuke opened his eyes again. There wasn’t any fighting going on ahead—which meant it was behind him—

Or, he thought with dread as a black Beetle dropped down from the ceiling, above.

“Persona!” Yosuke cried, calling for the wind—except the Beetle absorbed it with a happy little squeal and dove towards Teddie. Teddie wailed and ran away—but Kanji was running down to them, grabbing Rise and tossing her down. He drove a Zio spell into the Beetle’s back—hoping to stun it, maybe, and then pound it into the ground. The crack of lightning jumped back at Kanji, and Kanji fell back on his ass with a yelp, and rolled down the stairs.

Naoto shot the Beetle, directing it away from Rise and up towards Souji. Chie’s kick flattened one of the Beetle’s wings, and—haha, go figure, the Beetle was all white underneath. Yosuke summoned
Susano-O again, and Brave Blade sliced off the Beetle’s giant horn. It was in pain, it was bleeding and… it didn’t seem right, somehow. Normally the Shadows were a little stronger than this, weren’t they?

Yukiko finished off the Beetle with an Agidyne, but just like the other two Shadows, it didn’t disappear into the dark. It stayed, mangled and ugly. Souji came down the stairs, frowning at the Beetle, then peered down the stairs. Of course, they couldn’t see the Gigas or the Nyogen below.

“This isn’t normal,” Souji said. “Normally they don’t leave corpses.”

“Maybe we haven’t finished them off all the way,” Chie said.

“No, it’s dead,” Rise said. “No hit points left.”

Naoto made a funny face, the way she always did when they started talking about hit points and super effective attacks, but didn’t say anything.

Something black oozed from the Beetle’s shell and onto the stairs. Black on black. Yosuke watched the—blood (no shit, Sherlock, what else would it be?) pool on the stair, then slowly drip down to the one below.

“Now do you understand?” Souji said. It was apparently directed at Yosuke.

Yosuke glowered at Souji, and said, “What?”

“Why I wanted you in the back.”

“No,” Yosuke said. “Screw you.”

“That’s fine,” Souji said. “Chie-san, please change places with Teddie.”

Great. Now Chie could yap about how she thought that this of course was perfectly foreseeable and boy, wasn’t Yosuke dumb. “And what about me?” Yosuke said.

“No,” Souji said. “But if you don’t, then go.”

Go. Go, where?

Damn it. This wasn’t the way Yosuke thought things would go. He had envisioned—he didn’t know, the two of them charging through the dungeons with a devil-may-care bravado. But he totally forgot that there were all these other people here—totally forgot that Souji was a leader, not that guy who jerked Yosuke off at one in the morning, and that Souji’s idea of leading people was to be a distant dick.

“Come on, you two,” Chie said, taking her place at the end of the line. “We still have one more checkpoint to go through before we meet the head honcho at the top. Save it for when we’re done.”

“What if he’s right?” Yosuke said. “Maybe I should step down. Go back to the entrance, wait you guys out.”

“Oh, no,” Chie said, looking at Yosuke a little oddly. “You’re the only one other than Souji-kun who can use Garu spells. What are we going to do if some Shadow drops in from the back again?”

Souji was already halfway up the line. Fuck Souji.

“He’s doing this on purpose,” Yosuke said miserably. “He’s jerking me around, he’s being—”
“Oh, Yosuke,” Chie said, but a bit more dismissive than comforting. “He’s being his normal self again, that’s all. And a bit of a jerk because the dungeon’s stressing him out.”

“He told me to go away!”

“Because you’re being a brat, that’s why!”

“How am I the one who’s a brat? He started it!”

Rise wisely decided to walk a little faster before they could get much louder.

---

After fifteen minutes of yelling at each other and being left behind by the others, Yosuke and Chie settled on ignoring each other. The “ignoring” part only lasted about two minutes because they could always find something to complain about each other. It was one part habit, two parts boredom, and—well, Yosuke could say anything to Chie without worrying about things too much later. His just dues, for her banging his balls around so hard.

“So, uh, how are things going with you and Yukiko?” Yosuke said.


“I was just wondering, because—”

“Oh, no, we know how to be *discreet* and not air all our dirty laundry in front of everyone,” Chie said. “What a shock. How surprising—”

“Man, I don’t get why you’re such a bitch sometimes.”

She stepped on his toes and continued, “Yeah, things are great.”

“Even though she never said anything about her brother?”

“Do you *really* want to know what happened with him?” Chie said. “Yukiko said that she didn’t mind the others knowing, so I guess it’s okay to tell you. Especially since you won’t shut up about it.”

They had maybe another half an hour before they reached the last check point. Chie seemed to be warning him about something, but Yosuke was too angry to take heed. Fuck that. He was mad and miserable, so everyone else should be, too. He nodded and said, “I won’t say anything to anyone else. Promise.”

“Well… I think he’s something like nine years older than Yukiko. I don’t think they were ever that close to one another, but they were still siblings. When Ryuuiji-san was fifteen, he got a girl pregnant. No one can agree how—Yukiko says that she thinks he probably raped the girl, but officially the girl got pregnant and that was it. And you know, the dumb thing is that Ryuuiji-san’s gay, right?” Chie said, speaking faster and quieter now. Her face was bright red and her ears looked ready to steam right over. “So when he—you know, attacked… you know what I mean. I guess there’s all this psychological stuff attached to it. When the news got out, the Amagis disowned him and kicked him out of town before anyone else could. The girl got rid of the baby and moved out of Inaba and
Ryuuji tried to get her to marry him—I don’t know what happened after that, but everything was just barely kept under wraps. It’s been ten years and they still barely talk about him. He’s not even allowed to stay in town for longer than two or three days. And when Souji’s Shadow showed up, he kept talking about how what a nice lay her brother had been, and…”

Her face was so red that she made herself an ice crystal and pushed her face into it. For Yosuke, it felt a bit like someone had dunked his head into a bucket of ice water. Well, hell. Hell.


“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Of course you shouldn’t have, you idiot! Geeze…” She was tearing up a little bit. “I hate stories like that,” she said. “I hate them, I hate them…”

They had fallen pretty far behind, so there was hardly anyone to catch Chie’s red face and tears. She wasn’t sad about it—or maybe she was a little sad, but she seemed mostly… angry.

“Stories like that suck,” Yosuke said.

“They totally do,” Chie said.

“But that’s real life, right? Even when you win something you lose a lot, too.”

“No way,” Chie said. “If that’s what life is, then it should go to hell.” She wiped her face on the sleeve of her jacket and said, “We’re so far behind now. And since you made me cry—”

“I know, I know. I have to buy you steak.”

“No, I’m making you eat an entire bowl of tofu.”

“Oh, screw you.”

---

They dispatched the next Shadow easily enough. The Jotun didn’t really have much mobility, and his main attack seemed to be running up and down the stairs and shooting fire everywhere. And though it wasn’t particularly difficult, it had been a long battle. Souji pushed them up to the final platform, and they all took a breather. Souji didn’t really talk to anyone, just stood off in a corner and watched the first years joking around with each other (not that Naoto knew how to take a joke, but whatever) and Chie and Yukiko playing with Teddie.

Of course Souji didn’t make eye contact with him, but that was because Souji was a fucking jerk.

“I don’t think we’ll need all eight of us to go against the bonus boss,” Souji said, speaking to the group. “Although it was nice making the trip with all of you.”

“What a time to say that,” Naoto said. “After making us crawl up this damnable staircase yet again.”

“I thought everyone wanted to,” Souji said.

“I spoke far too soon,” Naoto said. “I should have saved my worry for something of importance, like
my detective’s agency. Or what I will have for lunch tomorrow.”

“The same thing you have every day,” Rise said. “Bowl of rice with pickled plums.”

“But pickled plums are really pickled apricots,” Yukiko said. “So shouldn’t we call them pickled apricots?”

“Don’t have that nice sound.”

“You know, you can pickle apricots in bourbon,” Rise said. “I didn’t know that until—”

“Guys!” Chie said, coughing. “I think we get it.”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Take this stuff seriously. For real.”

“Oh, senpai, did you just say ‘for real’?” Rise said, giggling. “Wow.”

“Anyway,” Souji said, his lips twitching up to the side a bit, “we don’t really have an idea of what to expect, so I’ll go for a defensive team. That means I want Kanji-kun, Yukiko-san and Yosuke.”

Wait. Him, too?

“Yosuke-senpai, you coming?” Kanji said. “Senpai’s about to head out.”

“Huh?!” Yosuke said, jerking his head up and down. “Um, yeah.”

So he was on the team? So did that mean Souji wasn’t mad? Or that… He tried to make eye contact with Souji, but Souji’s back was already to the doors, looking at them rather curiously.

“There’s a gap here,” he said to Yukiko, staring down at the ground visible through the space between the door and the final step of stairs. “I can’t reach the doors.”

“Oh,” Yukiko said. “You just jump at the door and go through.”

“Is that… safe?” Souji said.

“It seemed to work last time.”

Yeah, ‘seemed.’ Way to be totally circumspect.

“Well,” Souji said, cracking his knuckles. “I’m going in.” He looked to Kanji and Yosuke, just for a moment, not actually looking at either of them, just somewhere between them, and then leapt into the doors. Kanji followed a second later. Yukiko looked at Yosuke in a vaguely sympathetic manner, and then went in.

Meanwhile, the others were just fooling around, like they didn’t even care about the danger or the risk. Yosuke wished that he could be as carefree as them. Or at least, he wished…

He wished he could understand why they felt so freaking relaxed.

---

The chamber was pitch black, but at least this time they didn’t fall into each other like morons onto
the floor, just bumped into each other’s backs and hiss things like, “What’s that poking in my back?”

“Does someone have a flashlight?” Yosuke said, and yelped when Yukiko cast an Agidyne just a few inches from his face.

“Sorry,” Yukiko said. “I didn’t know you were there.”

Didn’t know—well, Yosuke wasn’t going to over-think this one. The fire wasn’t doing them much good: it lit up their faces and their bodies, but the room itself was black, just black. Souji cast a Hama spell a second later.

“Nothing,” Souji said. “I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be anything here.”

“It’s in there, guys, Rise said. Be careful. It’s a strong one.

“Yeah, that’s what I think, too,” Souji said. “Maybe we need to find another item to reveal the main body.”

“What, like a hidden room?” Kanji said. “Maybe somethin’ hidden away in those places where we kept getting teleported to and shit.”

“But the checkpoints don’t take us there anymore,” Yukiko said. “Souji-kun’s Shadow was the one who took us there.”

“How did those freaky lights work, anyway?” Yosuke said.

“I wouldn’t really know,” Souji said. “I didn’t experience any of it.”

“Yeah, well, whose fault is—”

“You guys mind not having your fights here?” Kanji said. “This is fucking serious.”


They continued to walk around the darkness, sticking close to one another. Souji and Yukiko stayed ahead. It was funny, but Yosuke felt as though he was walking on a very thin line, almost as though one wrong step would send him tumbling down to the ground—

Yukiko screamed and the fire went out. She was slipping down into the darkness—no, hell, she was falling into it. Kanji grabbed her before she could plunge too far, and yanked her back up.

“What happened?” Yosuke said. He pulled Yukiko up to her feet. “Geeze, I mean—are you all right?”

“A little surprised,” Yukiko said. She recast the Agidyne. “That’s all.”

“The ground ends here,” Souji said. He sounded faintly impressed. He put one foot out, and then pressed down into nothing. But it wasn’t quite nothing. Yosuke walked up to the edge, too, and peered down. Below there were splotches of light, pavement… a car, too, maybe. “I wonder what that means…”

“Kinda like we’re on top of a city,” Kanji said. “This ain’t the place we were at last time.”

“I wonder why,” Yukiko said.

“Mhmm,” Souji said. He takes the sword, and lowers it down. “It’ll be a long jump.”
“What?” Yosuke said. “You’re planning on jumping?” Souji looked at Yosuke blankly. Apparently Souji thought it was so obvious that it didn’t even warrant a reply. “Are you crazy?!"

“It’s waiting for us,” Souji said. “And we did something similar for Adachi’s dungeon.”

“No way, partner, this is—”

“Don’t,” Souji said.

“Don’t what?”

“Call me that.” Souji pointed down at the ground and said, “This isn’t a democracy, Yosuke. You fight at my side, but I lead you. You want to hold a vote whether we go? There isn’t going to be one.”

“Why are you such a fucking asshole?!"

“Then ask them,” Souji said. “Whether they really want to jump down, whether they really would have gone into the TV—if it weren’t for me taking you.”

“I don’t need to ask,” Yosuke said. “Of course they would’ve! You’re not special, Souji, any of us could’ve been leader—"

“Then why don’t you try it?”

“Maybe I will—"

“Then why don’t you stop me?” Souji said, and jumped down. Yosuke lunged for Souji, but fuck, he lost his balance and everything opened up beneath him and he fell in—

It was the most painful experience in his life. He was a fucking moron for jumping in, no doubt about it. The first ten feet or so weren’t so bad—but then the panic set in, and he thought he’d die right there and he felt so bad about everything, but he couldn’t understand why, he couldn’t place why, why did he—why was it that—he’d rather be dead than—

He crashed into the ground on his shoulder, and did a funny little bounce. Shit, he must’ve lost a hundred hit points on that alone.

“Hello?” he said.

He couldn’t find the others. Souji’s Hama spell had gone out. Kanji and Yukiko probably had already jumped, so they’d be down in… however long it took to fling yourself off a building. The cars and splotches of light from before had vanished. He was in the flat darkness again—why was it always like this? Geeze.

“Rise-chan?” he said. “Souji?”

Yo… pai… breaking… having… reaching…

“Yosuke-kun?”

There was Yukiko, her black hair disheveled and a smaller Agilao spell sputtering sparks in her hands. She waved her face with her fan. Her cheeks were flush—Yosuke felt weirdly embarrassed for that, and couldn’t place why.

“Hey,” he said. “You found Kanji-kun?”
“I told him that I’d go down first,” she said. The Agilao flared to life, becoming an Agidyne. She flicked her wrist, and it shot back up to the sky. “Have you found Souji-kun?”

“No,” Yosuke said. “I’m a little worried. Did you feel any—I mean…”

“No?” Yosuke said, his voice cracking and face flushing on instinct. “That’s—I didn’t mean—whatever you meant, I didn’t mean it like that!”

“I mean,” she said, fanning herself even harder, “I didn’t expect—I don’t think most people expect… It was such an intense wave of emotion that it took me by—quite a bit of surprise. I see that it didn’t have quite the same effect on you.”

“What kind of effect are you talking about here?!”

“Never mind,” she said. Her fan was a pale blur. Kind of pointless to fan herself when there was a giant fireball next to her face, but he wasn’t going to point that out. “We should wait for Kanji-kun before we look for Souji-kun, shouldn’t we?”

“I guess,” Yosuke said. “I mean, that seems like the right thing to—”

Somewhere behind him, there was a very loud thump.

“Do,” he finished. He and Yukiko went to pick up Kanji, who was braying like a donkey over, apparently, nothing at all. Yosuke shook Kanji a few times—the laughter was ten times creepier when they were stuck in this stupid, crazy dungeon—and almost slapped Kanji to make him get it together, but Yukiko shook her head and said, “He’ll get over it soon enough.”

“Like you do?”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind,” Yosuke said quickly. “Forget I said anything.”

“Hahahaha—”

“Maybe we should keep going,” Yosuke said. “Kanji’s here, so we might as well, right?”

“Of course,” Yukiko said. She put a hand on Kanji’s back and pushed him in the direction that she wanted him to go. “I haven’t had any luck contacting Rise-chan, so we should stick together.”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” Yukiko said.

She was honest, at least.

“When we saw it on the TV,” Yosuke said. “Sometimes we see… you know…”

“Yes?”

“I mean,” Yosuke said. “Normally we see a Shadow and not a… Come on, say something!”

“I’m sorry,” Yukiko said. “I thought that it would help if I were more like Souji-kun.”
“That was a pretty good impersonation, senpai,” Kanji offered. He snickered. Then he started laughing all over again.

“Many things about Souji-kun seem rather unusual, don’t they?” Yukiko said. “I don’t think it’s so surprising that his dungeon is also a bit… odd. He has multiple Personae. Maybe… this is another room.”

“So you’re saying he might have multiple Shadows or something?” Yosuke said. He elbowed Kanji in the gut. “Stop that!”

“I don’t know,” Yukiko said. “It didn’t seem to be an issue with him, did it?”

Souji wasn’t anywhere. That was okay. Yosuke hadn’t really expected him to be anywhere, anyway.

“Multiple Shadows would suck,” Kanji said.

_Can… me…? We’re… reach…_

“Tell me about it,” Yosuke said.

---

After stumbling around for almost half an hour, they spied a small candle glowing from afar. The candle was next to a door which led to a narrow black hall, so narrow they had to walk in a single file. There were light bulbs on the ceiling, with long cords dangling from them—ordinarily Yosuke might feel tempted to give them a tug to see if they’d turn the light bulbs on or off, but he didn’t want to do it—especially when he swore he could see… Well, he wasn’t entirely sure but he was sure that it was there. It wasn’t Souji—at least, he didn’t think it was Souji. It was a young man, maybe their age or a bit older—he didn’t really know. But it was right outside his field of vision and it was driving him absolutely fucking nuts. He figured it was just part of the dungeon, but he wasn’t going to mention it to the others. What if they thought that it made him crazy?

“Shit,” Kanji muttered.

“What?” Yosuke said.

“You heard that?” Kanji said. “Somethin’ broke.”

They all turned their heads behind them. As the tallest person there, Kanji had been put in the very back so they could all see what was happening in front of them. But now all Yosuke could see was Kanji’s giant lumbering frame blocking his sight.

“It looks like one of the light bulbs went off,” Yukiko said.

It did a bit like the tunnel was a bit darker.

They took another few steps forward and then Kanji said, “Yeah, did you hear—”

“Okay, this place is already like a creepy Silent Hill,” Yosuke said. “We get it. You don’t have to remind us.”

“Silent Hill?”
“Video game,” Kanji said. “Never played it. I like Nintendo stuff. You know. With the cute animals and stuff.”

“Uh-huh,” Yosuke said. “Nice to—”

This time he heard it, too. The lights dimmed—this time it wasn’t his imagination.

As the person leading the party, he decided to shut up and walk a little faster. But the lights kept breaking at a faster and faster rate and soon they were all running—it was completely irrational, but the shattering glass and vanishing light hit the panic button in his head. They ran and ran and then they heard someone who wasn’t them breathing heavily—Yosuke was sure of it, he held his breath and counted three people breathing—getting closer and closer and there was a door at the end of it. Yosuke flung it open and they spilled into the next room without even caring for what might wait for them.

“Oh,” Souji said. “You guys are here.”

“Wh—” Yosuke didn’t bother trying to stay on his feet. His legs collapsed and he fell onto the ground. Souji was sitting on a chair, looking faintly bored. “Where the hell were you?!?”

“In here,” Souji said. He stood up and brushed his uniform off. “The door was locked.”

“We were looking for you,” Yosuke said. “We were all—fuck!—worried for you, and you were…”

Yukiko put a hand on Yosuke’s shoulder and said, “We’re glad you’re all right, Souji-kun.”

“Uh-huh,” Kanji said. “What the hell’s with this weird get up?”

Yosuke turned his gaze up from the floor and to the room. It wasn’t so bad: cream walls, soft light, and a coffin in the middle of the room with flowers on top of it. There was a boy’s portrait on it: a young man with dark hair and a brash, cockiness in his smile.

It had to be Aoyama. Who else could it be?

“I think that’s where the Shadow is,” Souji said.

“You think?” Kanji said.

“I get a bad feeling when I get near the coffin,” Souji said. “Are you guys feeling better? Anyone need healing?”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. He helped himself back up to his feet. He wasn’t cool with Souji, not just yet, but now they were actually near the Shadow. Time to stop dicking around.

Okay,” Souji said. He walked up to the coffin. He brushed the flowers off the coffin—then he swept them aside, smashing them against the floor and wall, took the portrait and chucked them at the ground, flung open the coffin’s lid and plunged his sword down. A spray of blood splattered onto the walls, and someone—some guy, maybe—someone’s arms flung up and flopped over the edge of the coffin. Yosuke—he didn’t know what to do, was he supposed to stop Souji, was this… normal? It wasn’t normal, but he couldn’t make himself get between Souji and the coffin. He couldn’t let Yukiko or Kanji interfere with it, either; so the three of them watched until the coffin splintered and the flowers had been shredded by Souji’s blade. Souji had stopped stabbing—so Yosuke thought that Souji felt okay now.

“Hey,” Yosuke said. He came behind Souji and nudged him. “Give me your sword.”
“Sure,” Souji said. “Okay.”

Yosuke took the sword from Souji’s hands, and dropped it onto the floor, and looked into the coffin. The remains of a Hablerie was dissolving away, attached to the neck of a corpse wearing a school uniform. The front of Souji’s uniform was covered with blood—but that was dissolving into shadow and disappearing. Souji swept his bangs out of his eyes. He stared down at his hands, as though puzzled; then, not bothering to collect his sword, he said, “We should go. The others must be worried.”
“I think I went a little overboard,” Souji said when they returned to his house. Yosuke was staying the night at Souji’s place again, just to make sure that Souji wouldn’t do anything dumb. He told his parents that Souji had the worst case of chicken pox he had ever seen.

“Uh-huh,” Yosuke said. Dinner. They needed dinner. He went to the fridge, but Souji made him sit at the table and pulled out the leftovers Yukiko had brought the night before. Yosuke dimly remembered Souji promising the entire team dinner at noon, but it was already night when they got out, so they didn’t really have enough time for it now. Plus, with what happened—it wasn’t like he’d have much of an appetite, anyway.

He felt stupid sitting there without doing anything, so he set the table and pretended that his chopsticks were drumsticks. Badum-cha.

“I’m sorry,” Souji said between pulling out the pans and arranging the food in an aesthetically non-horrible manner. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Right.”

Souji looked over at Yosuke, and then said, “You seem awfully… curt.”

“Can’t blame me, can you?” Yosuke said. “Partner.”

Souji shook his head, almost as though he was disappointed with Yosuke, and grinned up at the ceiling, but with a sharp, mocking edge. “Are you still angry about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be mad about it?” Yosuke said. “I always—you know, I always thought that we’d be—and then you…”

“What?”

“Never mind!” He ducked his head so he wouldn’t have to see Souji’s face. He didn’t know what he’d find on it: confusion, anger, thoughtfulness, any of it. And that—that was scary. He didn’t know what to expect or who he’d see. He—he thought he knew, but maybe he had known less than… He swallowed. “Hey, man. Were we ever…”

Dead silence. Souji heated some savory soup—it smelled good. Real good. But Souji wasn’t saying anything.

“I mean,” Yosuke said, “I mean, did you ever think of me as your partner, or have you just been…”

“You were the one who started calling me it,” Souji said, pouring the soup into two bowls. “I didn’t know how to react.”

“So you don’t think of me—we’re not—” Yosuke broke off, unsure of how to continue. He had thought wrong, he guessed. Jerk. Asshole. Jerkass who led him on—

“Why don’t you put yourself in my shoes for a bit?” Souji said, sounding a little angry and a little tired. “Does it make more sense for me to think you as my partner or for me to think of myself as your leader?”

Yosuke didn’t see why those two things had to be mutually exclusive. Surely they could be partners.
“We didn’t hold a gun up to your head and tell you that you had to be leader,” Yosuke said.

“That’s not how I remember it,” Souji said. “But everything always looks different from the top, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, please—"

“Isn’t that how it was?” Souji said. “You gave me all the money. You told me to manage things. It never occurred to you once that you could have bought your own medicines or Macca leaves or Goho-Ms? Or that I might have had things to do besides listen to you people talk all the time?”

Souji pushed the food around the pan. Yosuke wanted to punch him in the face, but—he wasn’t an asshole, he was…

He stood up and put his shoes back on.

“I’m going for a walk, man,” he said.

“All right,” Souji said. “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Don’t forget to wear your gloves.”

Yosuke shrugged his jacket on. Then he said, “You know, just because you’re mad doesn’t mean you have to be an ass about it,” and left the house.

---

“Why hello there,” Teddie purred into the phone. “You have reached Teddie. If you’re a hot stud, hang up. And if you’re a hot babe, why don’t you give me your number so we can—”

“What the fuck, Teddie?” Yosuke said.

“This line is reserved only for the express pleasuring of moi,” Teddie said. “I don’t know you! I don’t know you!”

“This is Chie’s phone! Where is she?!”

“Chie-chan is currently occupied,” Teddie said. “But if you want, I can occupy you for a—”

“Stop,” Yosuke said. “Just… stop.” He had a headache—and it wasn’t because of the cold. He had planned to sit in the Dojima’s driveway like a loser, but then, well… the cats appeared. They surrounded him and it was a little freaky but it had to be normal, right? Then they did a weird head trick where they all looked at the bowls set by the side of the garage and back at Yosuke, then back at the bowls and back of Yosuke. When he ignored them, one of the cats dug its claws in his pants leg and yowled. That was when Yosuke knew he had to get moving.

“So you’ll be a hot babe for me?!”

“No! Geeze, I was checking up on you—why are you at Chie’s?” Teddie had said Chie was occupied—yeah, Yosuke wasn’t going to guess with what. Or who. Geeze, couldn’t those two wait for a time when they weren’t taking Teddie over to their houses or something—
“Chie-chan! Yuki-chan! Nao-chan! I need you to be a hot babe for—”

“Oh my god, Teddie,” Yosuke groaned.

“I—oh geeze what the—Yosuke?” Chie said. “Teddie—okay, look, get out, I need to put the game on pause—”

“I’ll take care of him,” Yukiko said. “Teddie, let’s go to the kitchen, okay?”

“I will go with you,” Naoto said, sounding just as alarmed as Yosuke felt.

“I LOVE YOU YOSUKE,” Teddie said. “AND YOU, TOO, Chie-chan! And you, too, Yuki—”

“I get it! Sheesh,” Chie said. She cleared her throat and said, “What’s up? Everything okay?”

“I couldn’t reach Ted,” Yosuke said. “Guess I was a little worried.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Naoto needed two other people for her Halo campaign, and since it’s kind of depressing to send Teddie back to your place alone, we invited him.” Chie hummed the first few lines of a song, and then said, “You so did not call me to find Teddie.”

“So what if I didn’t?” Yosuke said.

“I don’t know,” Chie said. “You went home with Souji-kun and things were pretty rough inside the TV. Is everything okay with him?”

“I—I don’t know,” Yosuke said. He squatted down on the curb and drew his knees close to himself. “Things are supposed to be… easier than this, right?” Because one day they were kissing and then Souji flipped out about the eggs and then there was all that stuff with Aoyama and then they had sex and then there was this. It was totally insane. He didn’t know if this was the way things were supposed to be, but Chie had to know something about it, meathead or not.

“Um… I think so?”

Never mind. She didn’t. “You think so?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Sometimes it’s easy and sometimes it’s… not? I mean, I had a boyfriend in middle school and it was like pulling teeth, but it wasn’t a bad relationship or anything. Sure, I wanted to kick his face in a lot—”

“How is that not a bad sign—”

“But he was nice and the sex wasn’t too bad but—I guess I like… low maintenance people? Like self-cleaning ovens? And you and Souji-kun are really high maintenance. I never thought I’d say that about Souji-kun, but when I think about it—”

“I get it, okay?” Yosuke said. “But—geeze. It’s been a week… you’d think there’d be a honeymoon period or something.”

“Well,” Chie said rather pointedly, “a lot’s been going on.”

Didn’t he know it.

“Don’t say it,” Yosuke said.

“Oh, Yosuke,” Chie said.
“Look, I gotta get back,” Yosuke said. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Have fun with your Halo tournament or whatever.”

---

“You’re late,” Souji said.

“I didn’t have my watch on me,” Yosuke said. He hung his coat up in the closet and sat at the table. Souji folded his apron and set it on the counter, and joined him. “Thank you for the food.”

“Yes,” Souji said. “Are you planning on going home after this?”

“You want me to?” Yosuke said, piling meat onto his rice.

“I’m asking about you,” Souji said. “Depending on how you answer, I might have to change my plans.”

“I’ll stay,” Yosuke said. “We have school tomorrow and I haven’t finished my homework.”

“Fine,” Souji said. “Are you planning on staying the night?”

“I don’t know yet,” Yosuke said. “What does it matter to you, anyway?”

“If you stay, then I have to arrange for that. Partner.”

“Oh, fuck you, you don’t even mean that!”

“I don’t see why it’s so important to you,” Souji said, picking at the baby cabbage on his plate. “I don’t even understand what you mean by ‘partner.’”

Neither did he. Yosuke ate, keeping his stare on a spot just by Souji’s elbow. Fuck him. Fuck him. Wasn’t it obvious what he meant? He had been calling Souji partner since April, and now Souji said he had a problem with it? Fuck him.

“We were supposed to be friends,” Yosuke said. “But we were always more than that.”

“Were we?” Souji said.

“I always thought we were,” Yosuke said. “I mean, you’re the one who told me all about Aoyama and you’re the one who took me to your bed and all, but maybe I was wrong.”

“You’re not wrong,” Souji said.

He didn’t even understand what that meant. If he wasn’t wrong, then was he right—and if he was right, then why say that he wasn’t wrong? But Souji’s foot was running along Yosuke’s calf and that meant something, right?

“Come on,” Yosuke said. “Don’t… don’t lead me on.”

“I’m not,” Souji said. “But I don’t know…” He looked at Yosuke, clear eye contact, serious and afraid— “I don’t know what the right word for it would be.”
“Well, why not?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just don’t. How’s the food?”

“I—really like you,” Yosuke said.

“Me too,” Souji said. “But how’s the food?”

“I don’t care about the food, damn it!” Yosuke said. “Come on! Don’t you—please, Souji, just tell me…”

Souji stared at Yosuke. Souji was angry with him, Yosuke realized: angry and hurt and why was Souji hurt when Yosuke was the one in pain, when Yosuke was the one begging Souji for some answer, any answer? Why was it like this?

“What am I supposed to tell you?” Souji said.

“I thought you always knew the right thing to say,” said Yosuke.

“Who the hell do you think I am, Yosuke?” Souji said. “I’m not that guy. I’m not.”

That wasn’t true, because Souji was that guy. He was. He had to be that guy.

“I’m going to keep eating,” Souji said. “And when I’m finished I’m going to clean up and put everything away. And you can either go home or stay. But I can’t be the one who knows everything anymore, Yosuke. If you want me to be that guy, then go.”

“I don’t want you to know everything,” Yosuke said. “All I want is for you to tell me that I mean something to you.”

“I love you,” Souji said. “Are you happy now? Is that good enough for you?”

And that was the end of that conversation. They ate in silence. The words jumped around in Yosuke’s head, sparking like a live wire, rattling around and around in his head. And when they finished eating and cleaning up there wasn’t anything left to say. He reached over to Souji and drew him close because it made him feel better, a little. And it made things feel all right, a little.
Chie called Yosuke out for lunch. Souji was eating with Naoki, anyway, so it wasn’t like Yosuke was missing out on anything. She looked exhausted. The first thing she said was, “Oh my god, I can’t believe how addicting Halo is.”

“Seriously?” Yosuke said. “Naoto-kun roped you in, too?”

“Yeah,” Chie said. “We’re clearing out all of Japan! … I think.” She rubbed at her eyes and said, “Anyway, last night—did you watch the Midnight Channel?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was… a little busy.”

“Uh-huh,” Chie said, raising an eyebrow. “I was waiting for Naoto-kun to finish something up when… I saw something. Rise-chan says she saw it, too. It’s another one of those Shadows inside of Souji-kun’s dungeon. I tried talking to Souji-kun about it, but he won’t talk to me about it.”

“He’s not going to talk to me about it, either,” Yosuke said.

“Yes he will,” Chie said. “You two are pretty close, you know?”

“Yeah, well, not close enough.” Not that he was bitter or anything. He took a bite into his yakisoba bread and said, “He doesn’t want to go back in. Ever.”

“Well, I can understand why, but we have to do it,” Chie said. “It’s our duty and everything, to keep the TV World a little safer and watch out for it. It’ll make things easier for Teddie, too, when he goes back in.”

“He’s not going back,” Yosuke said.

“Yes he is,” Chie said. “Naoto-kun and I were talking about him a while ago—” Probably during one of their 4AM Halo fests, Yosuke guessed. “—and she says that the situation with Teddie can’t last forever. He has no last name, no medical files, no family—he doesn’t exist here. He can’t just be a freeloader for the rest of his life.”

Yosuke picked at the crumbs on his pants. He brushed them off. He didn’t want to think about it, but Chie was—she was being a nosy gossip, geeze…

“He has to go back soon,” Chie said. “And it’ll be hard on him if we don’t clean up the dungeons every now and then, you know? Besides, if we all gang up on Souji-kun, he won’t react well. But if you tell him…”

“Then he’ll break up with me,” Yosuke said. He said it in a flat tone because he knew it was true. Souji—there was no way they were going to get Souji back into the TV. Not now. Maybe not for a while. He didn’t blame Souji—if he had multiple Shadows partying around in his head, he wouldn’t want to go back, either. But damn it, Souji was supposed to be their leader, their center, their strength, and now that Souji had… fallen? Was that even the right word for it? “We can’t go in without him, either, because then he’ll get all… weird. And if we bring this up with him, he’ll be mad that we think he’s fragile.”
Chie and Yosuke glared at each other. ‘Well, you do it, then—’ they both seemed to be saying. Chie picked at her meat. Pork, from the looks of it.

“He’s not really our leader now, is he?” Chie said.

“So?” Yosuke said.

“I don’t know,” Chie said. “It might be a good thing. It’s... brought him a little closer to us. Before he was always so distant, but now even though he’s not what we need…” She smiled a little and pat his shoulder. “I guess we can bring it up later,” she said. “At least until Dojima-san and Nanako-chan are out of the hospital.”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Thanks.”

“It’s no problem,” Chie said. “Also, do you have an X-Box at home, because Yukiko can’t stay up too late and we need a fourth—”

“Enough with the Halo already!”

---

December 23, 2011.

He and Souji were cleaning up the Dojima house. Dojima said that he’d be back soon enough, and Nanako was being let out on the twenty-fifth as a special treat. The house wasn’t a total pigsty—Souji was a little too much of a neat-freak to let that get by—but Souji wanted to give the place a special something. Do a bit of rearranging.

“You’re slow,” Souji said, pushing in the chairs while Yosuke flicked his wrist a few times over a lamp.

“I’m tired,” Yosuke said. “My thumbs feel like they’re about to fall off.”

“Halo?”

Oh, come on. “You, too?”

“I’m not really into FPS,” Souji said. “I like Nintendo games. Mario, Zelda, Pokémon, Nintencats —”

“Oh my god,” Yosuke groaned. “Of course you do.”

Souji grinned; then he said, “So that means you saw it?”

“Saw it?” Yosuke said.

“The Midnight Channel,” Souji said. “Everyone’s been acting weird around me, so I thought... And then I saw it.” He shrugged lightly, but it did look a bit like he was shoving the chairs in a little harder than he had to. “You guys can go in without me, if you want.”

“We won’t, though,” Yosuke said. “You’re our leader.”
“Then you won’t go into the TV for a while,” Souji said.

“We know,” Yosuke said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I… I can’t. None of the Personae feel like me anymore.” He leaned against the table, not really looking at anything.

Yosuke dusted the lamp a little harder. “Are you all right, man?” he said. “Not going to—I don’t know…”

“Hang myself?” Souji said. “No. I’m okay. Something’s bugging me a bit. That’s all. But it’ll be nice having a family to come home to at night again.” He went to make some coffee, and that ended that conversation there.

Yosuke watched Souji, unsure of what to say or if there was anything to say. There had to be something to say—he just didn’t know what.

“Hey,” Souji said. “Are you free tomorrow?”

---

December 24, 2011

Apparently when Souji said “let’s spend some time together on Christmas Eve,” he meant “let’s spend time with Daisuke and Kou.” Not that Yosuke didn’t like Daisuke and Kou (weird—when did they become a unit?) but Christmas Eve was for lovers, and considering Souji’s fondness for feeling Yosuke up, that meant that they should spend some time alone, right?

But it was fun hanging out with Daisuke and Kou, too. They went to Kou’s house, since Kou was a rich boy and had a lot of stuff. Souji brought a cake as a housewarming gift and Yosuke’s mom made him bring a bag of rice and almost thrust Teddie on him, but Yosuke managed to get Kanji to take Teddie and ran off with Souji and the others.

Kou kicked them all out in the evening when Ai Ebihara came by. Weird. Yosuke knew that Souji was friends with Ai, so she couldn’t be that bad, but still, weird. Even weirder to think about Kou getting laid—the guy was scrawny and shit, he wasn’t thinking about Kou naked, god, no.

---

Souji had taken to staring off into places—well, he had always done that. Souji had a creepy, blank way of looking at things, like he wasn’t all the way there. Sometimes Yosuke would yammer away for hours on end and Souji would be sitting there, not really responding—and then he’d say something and the tension would go away. But those thirty minutes between the part where Souji looked like he was thinking about the Meaning Of Life and Existence and when Souji looked like he was thinking about Yosuke were so…
They were heading back home together and Souji asked if Yosuke minded if they went fishing a bit, but then he didn’t bring his pole and what the fuck was going on, seriously? So they sat on the rock and stared across the river.

“People like this place a lot,” Souji said. “Chie-san, Kou and Daisuke, Naoki-kun, Kanji-kun. Naoto-kun, too.”

“Uh-huh?” Yosuke said.

“I don’t know,” Souji said, and Yosuke hated that Souji never seemed as sure as—or was this what it meant to know someone’s true self, to know that they weren’t anything like what you thought they were like? “Maybe they like the light reflecting off the water. But to me it looks… cold. That’s all.”

“I like it,” Yosuke said. “It’s peaceful.”

“Oh, is that it?”

What did that even mean? Was he joking? He couldn’t tell.

“I think there’s something wrong with me,” Souji said. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like…” He sat down on the grass, legs collapsing at sharp angles. Yosuke sat next to him, unsure of what to do. Should he reach out, should he—he didn’t know anymore. Nothing seemed to work. Souji tucked his hands into his pockets and his back seemed to cave right in. The weird thing was that he looked so alone—crazy because Yosuke was right there, so where did Souji think he was going? “You lost a ring around the time we started going into the TV, right?” Souji said.

“You still remember?” Yosuke said. “Wait—you didn’t find it, did you?”

“No,” Souji said. He sat up straighter. Grinned a little. “Actually… well, I got you a new one.” He reached into his pocket and in the palm of his hand was a ring, plain and silvery with a wood inlay—Yosuke’s face went hot.

“Dude,” Yosuke said. “Is this for me?”

“No,” Souji said. “It’s for Kou and Daisuke. I’m planning on fusing them together and making them wear this.”

Yosuke took the ring from Souji. It had a nice heft. A bit heavier than what he’d normally go for, but it wasn’t like he had ever been in a position to feel rings and try them on.

“Hey, thanks,” he said. “It’s great.”

“Mm,” Souji said. “Actually, about your old ring… You didn’t lose it. I sold it off.”

“… Wait, what?”

“It was the early days and… we were always short on money, so… Sorry.”

Yosuke stared. “You are so weird,” he said.

“You’re not mad?” Souji said.

“I bought it for a thousand yen in middle school,” Yosuke said. “… But seriously?”

“I sold Chie-san’s pins, random articles of Yukiko-san’s clothing… Ten thousand yen went a lot further back then.” Souji scratched his head. “I mean, I thought I was doing the right thing back then,
but when I think about it…”

He was just thinking about it now?

“I couldn’t get your old ring back,” Souji said. “But… that’s the one I got for you to make up for it.”

God, there were so many shades of weird surrounding this.

“Uh,” Yosuke said. “I got you something, too. It’s back at home, though.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“That totally defeats the ‘surprise’ part, you know?” Yosuke grumbled, and then yelped as Souji slipped a hand under his coat. “Wh—hey!”

“Just tell me,” Souji said, burying his nose into the faux fur of Yosuke’s hood. “I won’t let go of you until you tell me.”

“Argh, your hands are cold!”

“That’s why you should tell me.”

“It’s—argh! Fine!—it’s a coat,” Yosuke said.

“Like yours?”

“No, I asked Rise-chan what she thought would look good on you, and she said that something that didn’t make you like an old man,” Yosuke said. “I’ll bring it over tomorrow or something.”

“Can we have sex in it?”

“What? Sure, I guess.”

“Good,” Souji said. “I should break in all my clothes like that.” He slipped his hands out of Yosuke’s coat and tucked them into his armpits. “Shit,” he said. “Nanako and Dojima are coming back from the hospital then.”

“That’s—that’s good, right?” Yosuke said.

“Yeah,” Souji said. “But it means I need to wash everything over.”

“Oh… right.”

Souji caught Yosuke’s eye, and said, “So… want to give the kitchen table a last send off or do you need to get home?”

“I wish,” Yosuke said. “Mom’s going to throw a fit if I’m not home, though.”

“Yeah,” Souji said. “I’ll see you tomorrow? The girls are planning on bringing a cake.”

“Bringing or baking?”

“Wasn’t listening very hard, but…”

No one was walking along the river or along the banks or on the floodplains. Even the fish didn’t seem to be there. They kissed. Souji’s hands snuck under Yosuke’s coat again. Souji unbuttoned the fly of Yosuke’s pants, and slipped them down his hips.
“Put on my ring,” Souji said.

“Mghhgh?”

“Put on my ring,” Souji said again.

“Make me,” Yosuke said, looking down at Souji through lidded eyes. “Suck my cock. Then I’ll put it on.”

“Do you think you could fit the ring on your—”

“Oh, god, you’re ruining the mood!”

“Haha…” Souji helped Yosuke out of his coat and ran his hands along the sides of Yosuke’s body, not kissing him or talking, but staring not at Yosuke, but through. Yosuke shivered. He was cold, but he also liked this, feeling like he was the only thing in Souji’s world and like things were normal and like… like they were a normal couple fucking around on the river. Souji’s hand wrapped around Yosuke’s cock, a lazy little smile on his lips. “I’ve been carrying a bottle of lubricant in my pocket for the last week,” Souji said. “Just in case I wanted to fuck you into a desk or against the bathroom wall or against the bike rack.” He pressed the bottle into Yosuke’s hand. “You want me to use that bottle?” he said, his hand going down a line from Yosuke’s chest to his navel and then to the groin. “Then put on the ring.”
March 19, 2012

If someone were to make a chart—

Not that anyone would. Not of his head. His head wasn’t any good. No good. But it was the principle of things—although as far as principles went, he certainly had them. But the question was—

It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel right…

---

Something was bothering him.

Hard to place what, though. He knew what it was, but it was hard to—tell what part of it—what part of it really was wrong. They had gone into the television—

That always made him feel bad, all the time.

They went into the television to take care of the remaining Shadows and—things. Shaken. He went back home and went to bed and didn’t wake up until noon the next day. His head hurt.

That had been the week before.

He didn’t like it anymore, he didn’t like it anymore, he didn’t…

---

Going back to the thing that was bothering him—

It didn’t really seem to matter anymore.

---

March 20, 2012

To put a name to the feeling would be hard.

The general term was “dis ease” (like disease—tricky little play of language there), but the specifics
of it—

The part where it felt like his head wasn’t there or like he wasn’t there anymore, like…

Or the parts where it was like…

Foggy, he guessed.

---

There was a problem with people: they all wanted to talk about themselves.

---

Lately he had dreams of a woman in white and a long series of torii gates. The place it led to didn’t seem to be…

Probably not a temple.

Temples weren’t as… foreboding.

Didn’t he have a dream like that, back when he first came? And if he did, what did it matter? There wasn’t anywhere in the TV like that. Maybe he should go check—but the thought of going back in there made that troubled feeling rise up in him again, like it was rising up against him, like it was creeping into him and becoming him—

Although what that would look like, he didn’t know. Who was he, what was he like—he knew the answer to all those questions, he didn’t know how to answer them, he was sure that he’d know how to answer them if someone gave him a chance—or maybe he didn’t know.

Shadows—they could be cast in any direction, made from anything. So even if he had a Shadow, he didn’t know what that meant about him.

The door in the shopping district opened just long enough for him to talk to Margaret. He asked about the Personae. What would happen to them, what they’d do—

“They’ll stay in you,” she said. But what did that mean, what did the Personae do? “They are all a part of you.” But what did that mean, what did the parts add up to?

---

Shit. He felt sick.

---
He liked Yosuke, but he was going to go back into the city and Yosuke wasn’t going to follow him there. Visit, sure. College, maybe. But then—would he come back to Inaba, would he go to another city, would he live like his parents, ambling from one city to another…

He wondered… he wondered how the Aoyamas were doing.

---

Of all his friends, he was going to miss Teddie the most.
He didn’t like the reason why he’d miss Teddie the most, but the truth was—
Everyone was going to get along fine without him, but Teddie was going back into the TV and…

It was nice being the main reason why Teddie was here.

It made Teddie so easy to… like.

---

There was an end, some goal or destination, beyond the last of those gates, but what it was—
Maybe he should follow them, but he was—

Not afraid or intimidated, but—
That place felt like a part of him, only without the stairs or the dark halls or the candles or little Shadows hiding in coffins and under desks and beneath the floor—

(As for what those meant—anyway, he wasn’t ever going back to them, so he didn’t have to tell anyone, he didn’t…)

He’d come back to Inaba someday and—

It’d be all right then.

---

_March 21, 2012._

Yosuke sent him a text message.
How are you holding up, what’s up, have you unpacked, how are your parents?

Things like that. Nothing too demanding.

Nice of him to be so considerate. Caring about people was a good quality to have.

(Souji made a mental note of that. Caring about people, good quality to have.)

His parents were stuck in Indonesia. Big volcano explosion. Looked like they might need to take a train all around Asia to get back to Japan. So he had the place to himself for a few days. Maybe longer. Lots of things to unpack. Lots of things to get through. He had all the furniture in place and the beds prepared and the kitchen ready. He missed having a bed. Something nice and big to fall into. The text messages kept trickling in. Nice of them. Made him feel missed.

---

He needed to do something about Yosuke.

Fading him out of his life seemed like the best option. That cold shoulder and silence sent messages of its own.

Although, that wasn’t really fair to Yosuke.

It’d be understandable if he did it, but it wouldn’t be fair, would it?

What Souji had learned most about being a tool was that the best way to do it was to be a coward. Minimal pain. Maximum duration. It’d keep Yosuke uncertain for a long while. Casually string him on and then stop.

He’d have to cut off everyone from Inaba if he did that. Best not to, then.

Second was to break up with Yosuke flat out. Thank you for caring, but we’re too far apart now to make this work. Let’s see other people.

He had been thinking about asking a guy—he thought about a girl, but his type of girl wasn’t the type who would say yes to that sort of thing—on a train for a quickie, but the train had been nearly empty. No one that fuckable there. He hadn’t been that horny, anyway.

---

He didn’t love Yosuke. That implied things. He loved his parents. He liked his friends. He was okay with people in general. He didn’t mind himself.

Yosuke had some odd quirks—the partner thing that he still didn’t understand, the clinginess, the wardrobe that made him look like a twelve-year-old allowed to dress himself for the first time, the constant state of sexual confusion—but on a whole, he was a good person. Souji liked him. Good fellow. Not bad in bed, either. Quiet things made Yosuke cagey. If Souji sat somewhere for half an hour and just thought, said nothing, did nothing but think, Yosuke would fly apart and panic. Not
like Chie, who got jittery or Kanji, who stopped knowing what to do with himself.

It wasn’t an intentional thing Souji did. He had a lot of things on his mind.

He didn’t do it on purpose anymore. And when he did, he always—tried to make it up.

“Sorry. Forgot about you while you were sitting next to me.” Not a good way to start up a new conversation.

Right. He needed to send Yosuke a reply.

*things fine. thanks for worrying. busy unpacking.*

Would it really be right to put “I miss you” at the end of it?

He didn’t miss Yosuke. Not yet.

---

Everyone else seemed so content after resolving their Shadow thing. Good for them. Or maybe they weren’t… content—Souji remembered that they all thrashed around for a while and latched onto him like they might die if he weren’t there. But now they all seemed content. He was jealous of that. He was still thrashing around. He wished that there was something—he didn’t have that someone—he didn’t have that pillar or center.

He was—okay, all things considered.

Still hadn’t sent out that text message.

Probably would be better to append “miss you” at the end of it. Maybe it’d be implied.

He hit send.

---

*Hanamura-kun (Mobile)*  
Mar 21, 2012 08:33:52PM  
lol ya. np i no ur busy  
whens ur spring breka ovr?  
also get online

He had been pushing furniture around too long. His back hurt. Tomorrow he’d talk with Yosuke.

Anyway, the second he got on instant message, he’d be ambushed. Yosuke was the clingy type.

---
March 22, 2012.

They lived in the same city as before. Just changed their apartment building. The Aoyamas—he wasn’t sure if they were still around. Didn’t bother keeping tabs on them while he was in Inaba. Regrettable now.

His parents were still in Indonesia. Said something about touring Thailand. Trying the food. Yeah, that sounded nice. Wished he could have been there.

He tapped out a text message to his parents: *hey, do you know if the aoyama-ojiisan & aoyama-obaa-san are still in the city?*

The response came half an hour later. Of course they were still in town. Why would they move?

---

Yosuke sent Souji a few texts late in the night. Mostly things like, *I miss you* and *thinking of you hard* and *lol sry that was a slip* and *shit now im hhhrrrhard cant tyyp*.

Cute. But he wasn’t sure how to respond. He’d think of something by noon.

---

He knew which cemetery Aoyama-kun had been buried at. He polished the floors and wiped the counters and cleaned out the toilet and then went out of the city and towards the mountains.

He hadn’t gone to the funeral. Too busy having a mental breakdown. Hadn’t gone to visit Aoyama-kun, either. Didn’t seem like there’d be a point to it. “Sorry for making you kill yourself and stuff.” Didn’t seem like a good apology.

He typed a reply to Yosuke on the bus—something flirtatious but unmemorable—and got a text back a few seconds later: *fuck wish u were here ur penis nd astufffuckkk so hrrrlll*.

The rest of the text message was comically incoherent. He’d have to save that one.

---

He walked around the entire cemetery twice. It was dark when he got on the bus back home.

He had defeated Shadows, stared down his own doppelganger, and fucked Yosuke in school, yet he
had been defeated by an open gate. Nicely done, Sou-chan. Sou-chan, Sou—

Ha, ha, ha. Hilarious.

---

Hanamura-kun (Mobile)
Mar 22, 2012 07:41:06PM
lol so wutve u bnn up 2 2day

“Today I tried visiting my dead ex-boyfriend’s grave, but couldn’t make it past the front gates.”

“Today I cleaned all the things.”

“Today I had a convenience store meal. Pasta.”

“Did you know that a platypus has thirteen different toxin proteins it can kill you with?”

not much. you? seemed like an okay response.

---

Couldn’t sleep. A lot of reasons why: his room smelled like fresh paint, he wanted to do the groceries, and he missed having people nearby. Dojima-san, Nanako, Yosuke. His friends.

He picked up his phone. He had some old friends in the city. He’d spend tomorrow with them.

---


“Shit, how many boxes of stuff do you have?” Morinaga said, staggering in through the door.

“A lot, I guess,” Souji said. “Help me get all the groceries back in the fridge.”

“Uh-huh,” Morinaga said. “Where’re Obata and Mii-chan?”

“Elevator.”

“ Fucking cheaters!”

“Hahaha…”
“Quit that,” Morinaga said. “It’s creepy when you laugh like that. Something you picked up from the boonies?” Morinaga rested his elbows on the kitchen counter. He had shaved his head while Souji was away. It looked awful. And he still dressed like he was planning on putting on weight. All his clothes were too big. He was a skinny guy. Big clothes made him look smaller.

“I guess.”

“Yeah,” Morinaga said. “Must have been.” Morinaga looked like he wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure what to say—which was the normal look on his face, anyway. Souji put the eggs and milk in the fridge along with some cuts of meat. The vegetables and fruit he was planning on cooking now. The meat he’d refrigerate for a little while longer. There was talk of Mii-chan becoming a vegetarian when they were in the supermarket. It wasn’t a Junes. Felt weird.

“Guess it must’ve been rough,” Morinaga said. “Being the only buttfaker there.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Yeah? Found a few guys to go through? Some girls to stick it into?”

“You could say that.”

“What, nothing to say about it?”

“Rumors aren’t fun when you don’t know the people.”

“You’re no fun anymore,” Morinaga said. “Who else is going to be a bitchy gay with me? Mii-chan and Kaori-chan keep giving me the evil eye. They didn’t like it when you were there and after you left they kept yelling at me every time I opened my mouth…”

“Maybe you should keep it shut more often,” Souji said.

“You like my mouth open.”

“I like your throat and your ass, but that’s about it.” Souji reached over and pinched Morinaga’s face. “Look at you,” he said. “Not even your face is cute.”

Morinaga slapped Souji’s hand and took a swing at Souji. Souji ducked it easily and went back to stocking the fridge.

“Fuck, you’re still real fucking mean,” Morinaga said. “I don’t even know why I thought I missed you.”

---

*Hanamura-kun (Mobile)*
Mar 23, 2012 02:21:14PM
fffff junes cusbomrers
ffff
wat up hhh

“Nearly got a blowjob from an old friend. Restrained myself. Everyone could see us.”
“Watched a lot of bad movies.”

“Did you know that Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world? Fuck yeah.”

had some friends over. call me. got a treat for you.

---

The Aoyamas called him just after he finished eating dinner. Things went the usual way: how are you, are you settling in all right, are your parents all right? Fine, yes, yes.

Good. Since he was still on spring vacation, he ought to come visit them. They hadn’t talked in a while.

---

March 25, 2012.

He spent most of the morning wondering if he should put some make up on so he wouldn’t arrive at the Aoyamas looking ready to pass out on the floor. He put some on, made himself look like a fucking drag queen, removed it, made himself look like a fucking ghost. No winning there. He decided to go for a more natural look.

Yosuke had picked out a black peacoat for him. Better than a trenchcoat. Those things reminded him of that damn Shadow. He buttoned up, stared at his reflection, nodded. The Aoyamas were a straight-forward pair. If they wanted to tell him that they found out that he had fucked their son off a high rise, they’d do so by phone.

Thank god his parents were still in Thailand.

---

The Aoyamas still lived in the same apartment. Seemed ill-advised. He wasn’t sure why they didn’t move. He wished they did.

They had redecorated and painted their walls blue and everything about this damn apartment was making his eyes hurt but he smiled and dealt with it. What else was there to do? Auntie served tea while he and Uncle talked. It was a Sunday, so both of the Aoyamas had the day off. They were originally going to meet for dinner, but Souji pushed for lunch. Seemed safer that way.

Had to tell them, had to tell them, had to tell them.

“—so busy with things. Your father and mother—”
Didn’t know how to cut through the pleasantries.

This would be easier if he had something to drink.

---

He left the Aoyamas house just past three and went to Morinaga’s half by instinct. He wasn’t drunk, but he did have a glass of wine and he could fake drunkenness easily enough. Acting was one of his specialties. He slurred his speech and then practiced staggering around the halls before knocking on Morinaga’s apartment.

“Fuck, you’re so sloshed,” Morinaga said, catching Souji as he pretended to trip into him. Shit, this was so stupid. Morinaga would’ve fucked him regardless of how sober he was.

“Sorry,” Souji said. He kicked his shoes off and grabbed the collar of Morinaga’s shirt. “Sorry.”

“You’re lucky my parents are visiting the old geezer,” Morinaga said. He stroked Souji’s hip with his thumb. “So what do you want, Seta? A fuck or coffee?”

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not even drunk,” Souji said. He stood up straight, still holding onto Morinaga’s collar. “I don’t know why I was pretending I was.”

“I knew it!”

“Shut the fuck up. Are we going to do this or not?”

“I’m up for it if you are,” said Morinaga. “Knew you couldn’t keep it in your pants for long. Probably haven’t fucked anything but your hand for a year—”

Souji twisted the fabric of Morinaga’s shirt in his fist. “Fuck off,” he said.

“Oh, now you’re mad,” Morinaga said. “Fucking pussy. Just mad that you don’t have Aoyama’s dead ass to bang—”

Souji was glad that Yosuke wasn’t here to see him like this. And he was very glad that Morinaga wasn’t Yosuke, didn’t look a thing like Yosuke, because he didn’t feel bad about doing this. He didn’t feel bad about tossing Morinaga into a wall and coming at Morinaga with his fists. He was about to pick Morinaga up and maybe slam him into the wall, but Morinaga slapped Souji’s arms off and said, “Fuck you, what the fuck? Cowboy, man, cowboy.”

“Sorry,” Souji said. He helped Morinaga up. “Sorry…”

“Fuck, you’re pissy today,” Morinaga said. “What crawled into your ass?”

“I don’t know,” Souji said. He went into the living room and sat on the couch. Morinaga went into the kitchen and came back with two cans of melon soda. “Stressed out.”

“This about your folks still in Thailand? Live it up. Go to the city. Party the shit out of things.”

“I don’t like partying,” Souji said.

Just a dance club.”

“I’ll have to take your drunk ass back to the apartment,” Souji said.

“Fuck, you’re staid. Think I liked you better when you tried to break my skull on the wall.” Morinaga popped open the can of soda. Souji caught Morinaga’s wrist, and, slowly, steered it over to Morinaga’s head.

“You shaved your head while I was gone,” Souji said.

“And you got a fucking bowl cut. Lamer.”

“Mother said the old style made me look like a fop.” He tilted Morinaga’s hand, and a drop of soda spilled onto Morinaga’s fuzzy head. “Guess I’ll get it cut again soon.”

“Uh-huh,” Morinaga said.

“And you’re going to grow your hair out,” Souji said. “Have to. They might make you wear a wig if you don’t grow it out long enough.” He poured more soda onto Morinaga’s head. “Maybe this will help.”

“Yeah, right—”

Souji tossed his unopened can into a cushion and grabbed Morinaga’s shirt again.

“Come on,” Souji said. “All that fucking sugar. Bet it’ll fertilize something to grow in that hollow head of yours—”

“Yeah, you think you’re so funny—”

“Haha. Ha.”

“And your fucking robot laugh.”

Souji crushed the bottle on his hand and lobbed it onto the coffee table. He licked the soda off his hand.

“Twisted freak,” Morinaga said. “Guess you still got something going for you after all.”

“You do it, then.” He pushed his hand into Morinaga’s face. When Morinaga didn’t do anything, Souji slapped him lightly on the cheek, and yanked Morinaga to his feet. “Come on,” he said. “We’re going to shower. Get all this sticky stuff off you.”

---

_Hanamura-kun (Mobile)_
Mar 25, 2012 05:17:08PM

hey man u there?

Sorry, too busy banging an old friend through a wall.

Not really. It’s okay. Busy.
Give me a moment, basking in the afterglow.

Hold on for a minute, need to go for round two—

“Who the hell is Hanamura-kun?” Morinaga said.

“Guy I was dating in Inaba,” Souji said. “You want to reply for me?”

“No,” Morinaga said. “He’s probably no fun.” He squinted at the screen of Souji’s phone—going through the pictures, Morinaga guessed. “They’re not bad looking,” he said. “Those fuckbuddies of yours.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Souji said.

“Yeah?” Morinaga said. “That girl looks your type. All bashful. Probably said no all the way up to when you pounded her into the futon. Wait—you had sex with Risette?”

“Stop it,” Souji said.

“What? You didn’t?”

“Stop it.”

“Why the hell are you so mad about it?”

“They were my friends,” Souji said. “You’re an ass.”

“Geeze…” Morinaga frowned. “I was kidding.”

“You weren’t kidding, you were—”

“Fine, I was wrong, I—”

“And with Aoyama, too, you kept—you keep—” Souji grabbed the pillow and threw it at Morinaga’s desk. “You’re always leading me wrong—”

“That thing was your fucking fault, and you know it, so don’t blame—”

“Always fucking me over—” Souji grabbed his bangs and had a thought about tearing them out—Morinaga seized his wrists and pulled them up and over Souji’s head.

“Shit, this is melodramatic, even from you,” he said, his cheeks flushed. “God, you’re really into this one.”

“Quit it.”

“What?”

“Fucking cowboy,” Souji said. “I’m going. Screw it. Don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you,” Morinaga said. “See if I care.”

---
Parents were now in Vietnam, heading their way up to China. Lots of good food. They promised souvenirs. “Did you remember to give the Aoyamas a gift?” his mother asked when he told her that he visited that afternoon.

He brought flowers with him to the Aoyamas.

Seemed suitable at the time. Didn’t mean for Auntie Aoyama to cry all over them.

---

Things to text back to Yosuke: why are you so patient, what are you doing with me, why won’t you go away?

He missed his friends. He had friends in the city, too, friends like Kaori and Mii-chan and Tsumura and Daiki and Yukihiro. And then there were people like Morinaga who he fucking hated. What had he even seen in them back then? They had been fun, they weren’t bad, they were… they were mean and he hated them, he hated…

weird day. met with auntie and uncle aoyama. How much should he tell? How much was safe? He knew Yosuke would want to know what happened, how it went, but how had it gone? It ended with Auntie crying into the flowers and then he got fucked by Morinaga, and there wasn’t a way to express how that went on normal scales. told them about me and aoyama. went really fucking awful okay.

---

March 26, 2012.

Yukiko and Chie’s letter arrived and a package from Kanji came in the mail: a set of cute animal dolls. Very nice. Kanji was a good boy. He liked Kanji in various ways. This way and that way, depending on what this way and that way meant.

Parents took a detour to Hong Kong. Kaori and Yukihiro came over to the apartment and helped him unpack. Said they heard from Morinaga that there was a blow out between them.

“I’m done with him,” Souji said. “Can’t stand him anymore.”

He didn’t know what he expected, but Kaori patted him on the back and said, “Good. He’s an awful person, anyway.”

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Hanamura-kun (Mobile)
Mar 26, 2012 05:17:08PM
bored. boood. teddie cae m by says hi
he misses you

Easy enough to answer that one. *tell him I miss him, too. wish you were here.*

---

*March 27, 2012.*

He played a bit of Halo that night. It was okay. He was good at it, but it wasn’t much fun. He stayed up late and went onto multiplayer. He was hoping to hear Chie or Naoto or Yosuke or whoever else Naoto had roped into her obsession *du jour.* No luck. Just a bunch of twelve-year-olds calling each other fags.

He missed them. Needed to make plans for tomorrow. A job, maybe. Or call up Yukihiro and Daiki and Tsumura to hang out, see a movie. Something normal like that.

---

*March 28, 2012.*

Everyone was busy, so he got on the bus again and headed out to the cemetery. He bought a stupidly expensive bouquet of flowers and walked up and down the rows, searching for the Aoyama family plot. He found it. Aoyama Souji, 1992-2010. Loving son.

He put the flowers by the stone. What was the proper thing to do? Cry over it, wail, panic, reflect?

Reflect, then. He was sad. He was angry. He wished he hadn’t done it.

He was probably a better person now, but that shouldn’t have happened at the expense of someone’s life.

He was a better person. He had done good, at least.

Shouldn’t he have done something about those dreams—those endless gates—

He left after a few minutes. He felt cold.

---

*Hanamura-kun (Mobile)*
Mar 26, 2012 08:21:30PM
dude im proud of u wanna talk l8r
“There’s not much to be proud of,” Souji said. “It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“I think it is,” Yosuke said. “I mean, you had been avoiding it for what, a year? And now you’re facing it head on. That’s… I don’t know if I could do that. I’d panic or something.”

“Oh?"

“Okay, I wouldn’t, but—”

“Are you sure?”

“Screw you,” Yosuke said. “So… I guess you’re feeling better?”


“Yeah, I noticed,” Yosuke said. He sounded a bit disappointed, almost. “Guess there’s nothing like being back in your hometown.”

“Inaba is my hometown now,” Souji said. “Dojima-san is there. Nanako is there. You’re there.” Amazingly corny line. Wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Needed to think of a way out. “Hold on,” he said. “I’m getting a call from my parents. Talk to you some other time?”

---

March 29, 2012.

He hadn’t paid any attention to the weather in the last week. Very refreshing. He didn’t know it’d be raining that day until he walked out of the apartment, and didn’t have a clue when it’d clear up. Could be never. It could rain from today until the end of time. Midnight Channel, all day long.

---

“Yeah, the TV’s fine,” Yosuke said. “You’re worried about it?”

“A little,” Souji said.

“Relax, man. It’s done wi—”

“SENSEIIIIIIIIII, HOW ARE YOU, SWEET BABY—”

“—and Ted says the TV’s clear! Even your… place.”

“That’s good.”

“So what were you thinking? Parents still in China? Guess you must be lonely.”

“Not really.”
“What, really?”

“I’m used to this kind of thing,” Souji said. “You should, too.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You just said something weird. Did you say that I should get used to being lonely?” Yosuke said.

“Wh—what the hell?”

“When you move into the dorms or your own apartment—”

“Without you?” Yosuke said. “Is that what you mean, without you? Are you fucking serious? We have this fight every fucking month.”

“‘I’m not going to go anywhere, we’re a couple, hey, at least neither of us can get pregnant, we’re partners, aren’t we?’”

“Don’t—don’t parrot my words back at me, Souji.” Yosuke fell silent. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“Come visit me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Souji said. He did. He was trying to flirt his way out of this. “Come visit me. School doesn’t start for another two weeks and my parents will be in Mongolia by the weekend. Come visit me and make me feel less lonely.”

“God, Souji,” Yosuke said. “Fuck you.”

---

Bad play. Dumb move.

Shit, he needed to do something.

---

April 1, 2012.

From Tibet, with love: “here are some pictures you might like; we’ll be back soon, son.”

---
He came back to Inaba without telling anyone. It was three hours by train (or four? He wasn’t counting) and Dojima was at work and Nanako wasn’t answering the home phone. It was raining. He took the bus to the shopping district. His arm and shoulder all ached. His suitcase was too heavy.

The gas station attendant—she had a name, didn’t she—he—didn’t…?—was watching him huddling both suitcase and body beneath his umbrella. She laughed and beckoned him to wait beneath the shelter of the gas station.

“Hey there,” she said. “Been a while since I’ve seen you. You look different.”

“I got a haircut.”

“Really? You look exactly the same!” She laughed again. She leaned against the terminal, whistling a little tune. “Waiting for someone?”

“The bus.”

“You’ll be here for a while,” she said. “Hardly anyone takes the bus on rainy days, so the driver takes his time. You’re that city boy, right? Dojima-san’s.”

“That’s right,” Souji said. “Who are you?”

“No one important, I suppose.”

“That’s no way to answer a question.”

“Don’t get cheeky, little boy,” the attendant said. Was it a joke? It could have been a joke.

“Your name?” he said.

“What do you think it is?” she said.

Souji didn’t know what to say. She was incredibly hostile. It made it hard to eke out even the inkling of a bond.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t really know. We’ve never been introduced.”

“That’s no excuse. Hahaha…”

He laughed along with her, a little uneasily. What was he supposed to say?

Her eyes were a little strange. Very red.

“Hahaha,” she said, patting his shoulder. “What a pity. You really don’t have a clue who I am.”

Of course he knew who she was: she was the gas station attendant who greeted him, the woman he talked to when it rained, the person who offered him a job that never panned out. Red-eyed woman who was… who was…?

He was still thinking when she stood up and left him. He didn’t think much of it, but the blood rushed in his ears and he thought she turned around and said something to him, but what was it—?
April 6, 2012.

“And then she left,” Souji said.

It was after school. Yosuke was technically still working, but he was giving himself a break. Chie was helping in the clothing department—at least, he thought she was, Yukiko was somewhere in the shop doing groceries and the two of them were probably going to meet up somewhere in the middle and do weird girl things together. Souji—well, he was back in Inaba. He got a haircut when he went back to the city and dyed his hair black. His hair was now very carefully gelled in a crest up front, and combed away from his face. Even though he moved back to the same city he had lived in before, he was going to a different high school and they had… opinions about hair color. That was what Souji said, at least. Yosuke still wasn’t sure how to process it. It looked weird. Souji’s eyebrows were still gray.

Souji hadn’t told anyone he was coming. They all found out after Abe-san called Kanji’s mother saying that he had been driving in the shopping district—it was raining and a fog was setting in, so visibility had been bad. He hit something and slammed down on the brakes right away. Thought it was a dog or one of the Suzuki’s cows, but when he got out of the car it had been Dojima’s boy lying on the ground, his suitcase parked safely by the bus stop.

Souji said he didn’t have a clue what he was doing there, either. As far as he was concerned, he had been mid-conversation with someone one moment, and in the hospital the next. The doctors suspected that he must have had a seizure, but couldn’t pin a cause. They kept him in the hospital for a day or two, and then shrugged and said the equivalent of, “As long as he doesn’t pass out like that again, he’s free to go.”

Go figure. Always an enigma, even to the doctors.

Spring break was already over. Yosuke was squeezing a few days of work before the midterms hammered him in May. Souji said that his classes started the next week. The spring breaks were a little later in the city.

“Huh,” Yosuke said, because he wasn’t sure what else would fit. “Weird.”

“Yeah,” Souji said.

“I’ve never seen her around,” Yosuke said. “That attendant.”

“She never seemed to work much. A pinch-hitter, I think.” Souji tugged at his collar. “I don’t know. Not many people seemed to recognize her.”

“Well, can’t know everyone,” Yosuke said. “You’re the one with half of Inaba on your contacts list.”

“Haha. It’s good to know people.” Souji stretched his legs out, and brushed his foot against Yosuke’s thigh.

“Dude, your shoes are covered with mud.”

“Oh. Right.”
Yosuke picked at the noodles on his plate. “Ted went back to the TV,” he said. “Said that your dungeon’s been… bottled up? I guess.”

“That makes sense.”

“—it does?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Souji said.

“I—what part of any of ‘your dungeon’s been bottled up’ made any sense to you?”

“Haha.”

“Forget about it,” Yosuke said. “You obviously don’t want to tell me.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to tell you,” Souji said. “But… I don’t think I could tell you. I don’t really remember…” His eyes unfocused. “There was a limo and a man with a long nose told me that I had fulfilled my part of the story. And that was it. No more Personae. I picked up a sword a while ago and couldn’t figure out how to cut anything with it. Still have a mean handle on a five-iron, though.”

“—I haven’t even thought about Susano-O since you’ve left.”

“Funny, right?” Souji said. “It’s like the other world’s gone and vanished. Even though you guys are still watching for the rain and fog.”

“… Yeah.” Yosuke twisted the ring on his finger. What was he supposed to say now? Having Souji back was great, but they were in public and it’d be gross to start fucking in the middle of nowhere. He crammed a few forkfuls of noodles into his mouth.

“I thought about you a lot,” Souji said. “While I was back home.”

“Mmpfh?”

“Honestly, I don’t really understand it,” Souji said. “When you’re not there, I miss you. When you’re with me, I feel better. Sorry.”

Sorry—for what? Oh, god, they were going to do this game again, hide-and-seek, question-and-answer version? Yosuke couldn’t do it now, he had enough on his plate without playing these crazy —

“Back home there was another guy.”

Shit.

“For fuck’s sake,” Yosuke said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yeah,” Souji said.

Yosuke tugged at the apron strings. It took him a few tries. His hands felt numb.

“C’mon,” Yosuke said. “Let’s go to the floodplains for this.”

---
He checked out of work and walked ahead of Souji. He needed to have some kind of speech ready. Some kind, any kind. But all of his thoughts were fucked up. His brain caught on one thought and spun it around and around and around until he forgot what he had been thinking about before, so now he was thinking, *fuck you fuck you fuck you.*

Shit, he had been a moron to trust Souji, an idiot to believe in him, he hadn’t been—he should have seen this coming, he knew it was weird that Souji didn’t start talking about breaking up right before he left Inaba, shit, even Chie had seen this coming—damn it.

Yosuke stared into the river. Something, something, he needed to think of some fucking thing to say, because if he didn’t, he’d end up forgiving Souji because that was what happened: Souji did something and Yosuke said, “Yeah, sure, that’s fine,” but what part of, “I left town and fucked some other guy, whoops” was fine? Was he that much of a fucking doormat or…

His hands balled up into fists.

“Hey,” Yosuke said.

“Hmm?” Souji said. He didn’t even look a bit worried, that fucking bastard.

“Was it good?” Yosuke said. “I mean—did you like the sex or something?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, fuck you!” Yosuke raised his fist, pulled it back—but Souji didn’t make any move to counter or even flinch, so he had to lower his arm because what kind of asshole would he be if he actually *did* beat Souji up? He settled for tugging at his own jacket, so hard that the fabric snapped in the wind. “What the hell,” he said. “The entire time you’ve just led me around in circles and—I keep telling you that I’ll always be there for you and then you go and fuck the nearest hole on the fucking train—what’s the fucking point?” He kicked at a pebble, and it plopped in the water. He kicked another one in. “Sometimes I think you’re just fucking with me,” Yosuke said. “That has to be it, right? You lead me on all these impossible—and then you—shit.” He was dripping tears everywhere. Fuck.

“I…” Souji offered a handkerchief. Yosuke knocked it away.

“Fuck you,” Yosuke mumbled. “You think that’s going to make me…”

“I know that it’s enough,” Souji said. “You’re in love with me.”

“So what?” Yosuke said. His face went red. Yeah, just go ahead and say that. He ought to say something like, ‘because you made me, you jackass’ but then Souji would crumble away and probably—god, try to jump off a cliff or something, what the fuck. Asshole.

“… It’s… that…” Souji rubbed his chin. “I… won’t do it again.”

“Whatever,” Yosuke said. “Forget about it, man.”

“I mean it,” Souji said. “I thought about you a lot in the city. I broke things off with Morinaga-kun because he wasn’t anything like you. I… love you, I think.”

“Forget about it,” Yosuke said. His cheeks were even redder now. “Forget it. I don’t want to hear from you.”
He left Souji on the floodplains. He went back home and went straight up to his room. He wasn’t worried. Souji would call him back—he knew Souji would call him back. They’d talk things over and then they’d patch things up. He could see it in his head, playing out perfectly—Souji would text or call or IM him and they’d argue all night and the next day Yosuke would invite Souji over after school and while his parents were still busy, have make up sex. Souji would explain things and Yosuke would know what the hell Souji meant when he said that he *thought* that he loved Yosuke—probably not, but if he did—oh hell. Too much to think about.

The worst of it was, it didn’t matter what Souji said or what Souji did. He just… he couldn’t leave Souji. Or at least, he wouldn’t. Not now.

Yosuke set his phone on his desk and opened his textbook and waited. Everything was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine. Souji was okay. He was okay. It was all behind them. There was nothing to fear. He should be happy that Souji had told him at all. He should be grateful that Souji loved him at all. And he was.

end.

End Notes

If you made it this far, thank you very much for reading all the way until the end. I was young and gloomy at the time that I wrote this.

Until next time. ♥

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