Summary

Hey Mr. Big-Name-Kid

“So, Niwa-san, your company can attest to owing its recent, and very impressive, success to you new summer line?”

Niwa Hachiro: head of the popular textile company that produced the *Sakura Loom* line that was released into stores last June. The company, S&L Co., was until the most recent spring suffering under millions of yen in debt, until sudden boosts in profits worldwide, and the cutting of paychecks and letting go of a vast amount of employees, *revitalized* the failing business. The company had always produced high-quality, fashionable clothing, usually accompanied by a heavy price tag. Production, based off of last week’s visit to retailers, had oddly increased in recent months, despite the loss of a major portion of the workforce, and its cost had apparently lessened significantly, and the now cheaper clothes caused an extreme increase in sales.

Niwa preened under his apparent praise, a proud grin stretching across his face, as his dark eyes flickered from the camera lens back to the reporter’s seemingly vapid face. He leaned a fraction of a centimeter in towards the microphone held out before him. Niwa’s eyes slipped down with the casual movement, tracing over the interviewer’s long legs with a subtle leer.

The CEO began to speak. “Yes, our summer line has been doing very well, but we must also thank every single one of our employees who have been dedicating themselves to ensure its success.”

The reporter almost raised an eyebrow, but refrained, maintaining a perfect expression of bland interest while pulling the microphone back to his own lips. “It’s very impressive that morale has remained so high despite the recent streamlining. How has your company managed to inspire its workforce so?” The company head’s pleasant smile grew, and sharp blue eyes caught how his fingers wiggled, as if itching for something. Greedy little motions.

“Well, S&L has always prided itself on being a family, factory workers included. The inability to pay so many of our precious employees hit us all hard, so we’ve redoubled efforts to bring the company back from the brink. With continued success we hope to be able to rehire everyone we’ve lost, so everyone is very dedicated to the current projects.”

“Your company has also always prided itself on centering its factories here in Japan, rather than outsourcing, correct?” Niwa blinked, slightly blind-sided and smile faltering for just half a second before it recoiled back into place, but with a new sinister twist.

This tycoon was tougher than he initially thought; he had a good grasp of his own reactions and a sense of how to work the camera to his favor. Pity he still didn’t stand a chance.

The reporter quietly and unobtrusively traced his knee with his microphone-free hand, and the businessman momentarily paused at the movement, slightly distracted. He hated these tactics, the little movements, the near imperceptible flirtations. Just enough seduction to make even the minds of the least interested people wander.

Just the briefest falter, the shortest moment of distraction, could lose a player the game.

And so his opponent, the CEO, refocused and made his next move. “Yes, the previous heads have always maintained a tradition of keeping the company on native soil. As a proud Japanese company, we must do our best to give back to our people and the economy.”

“You only took up the headship two years ago. Will this be changing under your leadership?”
“Certainly not. Especially not considering the current recession.” Niwa’s smile couldn’t be called that anymore, reduced to a tight quirk of the corners of his lips. The reporter leaned forward, daringly exposing his collarbone from where it peeked out of his loosened tie and dress shirt. Sexuality meant nothing when it came to certain thoughts; even a man’s neck could elicit images, recollections, and half-remembered desires in the most traditional of men.

“How many factories does S&L have producing the Sakura Loom line?”

“Three.” The businessman replied, as a well-polished dress shoe slid up his leg, an action the questioner knew, while out of sight of the camera, was pushing the limits of propriety.

“The first two are in Yokohama and Himeji, right? Where is the third?” He pressed, and Niwa took a moment to gather his concentration, eyes refocusing, and hastily responded. His gaze flickered to the top right; inconclusive studies reported that could mean he was visually constructing an image. But there was no real need for that observation.

“Yokkaichi.” Inwardly, the reporter smirked. Outwardly, he smoothed his hand over his thigh, a casual but eye-catching movement.

“I was under the impression that the Yokkaichi factory was taking commissions for new school uniforms for the coming school year.” He said with an innocent mix of confusion and insecurity. The businessman ate it up, grasping the apparent insecurity like a dog presented a steak, eager to tip the scales of power back in his own favor.

“Wrong impression, then.” Niwa smiled genially, forcing an easy air. The reporter relented his little distractions, picking up a binder from the desk before them with slender fingers. The innocuous binder had rested there during the interview, next to his jacket and the tripod; its damning contents always at hand. He rested it in his lap and took his time flipping open the black cover, revealing carefully laminated forms and photos, each one marked with the official S&L logo.

“These production records from the factory say differently.” A smile of the reporter’s own played across his lips, his eyes suddenly predatory, as if he were descending upon a cornered meal. Niwa jolted, lurching forward without even a semblance of good humor left. The reporter flipped the page, presenting a new set of papers. “And these import records also say that the Sakura Loom line was not produced in Japan at all, but rather was brought in from India.”

The CEO’s mouth hung open, wide eyes raking over the presented images and forms in abject horror.

“I have pictures of the factory, as well, if you’d like to see them. Particularly the regulation breaking locked exits, inexistent fire escapes, and what appears to be child labor. Not to mention the entire building’s unstable infrastructure detailed in these blueprints, and samples of the fumes your workers are spending eighteen hours a day inhaling.” The reporter continued mercilessly, and Niwa made a sort of choked noise in the back of his throat.

“Bizarrely enough, the building and conditions are identical to another factory that recently collapsed after a manufacturing accident started a fire. The flames resulted in the explosion that sent the entire building collapsing in on itself and six hundred workers, only ninety of which survived. The workers had been unable to escape due to there being no emergency exits, stairs, or windows, and the locked doors essentially trapped them in a collapsing oven.”

Niwa’s eyes were flickering left and right, his fingers drumming on the arms of his chair.
“Even more coincidentally, this incident has gone unreported by Japan’s news, despite the indisputable owner of the factory being the S&L Corporation.”

He paused, for just a moment, to savor the taste of the air. And then he went for the throat.

“Well, Niwa-san, what’s your response to all this? Will you take responsibility for the hundreds of deaths—“

“I deny all these outrageous accusations!” Niwa yelled, face purpling with frustration and rage, but the reporter was already moving. He threw his jacket over his arm while tossing the microphone into his bag, and collected the camera and tripod as two security guards slipped into the office. Despite his agility, his equipment weighed him down, and the two men in suits managed to catch hold of him and wrestled the camera out of his hands. One dutifully removed the memory card, while the other held him still by the forearms, ignoring his struggles and squawks of protest, before the video camera was carelessly tossed back into his bag. The card was handed directly over to Niwa, who held it triumphantly out, teasingly waving it back and forth as he began to gloat.

“No copies, huh? This is precisely why high school brats should stay out of the game.” Niwa laughed, and the teenager made a strangled sound of fury. “Get rid of him, boys.”

Security carted him out through the halls, the elevator, and then the lobby, throwing him out into the street with condescending huffs. He was left there on the sidewalk, wide eyed and shaking, as they disappeared back into the S&L building with victorious smirks.

Kudo Shinichi got up, dusted himself off, and collected his bag and jacket from where they had fallen with a restored cool, just the slightest smile threatening to break out across his dignified expression. The memory card he had hastily replaced with a blank with some sleight of hand before he was caught was returned to the camcorder, and the real binder pulled out from where it had been hidden underneath his school uniform in his bag. Pleased with both his act and the successful bait-and-switch, he sauntered away from the building, happy to catch the bus back home and ruin a multi-billion yen company.

The Kudo Manor was waiting for him with lights off, a definite sign that he was the only one home. Feeling relieved, he made a beeline for his room, and more importantly, the computer within. He didn’t dare bring his laptop to interviews; angry scoops were often all too willing to crush nice things (he hadn't actually expected his camcorder to survive today, but wow, maybe even his luck could be good sometimes). While he waited for the interview to upload for editing, he got to work touching up the article detailing the events in India and the cover up, while adding in Niwa's denials and quotes from the afternoon showing the man's reluctance to admit to his actions.

It was well into the evening by the time the story was ready to go live, but there was no denying the overwhelming feeling of satisfaction that swept over him, after weeks of travel, heavy research,
and erasing any evidence of the more questionably legal actions that resulted in the truth finally being released to the public. Not exactly how most teens would boast about spending break, but there was no feeling better than seeing hard work pay off as everything came together. The mobile app for his website immediately informed his readers that a new article had been published, and right away his site’s views rocketed up as thousands introduce themselves to Kudo’s newest big scoop. Many were loyal fans; others were newscasters, reporters, and all his other competitors waiting for a story to pounce upon. He held no claims to the stories he published, except enough to discourage plagiarism, of course, so as many stations, papers, and sites could report in on the dirt he unearthed as possible. So long as the truth got out, he was satisfied; though, in the end, everyone still knew exactly who came out with it first.

Satisfaction curled in his stomach as he crawled into bed after a quick meal and removing the carefully applied makeup from his face. He had been working on this story for weeks with little time allocated to boring things, like eating and sleep, and he was still pretty jetlagged, so the bed felt like heaven. Tomorrow he’d wake up to the fallout, but for now, he didn’t feel guilty about resting his eyes for a moment.

The skyline of London was alit with a certain energy that night, the flashes of blue and red lights dancing through the streets as helicopters spun through the air, shining beams like spotlights down below. The air carried a brilliant, energetic feeling, as if crackling with excitement and buzzing with anticipation.

A crowd gathered outside a museum, moving and rippling with the wind as their eyes collectively set on the sky, hearts pounding and breath held.

It began with someone muttering slightly under their breath, a quiet whisper of awe, before soft exclamations burst forth, building and amplifying into a solid chant, voices rising and falling in excitement-induced unison.

“KID! KID! KID!”

The cheering raised in volume and tempo as the sirens increased, sharp wails cutting through the air in time with the voices, until broken by an unexpected disturbance from above.

A sleek black jet descended towards the roof of the museum, carrying a bold emblem on its side: a plain, grinning theatre mask.

The crowd shifted anxiously, and annoyance built among the audience, until another enchanted murmur started the chanting afresh, this time stronger, wilder, and faster, as if rebelling against the intimidating presence of the plane and its occupants.

“KID! KID! KID!”

“Man, they’re really riled up tonight.” A heavy accented voice echoed down, speaking in Japanese. Clinging to the military-grade, inch thick wires that descended from the jet’s bay were multiple figures, all masked and armed and defiantly glowing in the darkness of the night. The one who spoke was dressed in deep greens and bright reds, and his dark skin emitted a fiery brilliance, as if he were another star in the night sky. He watched the crowd carefully through the veiled eyes of his domino, mouth twisted in aggravation.

“Well, it’s been months since the last heist in England.” A girl was drifting through the air,
surrounded by a halo of soft light. The white, red, and soft pinks of her costume contrasted brilliantly with her long, dark hair. Though she spoke softly, her voice was strong, carrying even in the churning air and wild wind.

“Why are they cheering for that jerk, though?” Another girl grumbled, clinging to her wire a little nervously. Her costume was blue and white, in contrast to the figure next to her, who wore red and black and dusty brown. “He’s a bad guy!”

“Some people call us the bad guys, Tsuyu.” The man at her side replied, tone even, as he carefully measured the direction of the wind that tussled his blond hair.

“Well,” The final figure huffed, as she bounced between the hanging lines at neck-breaking speeds. She wore dark green and grey, but her skin radiated a ghostly aura. “It won’t be an issue anymo’ since we’re gonna bring him down!” Her voice rose sharply near the end of her statement, and those nearby flinched from the shrill sound that pierced the air.

“Watch whatcha doin’, Banshee!”

“Shut up, Heiliopause, ya idiot! I’m in complete control—”

The frustrated shout was interrupted by a sudden jerk in the jet’s hovering, jostling the hanging crew and even knocking loose Tsuyu, whose grip on her wire had already been tenuous.

“Tsuyu!” The flying girl in white swept her out of the air before she could fall very far. “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay, Angel, but—”

“The hell was that, Hawk?” Heliopause snarled upwards, glaring at the bottom of the jet. Again, the whole craft shuddered, before beginning to bank to the left, away from the museum.

“Don’t tell me…” Hawk muttered and fortunately, no one had to. As their plane went haywire and lead them away from the scene, the crowd began to go wild with excitement, as all the sirens went silent and interfering lights were one by one extinguished.

Atop the museum, a figure emerged from a sudden burst of mist, with a showman’s cry of “Ladies and gentlemen!” Clad elegantly in a flawlessly white suit and top hat, with a flickering cape behind him, the star of the show finally appeared.

The heist began.

He woke up earlier than he would have liked the next morning, Saturday, the second to last day of break, to noise that could only be created by a handful of uninvited teenagers. He groaned as he tugged his pillow over his head, trying to block out the distant but disturbing arguing, clattering, and laughter. A very familiar voice was singing, likely in the kitchen, with no distinguishable melody. His mother must have been helping Ran make breakfast.

His mother, when did she show up? His father must be around as well, which explained the absolute ruckus downstairs. Kudo Yusaku was a man with a great deal of followers: “interns” that invaded the manor whenever he was in town.

Shinichi wistfully recalled three years ago, when the city was still peaceful and normal, when he
would not see his parents for months at a time, but with the sudden increase in meta-human activity and near-apocalyptic attacks on the metropolis, the two of them have made more of an effort to return every few weeks, bringing along with them his father’s apprentice and his entourage of friends. The only silver lining was that Ran was a part of the posse, so he finally got to see her after long periods of nothing. They’d been dating for nearly a year and a half, and yet lately, he rarely ever saw her outside, and sometimes even in school. They used to be inseparable, but since joining up with Yusaku’s protégé, she seemed to have become perpetually busy, inconsistent, and unreliable.

(He knew he wasn’t being fair, but it was so much easier to be mad than hurt.)

She was downstairs now, though. He could go spend some time with her. Months ago that thought would have had him up and out of bed in an instant, now his limbs didn’t even so much as twitch.

Something angry twisted in his stomach. He didn’t want to see her, not really, not today. He had felt so good, relieved and proud, last night; he wanted to savor his own success a little longer. His mother would come up soon, to check if he was actually home and if so wake him for breakfast. He had to get out of the house before then.

And, well, if his father was in town, something big must be going down. His father’s returns seemed to have an uncanny correlation with explosions, super villains, not-so-natural disasters, and the Earth’s imminent doom. He could almost smell the scoop developing somewhere through the pillow over his face.

Two big stories in a row? Maybe his luck was finally taking a turn for the better. Big news tempted him out of bed like a seductress would in, so he heaved himself away from the warmth and soft firmness of his mattress to the closet. Thankfully, there’s a bathroom connected to his personal quarters, so he didn’t have to sneak about any invaders that could report his presence to his mother. Ten minutes later he was freshened up, dressed professionally but comfortably, and began to pack. Freelance press ID? Check. Digital camera? Check. High-end camcorder? Check! Lock picks? Handcuffs? Voice recorder? Microphone? Batteries? Everything else?

It paid to be prepared in his line of work, particularly with his crazy life as a crime-magnet. His big duffel bag was heavy when fully packed, but he had no other choice as an independent, high school, freelance reporter without a cameraman. And even burdened, he was damn fast on his feet, as the starting striker and captain of the soccer team, which also happened to be an essential skill to escape this house. The second floor was relatively safe, the only visitor that would be up here was his father, and if so, he would be locked up in the library or office. The first floor would be harder to navigate, with his mother and Ran blocking off the kitchen and therefore the backdoor, and the other’s likely invading the living room, in-between the stairs and the front door. Not that any of them could really stop him from leaving, but they could alert Ran. So, dining room window it was.

Of course, it’s never that simple, now is it?

Hakuba caught him just as he had silently made his way down the stairs, expectant.

“Sneaking out so soon? You haven’t even greeted Ran-san.” The blond always spoke with such maturity that Shinichi almost wanted to like him. He and the other were alike in so many ways; they shared the same interests and passions and would likely get along fantastically if not for two very debilitating reasons.

“I figured she already has plans for after breakfast that I’m not invited to.” He remarked right back, purposely adding a sharp edge to his words while still remaining completely civil. What ever plans Ran undoubtedly had, they likely involved the blond and not him, her supposed boyfriend. Hakuba
recognized a topic that will inevitably result in conflict, and let it go.

“I read your story on the factory collapse.” He tried instead, expression pleasant. Shinichi was not fooled.

“Oh?”

“Honestly, Kudo-kun, when you went off to India to investigate a ‘huge scoop’ I was not expecting it to be this huge.” The blond continued, sounding half-impressed and half-exasperated. “How did you even pull this off?”

“Don’t worry, Hakuba, there’s no proof that I did anything illegal to obtain any of those documents and pictures.” Shinichi didn’t bother with pretenses; he knew exactly what Hakuba was really asking. As a detective, the blond was always suspicious of something or other.

“You’re as bad as Kuroba-kun, sometimes, I swear.” Shinichi rolled his eyes. Case in point of Hakuba being a completely paranoid busybody: Kuroba Kaito was some guy he had never met in Hakuba’s class, that the detective was absolutely convinced was also the infamous jewel thief Kaitou KID. But had absolutely zero evidence besides the circumstantial to prove it. Honestly, he respected the British boy’s abilities as an investigator, but some days it felt like the guy believed everyone around him to be a superhero or villain until provided with reason to actually assume otherwise. It was always guilty until proven innocent with Hakuba.

Or maybe Shinichi was just a tad bitter when it came to his acquaintance, who, funnily enough, had everything he always wanted. Kudo Yusaku had taken the blond under his wing when both boys were just nine, guiding Hakuba on the path towards becoming the most renown teen detective in both the United Kingdom and Japan, while simultaneously sabotaging all Shinichi’s own attempts to follow after his role model Sherlock Holmes’s example. His father, acclaimed as the “World’s Greatest Detective” despite being a novelist, believed the career of a private eye too dangerous for his own son, but ideal for another man’s.

But Shinichi was contrary by nature, particularly when his parents were involved, and by the time he was twelve he was secretly running a crime blog from his desktop computer. Ha, take that, Father.

When Yusaku had gotten wind of these Internet activities (“He’s not just watching porn? Wait, he’s not watching any porn? Then what’s he doing in that bedroom of his all day and night?”) via one baffled Inspector Megure, it was too late. Shinichi had made a career as an investigative reporter.

“If you’re heading out, then I assume you’ve… caught a scent, so to speak?”

Shinichi smiled despite himself. “Maybe. Want in?”

“I would never dream of interfering with a news investigation. But I am a detective, and I know how you are prone to, ah, coming across criminal inconveniences. Do try to be careful.”

Oi, oi, I don’t want to hear that from you.

Shinichi promptly decided the conversation was over, and continued on his way, brushing past the blond with his head held high. No point skipping the lobby now that he had been spotted, he would just have to hurry through.

Unsurprisingly, that weird Osakan and his ponytail girlfriend were spread over the couch, arguing. He almost managed to walk right past them, both too caught up in clawing at each other to pay
much attention to their surroundings, but another girl walked in just as he’d almost completed his escape.

“Oh, Kudo-kun!” She called, noticing him immediately, which snapped the bickering pair out of the dispute and brought their attention towards him. The whistle-blower was Nakamori Aoko, who he knew the least well out of all his father’s interns. She looked remarkably like Ran, which was reason enough for him to try and keep his distance, even though he loathed admitting it even in the safety of his own mind. “Good morning! Already heading out?” She asked, but he didn’t quite have a chance to answer due to Hattori’s happy exclamation of “Kudo!”

The Osakan was, frankly, an enigma. Friendly and outgoing, he somehow ended up taking a shine to Shinichi on the first day they met. Shinichi had at the time thought, hoped, if he was honest with himself, it was the beginning of a long-lasting friendship. He wasn’t wrong, but not exactly right either. Their acquaintanceship was one of endless mixed messages. Hattori had a habit of lighting up the moment Shinichi stepped into the room, of chattering to him about sports and food, and calling him frequently with more chattering. But, in contrast, he constantly changed the course of conversation, or sometimes abruptly ended it, if Shinichi brought up cases, or work, or his family, or Ran, or any of their mutual acquaintances really, or just about anything that wasn’t school, sports, and restaurants. Such interactions make it abundantly clear that Shinichi was locked permanently out of the loop about a lot of things, and since Hattori was obviously a shit liar and secret keeper, the other teen often avoided Shinichi or blatantly ignored him for days on end after such blunders, going from clingy to guiltily chilly basically every couple of weeks.

Shinichi hated lies, hated secrets, and most of all, hated the reminder that he is basically drowning in both those things, and therefore, kept his distance as much as he was able. Today, though, it seemed Hattori had elected to speak with him. “Hey, man, every news channel is talkin’ about ya!”

Kazuha, Hattori’s not-quite girlfriend, slapped him on the arm. “Moron, ya make it sound like they’re gossipin’ ‘bout him!”

With a look that mimicked how annoyed Shinichi felt, Hattori snapped right back. “Idiot! Kudo knows what I mean, don’tcha Kudo?”

But Shinichi just sighed and hefted his bag a bit further up his shoulder, and departed from the scene of impending couple drama with a wave to Aoko. The continuing bickering followed him right out the front door.

Still, the knowledge of his story making such a splash lightened his mood and brought a smirk to his lips. It was a nice spring day outside, still early enough for coffee, but close enough to noon for the air to be warm. He thought about going to Poirot for his daily dose of caffeine, and popping into the Mouri Detective Agency to see if there were any cases he should report on that he had missed in the past two weeks. Maybe there he would pick up a scent of any impending trouble; otherwise he would just make his way to the police station and popular hubs in the city.

Undoubtedly, he’d run into something eventually. That’s just how his life went.

When he arrived at the Mouri Detective Agency, he found Kogoro watching TV. Which would be fine if it were anyone else, it was a Saturday morning after all, but considering this seemed to be the itinerary for every day, it annoyed him.

“Good morning, Occhan.” He called, as he entered without knocking. The room was cluttered with
beer cans and loose papers. Ran must not have been home last night, or earlier today. Actually, it was likely she hadn’t been back to the agency in roughly a week, considering the levels of unsorted or disposed trash, the number of convenience store bento boxes, and heavy scent of tobacco. Kogoro barely looked away from the TV, haggard and worn, and obviously nursing a hangover.

“Finally back to your usual snooping, brat?” Shinichi ignored the response, poking around the desk. There was information about a missing adolescent there. A boy, thirteen and from Osaka, had reportedly been missing for six weeks now.

“Is this your most recent case?” He asked, picking up the paper with the boy’s picture and details. Kogoro glared at him.

“Tch, that’s days old, so mind your own business.”

“Days?”

“The kid’s friend dropped by on Thursday, claiming he’s been missing for nearly two months. Nobody knows exactly when he disappeared, and the parents never filed a missing persons report. Seems to be just your typical runaway.”

The mentioned friend had left a cell number at the bottom of the page. Shinichi took a picture of the whole paper, before saving it into his phone. This tale was an unfortunately common one, but something about it bothers him. When he brushed his fingers along the paper, he got a feeling of dread and foreboding, and slight panic.

Well, he came here looking for a scent, so might as well follow it. He pocketed the picture too, figuring he might be able to glean more from it given time.

“Thanks, Occhan. Where’s Ran been?”

“She left last Wednesday with Sonoko for some stupid villa visit or something.”

Shinichi pursed his lips. The look Kogoro shot him was somewhere between pity and knowing. Which just showed how far his relationship with her has sunk.

He was tempted to call Sonoko and ask her side of the story, but already knew that his childhood not-friend would tell him that Ran went somewhere with her mother, or whatever other excuse she had been fed.

On the way out, back into the streets, he took out his phone to begin the investigation. He called the number that had been left with the case details as he headed down the avenue, already having a destination in mind.

The person on the other end of the line was a volunteer at the local youth center, Asakawa Shimpei. He was nineteen and in college, but spent his free afternoons overseeing the recreational sports teams’ practices. The missing one was Moriguchi Satoshi, one of the older kids on the Frisbee team at thirteen, who had stopped going to practices mid-February. The concerned coach visited his home address, but did not meet Satoshi there, and apparently inquiries about the boy’s whereabouts to his parents had been met with aggression, and had been thrown out into the street. Unsurprised by the treatment, due to having suspected the parents to be abusive for months, the coach then reported in to the local police, who conducted a search. Satoshi was never found, and when the parents were thoroughly questioned by authority figures they couldn’t chase out, they claimed Satoshi had run away to Tokyo.

Investigations of the house revealed that not only was the home in squalor, but a portion of
Satoshi’s clothes were missing, along with a couple other items. It sounded like tens of other stories Shinichi had heard, but again, a horrible feeling crept up his spine.

It reminded him of the nauseous sensation he always got when he was about to stumble across a corpse.

Well, one missing kid wasn’t much of a story, but Shinichi did have an idea about how to pursue it. He headed downtown towards the docks, and subsequently, the warehouse districts. Many runaways, orphans, and other vagabond kids frequently hid out in a particular bunch of rundown, unmanned buildings, gathering with sleeping bags, hungry eyes, and heaps of information.

The place carried the feeling of hopelessness and chaos, so he didn’t actually head there all that often, because first off, he grew up in an elegant Western mansion and was generally used to the rigid order of police work, and secondly, well, he usually wasn’t very welcome there anymore. That’s just what tended to happen when a story a reporter runs, arrogantly thinking that the publicity will help the reluctant subjects and thinking oneself a savior for it, happened to go wrong and resulted in the desperate inhabitants losing yet another shelter. Shinichi had been a different person then, and the shame still weighed heavily on his shoulders, especially the closer he got to his destination.

But he wasn’t going to run away. There was a kid in trouble, and Shinichi could help him. He owed those poor vagrants at least that much.

The warehouse he came too was dilapidated and eerie, even in the bright sunlight of the day. Wary, cold eyes tracked him through the dusty shadows, and young teens were scrambling in the darkness, away from the portions of floor illuminated by the sunlight shining through the grimy windows of the rundown building. They tracked his footsteps as he made his way further in, making his presence more conspicuous than he usually would. It was for the best that they didn’t have any reason to think he was snooping, lest they get aggressive in their desperation.

The whispering echoed through the quiet halls, nervous and anxious, scared. While the homeless children that hide here from abusive caretakers and a broken foster system tended to be harrowed and weary, they were all still adolescents; the warehouse usually was filled with shouting, laughing, and arguing, just general childish shenanigans, but today the atmosphere was thick with fear, suffocating the warehouse’s inhabitants.

Something was very, very wrong.

Eventually, a tall figure emerged from the murky gloom, hovering threateningly in his path. Shinichi recognized this teen, which was just a year older than him and far more sharpened by strife. Daichi was rugged around the edges, with dark skin and darker eyes and bleached hair so filthy it might as well still have been brown, but he was also powerfully built, and deadly in a fight. The ringleader and protector of the little refugees gathered in this ragged shelter.

He glared and sneered, bodily blocking any further progression into the base, “Look who it is. The rich smarty is back. Gonna screw us over again?”

Shinichi wasn’t really listening to his snarls, instead observing the stressed and anxious figures scattered in the hall, quivering with too bright eyes.

"What's going on here?" He asked, skipping any pleasantries or snark. Daichi bristled and frowned at him, aggression fading into cold wariness. He knew his usual howling and barking wouldn’t scare off Shinichi, even if it sent gangsters scrambling for safer turf.
"None of your business, snoop. Why are you here?"

Shinichi pulled out Satoshi’s picture, and presented it to Daichi, who took it with a look of slight disdain. "I'm looking for this boy. Do you know him?"

Daichi was still, face carefully blank in frustrated annoyance. "...No. Why?" Not necessarily a lie, but the posture of the rugged teen suggested evasiveness and unease. Daichi was hiding something.

"He ran away from his abusive home in Okinawa. He supposedly came here."

"So, why look for him? Drag him back to his good-for-nothing parents?"

"Of course not. But his friend is very worried about him. This kid might be in trouble."

Daichi frowned, but relented. If there was anything this dilapidated pack leader couldn’t resist, it was a troubled kid on the lamb. "I'll ask around." Worry had tightened the corners of his eyes and there was an ill-boding droop in his shoulders as he finally rasped out his answer.

Shinichi didn’t ask. "Thank you."

Yellowed teeth flashed in a snarl, but there was no real animosity in the gesture. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for him. Sometimes it helps just to know somebody's looking for you, that someone out there cares."

_I wonder_, Shinichi thought, privately.

“Some of my kids say they saw him around about a week ago. They tried to snag him, but he said he didn’t need any help. He was hanging around the old fish garage on the docks, about six blocks from here, for two days. They haven’t seen him since."

The “old fish garage” was actually another old, abandoned building that had been given up as a lost cause after an incredibly bad, and ill attended, mold infection spoiled the stock that was processed there. For months it had been up for demolition, but the project would not begin for another two; however, as Shinichi stood in the dust and gloom after jimmying the lock to slip inside, he realized that the building might not even last that long.

More importantly, there were vestige signs of an inhabitant underneath the rusted stairs. A stained blanket and pillow had been carelessly thrown on the grimy floor, and junk food bags and tinfoil were haphazardly scattered about, left to attract ants and possibly mice, if the holes chewed through them were to be taken at face value. After some shifting around, he pulled out a backpack, stuffed with worn and unwashed clothing and odorously beginning to stink, from under an overturned steel barrel.

Most interesting was the tale told by the disturbances in the dust built on the floor. A single path of overlapping footsteps carved through the building, suggesting that Satoshi had taken the same route in and out of his temporary shelter several times, but elsewhere were scatterings of much larger prints, likely from differently people all in the building at the same time. They lead to overturned equipment and mindless destruction and vandalism, and most ominously, to Satoshi’s bedding.

Shinichi’s jerk impression was that a gang had stumbled their way in and caused chaos, but instinctively, it rang false. From the entire room he received the impression of extreme fear,
cruelty, but no anger or amusement, or excitement. Physically, it presented a clear picture of teen vandals; emotionally, it suggested a job performed with cooler heads and colder hearts, detached and unvested in their actions. More than that, he noted the graffiti was not at all like the style of any of the local gangs and delinquents, and more stereotypical, like what an adult might suspect street art was supposed to look like, rather than what it actually resembled. Whoever made the markings was also likely to be inexperienced with spray-paint, considering the smudging and failure to apply the correct number of layers, and just generally made amateurish mistakes too often to be well practiced.

And the footprints. The marks of the soles had faded, probably four or so days old, but he could still recognize that sneakers did not make them: they were the wrong shape. From the markings he could still distinguish, he assumed they were made with practical business shoes.

Whatever had happened here, it was not gang violence.

Shinichi took detailed pictures of everything, careful to not disrupt as much as possible, before giving the whole building another search, to just ascertain that Satoshi really was gone.

He found nothing more of interest.

And then, suddenly, the Earth began to shake. The whole building seemed to rattle ferociously, foreboding groans of an unsteady structure on the verge of collapse blocking out all other noise. Horrified, he dashed for the exit, deciding that running across unsteady ground and risking tripping and injuring himself was better than remaining in the rickety building any longer, lest the roof cave in on top of him.

When he burst back out into the street, stumbling over his own feet and unsteady with the added weight of his bag, Shinichi froze.

It wasn’t a natural earthquake, he realized. Such an occurrence would be impossible, because the ground was shaking in intervals, a pattern he recognized as footfalls of something really ridiculously gigantic.

Above him, a block away at most and closing steadily, stories high and billowing, was a gargantuan inferno of flame and smoke and what vaguely appeared to be some sort of molten figure underneath the violently red licks of fire. It moved with swinging, humanoid steps that seemed to take a great deal of effort, with moans, more akin to a landslide rumbling than anything a person’s vocal chords could produce, pronouncing every shuddering step.

Seemed like he was right about the impending doom descending upon the city.

But whatever it was, it was making its way towards him.

Meaning, Shinichi had to the hell out of there, right away. He sprinted away from the docks and the warehouses, noting that the humongous, walking lava flow must have begun somewhere in the same district, as surely he otherwise would have felt the vibrations in the ground before it could get so close.

Ahead of him, a police car careened around a corner, sirens blaring. For once, Shinichi thanked whatever bad luck constantly attracted law enforcement to him like moths to a lantern, and threw his arms into the air, waving madly.

Screeching to a sudden stop, the car and its occupant barely waited long enough for him to throw open the door and swing himself in before rearing off again, shrieking down the road. The officer
behind the wheel was vaguely familiar, and staring between him, the impending disaster, and the street with wide, unnerved eyes.

"Kudo-kun!" The woman grunted, hands tight on the steering wheel.

"Hey," Shinichi said, cracking a smirk at the driver, before going back to apprising the most recent assailant of the city.

"Hi—No! I mean, grab the radio for me!"

Shinichi snatched up the transceiver of the radio, tuning his focus onto the flurry of words coming through the speakers; thankfully Megure’s voice was mixed in somewhere, barking orders. Recalling the identification of the vehicle he saw for half a moment, he prattled of the car’s ID code into the receiver, before beginning his spiel. “This is Kudo Shinichi, with Traffic Police Sergeant Naeko Miike. Megure-keibu, can you hear me?”

"Kudo-kun! What are you doing—"

"No time for that, Inspector. Tell me, do you have visual on the threat?"

"We’re just arriving now—by god, is that—"

“A giant, walking inferno? It would seem so.” Shinichi replied, worry twisting his gut. The monster, or whatever it was, was without a doubt immensely dangerous, and the city was buzzing with activity at this time of day on the weekends. Thousands of lives, if not millions, were very suddenly in danger.

He unpacked the video camera he used for live streaming broadcasts and deftly turned it on, beginning to film the scene through the window of the still speeding patrol car. The more people made aware of the current situation, whether across the country or just in the city, the better. It was possible people within the danger zone thought the shaking of the Earth was simply an earthquake, like he initially believed, and not some kind of flaming Godzilla leisurely taking a stroll through Haido Park.

"Where are you now, Megure-keibu?"

"The corner of 78th and Teiba!"

"Alright, we’re heading there now!"

"Hold on, Kudo—"

Moments later, Shinichi was bursting out of the vehicle and joining Megure on the sidewalk, blocks away from the monstrosity, camera still running. The inspector raised a disapproving eyebrow, but there was little time for reprimands in this desperate situation.

“We need to broadcast an emergency evacuation notice.” He suggested sternly, but Megure was on the ball.

“Already working on it.” He grunted back, before turning to his men, “Get some copters in the air! I want eyes on this thing!” The Inspector barked, to both the handful of men that accompanied him there and the radio receiver clenched in his fist. It was not exactly in his jurisdiction to demand such a thing, but Shinichi figured that Superintendent Matsumoto was probably already thinking along the same lines.
“Sir,” Takagi called, face creased with worry, communicating with someone over the other radio in the police car, “There’s a helicopter near us right now that the Superintendent wants you on.”

“Good, get it down here.”

Shinichi frowned, eyes still tracking the lumbering, smoking atrocity in the distance. “Wouldn’t it be best if you had cameras up there to broadcast the scene, so people know what’s going on? Right now, the whole city is liable to descend into panic.”

Megure eyed him, already knowing what harebrained scheme he was suggesting, but Takagi was less quick on the uptake.

“Yes, but unfortunately, we don’t have time to retrieve the necessary—”

“I’ve got the equipment right here.”

Both police detectives frowned, but there were no other options. The evacuation notice need to be made immediately. There were no further arguments as the descending aircraft whipped the air around them into a frenzy.

From up in the air, the disaster was all the more apparent, and thankfully more observable. Perfect for a live broadcast.

And, of course the whole situation in general was entirely convenient for him. Camcorder out and held steady, directed at the flames below, he began, “This is Kudo Shinichi bringing you live coverage of Tokyo’s newest disaster. About five minutes ago, fires broke out in a warehouse off of Main Street, quickly escalating into an all out explosion. In the center of the blaze, a huge shadow can be seen but has not yet been identified. I’m here with Megure-keibu, who will now advise us on the emergency protocol of this situation.”

He directed the camera to the Division Head, who nodded curtly and spoke, clearly and authoritatively, “All citizens within three kilometers of this event should immediately evacuate to the nearest shelter. All hospitals and schools have already been contacted and advised. All citizens outside of the immediate radius should remain indoors and keep calm. Please tune in with your local news stations and wait for further information, directions, and police bulletins.”

Shinichi turned the camera to himself to quickly detail the addresses of all shelters within four kilometers for those that were unaware. Outside the helicopter, the fires rose higher and were spreading over to the adjacent buildings as the figure within them stirred. A roar tore through the city, a bellow of animalistic fury and pain, followed by an explosion so furious their transport was knocked backwards by the force of it, teetering in the air. He held desperately to the leather grip above him during the sudden lurch, his grip on the camcorder hard.

When they steadied, he directed the camera back out the window, capturing the image of the great figure rising up from the smoke, standing sixty stories tall and spanning the width of a skyscraper. The flames seemed to cloak it, swathing around it in a fiery shield even as it lurched forward into the street directly. Alongside him, Megure-keibu let out a horrified gasp. “By god…” The flames swirled around, and if not for the obvious form of some kind of humanoid giant underneath the raging red and orange, he would think he was looking at a tornado of energy making its way downtown, towards thousands of undefended citizens.

The pilot in front seemed at a loss of what to do, until Megure directed him to move the helicopter
after the maybe-creature. They swung through the air after it, maintaining a hopefully safe distance above it, with Shinichi habitually, unthinkingly narrating the entire scene to his viewers. The blazing figure left behind pools of melted and cracked concrete with every huge, shuddering step. Each time it lifted its foot and put it back down, the whole city seemed to tremble. The smoke and heat rising from its form distorted the air and vision, and Shinichi could feel the hot touch of roaring flame on his face, even inside the helicopter. That...thing was positively blistering, way hotter than a normal house fire. Luckily the block seemed entirely vacated of all screaming, human life, and now other police helicopters were swinging around, and he could hear the distant sirens of fire trucks on their way.

He didn’t think they would do much good.

But he also believed they wouldn’t be necessary. Those guys were surely on their way already.

But that thought jinxed them, as the creature seemed to take notice of something for the first time; what could have been a head in the center of the blaze turned up, as if looking at the circling helicopters. It groaned, a horrible sound of crackling flame and pain, and lifted a flaming arm.

“Bank right!” Shinichi screamed, and the sheer authority in his voice caused the pilot to jerk the joystick right, bringing their transport into a sharp arc through the air. A trail of fire ripped suddenly through where they were just hovering, the heat singing the helicopter’s side. They had escaped the first attack, but they were not safe yet.

The monster was preparing round two, the flames along its arm pulsating dramatically for another shot.

“Down! Go down!” Shinichi barked, but there was no time. The pilot forced their elevation down a few meters just as a second blast of fire roared towards them, a meteor that would swallow them whole.

The reporter calculated the trajectory. The shot was too high, going to go right over their head, but the rotors were going to be caught in—

He was too late. The fire passed right by the nose of the helicopter, catching the rotors and blasting one off along with a portion of the roof. The helicopter shuddered, and then began to fall, the single rotor left sending them careening through the air as the vehicle spun wildly right, before shutting down completely. They rolled and turned, and Shinichi suddenly wished he had buckled up properly. Thrown from his seat, the whole world spun before his eyes and distantly, he could hear Megure yelling. But then all the colors changed and he was no longer being rattled, as if he was on a rollercoaster, and instead he was freefalling. He plummeted down, face up, and could see the melted, open top of the chopper, and the hole he had apparently slipped right through.

Shit, shit, shit. If only he had a parachute, a glider, anything besides the stupid camcorder in his hand.

Where the hell were those idiots?

He had roughly four seconds before he hit the ground. Shouldn’t his life flash before—

And suddenly, there were arms around him, first falling with him before slowly pressuring, gently reducing their acceleration completely before reverse their direction entirely, heading back up.

A masked girl with long brown hair smiled down him while readjusting her grip, so that she had one arm under his knees and the other supporting his back as they floated upwards. “You alright?”
His savior asked, and he almost, *almost* blushed, because wow, she was always so damn pretty, but managed to keep his expression under control.

“Yeah, but you guys sure took your time getting here.”

She laughed sweetly, and he almost groaned. God, this girl. “Sorry about that. I’m gonna pass you to Hawk, just stay relaxed and loose, alright?”

“Yes, but you guys sure took your time getting here.”

Shifting in Hawk’s grip, he tried to get a better shot of her rescuing the Division One head, but a disapproving noise reminded him to keep still. “Oi, I could drop you.” Hawk reminded, clearly not even remotely pleased with the situation.

“You won’t.” But Shinichi reached up to grip the line supporting them anyway, not particularly interested in relying on Hawk for anything, ever. He could almost hear the hero’s eyes rolling behind the mask. The jet supporting them slowly drifted through the air, dragging them over a building that was thankfully not on fire and to the creature’s back. Hawk dropped him there none too gently.

“Stay here, don’t move, don’t do anything suicidal, and please, please stay out of the way. I mean it.” Hawk promptly commanded, tossing Shinichi something shaped like a small boomerang, “Use this if you absolutely have, and I mean *have*, to get off this roof and the stairs aren’t an option. Emergencies only!” It was made to look like a bird, but in reality it was more like a grappling hook gun, as Shinichi knew from experience.

“You said that last time. I know.”

Hawk made a very frustrated and exasperated noise, like a strangled cat. “And you still didn’t listen!” He seemed ready to go on a full out tirade, but a notable explosion in the distance behind him stole his attention away. “Emergencies only! And stay here! At the end of this, if this building is still standing, I better find you on top of it!” He was still shouting even at the black plane pulled away from the rooftop, back towards the battle, and his voice faded out, no doubt still fussing. Knowing the hero wouldn’t see it, Shinichi took great deal of pleasure in rolling his eyes as dramatically as he could manage.

As if, there was reporting of the truth to be done.
Would You Fight For Me

The buzzing in the back of his mind focused him, sharpening his vision and hearing to the point where the city flowing beneath him was startlingly clear in perfect, vibrant clarity. The scent of burning asphalt and smoke was thick in his lungs, only a slight hint of the more recognizable human scent he was familiar with remaining. The ordinary odors of the city were nearly entirely lost beneath the overwhelming stench of ash and burning.

Saguru gripped the line connecting him to the jet all the tighter, alarms blaring within his head. The endless instinctual whisper of warning, warning, warning was nearly nauseating. The massive, burning creature that was carving its way further into the city was well beyond his pay grade, and his danger sense made sure he knew it, blaring like sirens reverberating through his skull. Adrenaline was already coursing through his veins, but there was little he could do but shift his gaze around, searching for wayward citizens. Evidently, Shinichi's evacuation broadcast had been effective, and the area in closest proximity to the monster was entirely abandoned, and the blocks further out were quickly emptying, panicked and apprehensive citizens fleeing away from the mobile volcano bearing down upon them.

Heliopause swept up alongside him, mouth turned in a ferocious scowl. "We need a way to stop that thing. If it keeps moving, it'll reach the higher population areas."

If such a huge, heat-radiating threat entered into the actual population dense areas of Tokyo, it would be a complete disaster. In a way, the emergence of this freak from the sparsely inhabited warehouse district had been a blessing.

"Considering its current pace, it'll reach the center of Tokyo in the hour. We have to stop it here, but where is it going? What's it after?" He wondered aloud, wishing for a way to deduce such answers. Unfortunately, psychoanalysis was rather difficult when the subject was obviously more disaster than human, and somehow he doubted he would be able investigate this particular crime scene all that thoroughly at a later time.

Maybe Shinichi's footage could be useful when it eventually came to that, but for now, he needed to focus on the battle ahead.

As if Hattori knew that his mind had raced too far ahead, Hattori snarled. "Like that matters right now!" Furious and reckless as ever, Hattori was streaking away in a blur of black towards the foe an instant later, light pulsating from his form. The blazing abomination took notice of the incoming assailant immediately, with whatever eyes or senses it apparently had, and turned its attention away from the fleeing helicopters buzzing in the air above. With a great, laborious movement, it hefted up an arm and launched another meteorite-like projectile, straight into the hotheaded hero's flight path. With barely even a pause, Hattori launched his own attack right back, yellow energy enveloping his hands and bursting forward. The force of the energy strike scattered the molten rock into dust, and Hattori shot right on through.

"Take this, ya overgrown campfire!" He roared, a second blast erupting from his hands and into the creature's head—or at least what seemed to be its head. The whole figure shuddered backwards but did not collapse, and instead surged forward anew, with a ferocious, earth-shaking shriek.

It swung its blazing arms forward, straight at its assailant, who had clearly moved in far too close. Hattori was his hit hard with what essentially equated to a falling mountain, and was shot backwards like bullet amidst dust and rubble into the surrounding cityscape.
"Oh hell no!" Someone shouted, a ghostly figure sweeping alongside the side of monstrosity while it was distracted. From her mouth burst forth a terrible, sharp, ear-piercing scream that made even the far-off Saguru shudder and hastily activate the noise cancelling function of the comms in his ears. His super-senses did not mix well with Banshee's own abilities; thankfully, Prof. Sun had invented a sort of cancellation device to prevent Saguru from being deafened by his own teammate. The monster had no such support, and flinched backwards with a horrible moan, aborting its attack to attempt to cover what would be its ears if it had a more humanoid form.

"Now, Tsuyu!" Saguru yelled into his communicator. "We need you now!"

"I need more time!" The girl responded, strain making her voice tight over the line. Inwardly, he cursed, they didn't have more time! If they had been more prepared for...whatever this was from the start, this battle and the ensuing chaos would long be over already. The Overseers had warned them of an impending attack on Tokyo, but not even their best informants could seem to pinpoint exactly what kind of threat was about to strike, or where, or how, or who was responsible. They knew nothing specifically, the few clairvoyants in the organization had been unable to discern anything, but technically, since they did have a warning of sorts, they had time to prep. Which meant, failure was unacceptable.

But this wasn't within the parameters of any of their expectations.

Still, they could do this. Or rather, they had to.

"Angel, can you take that thing head-on?" Saguru asked, and Ran's melodious voice came echoing back to him over the hum of the comm.

"For a couple minutes, maybe!"

The monster had recovered from Kazuha's sonic screams, but so had Hattori, having peeled himself from the crumbled skyscraper wall that he'd been smashed into like a swatted fly. Ran was now flitting around alongside the Osakan hero, who was smoking with power and fury, and together they wound around the fiery strikes the disaster rained down. While they managed to avoid being struck while showering their own attacks upon it, the wild waving of the inferno's arms and the small comets that shot from it were tearing apart the surrounding city. A single strike crushed sturdy, stout building as if they were made of plastic building blocks rather than stone and metal.

This couldn't go on; just the damage alone was intolerable.

And he had left Shinichi on one of those buildings.

A rush of fear rushed down his back, compounding the ringing in his head. "It's destroying everything! You have to stop it!" He barked at the other two, feeling helpless. He could pilot the jet, armed with missiles and turrets, but there was too much of a risk of those striking their surroundings instead of the enemy if he dared shoot them. And that was a debilitating lawsuit waiting to happen. And they had all seen what that thing had done to the helicopter.

Equally frustrated, Hattori snapped right back. "Easier said than done!" But he shot forwards anyway, streaking up underneath the beast's arm as it descended upon a building that was, for the moment, still standing. Rippling with power so bright Saguru had to look away, he caught the arm plummeting down upon him head on.

It was a completely, utterly idiotic plan, considering Hattori didn't have any sort of super strength. Thankfully, Ran, who did, was there to back him up. They made a good team against such an opponent, both solar fueled but with different results. Ran absorbed sunlight and became a sort of
battery, and the energy granted her super-strength, flight, and near-invulnerability. She was an absolute powerhouse, capable of sending opponents twenty times her size flying half a block with a single punch. But the heat radiating off the creature would be a problem even for her, sapping her energy as her powers struggled to keep her from burning right up.

Hattori, on the other hand, being an absolute hothead, only grew stronger from contact with the blazing inferno. He burned hotter than almost everything, all the power of a dwarf star packed underneath his skin, and practically altering him into living plasma carefully contained in human form. He even had his own gravity, and was so dense that he could take even the harshest of hits without injury.

But though they could take the monster's blows, and bat it around right back, they had no way to actually stop the thing. Together, Ran physically shoving, and Hattori firing magnesium-bright plasma blasts in a constant stream above his head, they managed to turn back the monster's arm, sending the whole inferno toppling backwards.

_Idiots._

The sixty-story tall and _tons_ heavy creature came down like a lava-hot rockslide, crashing back on the street with a force that shook the whole city. Its waving arms smashed two stout buildings on the way down, reducing them to mounds of melted rubble and bubbling concrete.

Saguru told them to _stop_ further destruction of the city, _so of course_ they went and caused some more. Why not? Instead of pointing out their mistake, he focused on what could be done right then and left tearing them apart to later. "Banshee, keep it down!" At his order, Kazuha came bouncing back into the battle, pin-balling between half-collapsed buildings and rippling with gathered energy.

"Ya got it!" She chirped back, before taking a very deep breath. Knowing what was coming next, he reactivated the noise cancelers in his ears, just before she let out a long, deafening wail.

Again the city shuddered, but this time with the force of her prolonged sonic scream, and the downed monster screamed right back, like an erupting volcano, all noise, ash, and collapsing rock, as it writhed in pain.

When her wail broke off, out of breath, the fallen creature seemed to slump in relief. A sharp intake was the only warning it got before the torture resumed, another horrible screech bursting from her lungs.

"Alright, I'm almost there!" Aoko's voice came through over the comm, tight but determined. In an instant, all three of the heroes pulled away from their opponent, shooting further up in the air. "Here it comes!"

First, they heard the roar of a torrential downpour or rumbling waterfall. Then, like a tsunami thundering across the coast, a great mass of water burst onto the street from the East. Black, brown and crested with white, the wall of seawater crashed over the giant blaze in a flurry of steam and swirling waves. In the center of the chaotic surf rose a figure in blue and white, her soaking wet hair clinging to her neck and face as her hands cut through the air like a maestro conducting.

At Aoko's direction, the water swirled and swelled up, spinning viciously around the stunned fire colossus, until the waterspout stood over two hundred meters high and a quarter as wide. The vortex entrapped the howling monster, an entire river's worth of water pouring down upon its searing hot form, as steam billowed upwards into the forming Cumulonimbus cloud above. But the condensation funnel did not abate. Its mistress may have been straining to control so much water...
with precision, but she was determined all the same.

Aoko was that kind of person; once she set her mind on something, she would pursue it with everything she had and then some. Stubborn to a fault and as unstoppable as the tide, she created a disaster of her own right in the downtown streets, having forcibly carried the water kilometers to this point entirely by herself.

It was an impressive feat; one she had never performed before. Most days she only manipulated a couple gallons of water that she had to carry with her, or pulled from pipes or fountains. At most, on a particularly crazy day, she wielded enough to fill a pool, but this, *this* was definitely the furthest she had ever pushed her powers.

They all could only stare as the inferno was slowly extinguished inside the tornado of water, leaving behind a charred black giant. As the water descended down, so did what remained of the monster, crumbling in on itself like charcoal in an ash pit.

It was over.

And Aoko collapsed boneless to the ground, chest heaving with rasping breaths.

"Tsuyu!" Ran yelled, panicked, as she shot towards the other heroine, who laughed weakly over the comm.

"I'm okay. Just—" She gasped for breath between each word. "Just exhausted."

He couldn't blame her, but there was one problem with that.

She didn't have the energy to control the water anymore.

The waterspout, which had been slowly slackening under her direction, suddenly broke down, pouring down in a torrential rain of filthy water. Ran shot forward and snatched Aoko off the street before the flood hit, washing over their collapsed foe with the force and mass of a broken dam. Whatever remained of the giant dissolved into sludge as tainted seawater rushed down and through the streets, over the rubble and filling the buildings that had managed to remain standing.

To be frank, it was a disgusting mess. The water damage alone would take weeks to repair.

And most of that water, and the monster it had defeated, would gradually flow right into the sewage system. Saguru couldn't even guess what sort of contaminates were in it, but certainly they were bad enough to considered an ecological disaster of their own right.

With a sigh, he directed the jet back to the building where he had left a certain reporter. It was still standing, and surprisingly, Shinichi was still there, watching his approach with keen eyes and armed with a camera and microphone.

Oh god. He should just turn the jet around and *run*, but no doubt would Shinichi write a particularly scalding editorial about *that* if he did.

So he took a deep breath and prepared himself to face an onslaught of questions that would probably be sharper and more piercing than arrows.

At least the other had done as he said and had remained there—no, wait he hadn't. There was a distinct sheen of sweat on Shinichi's brow and a flush in his cheeks. Shinichi had been busy, buzzing around the area for the best action shots, evidently, and only returned here to for a chance to put Saguru on trial.
"That was quite the spectacle," Shinichi said blandly as Saguru dropped down on to the roof. He was looking distinctly unimpressed, but Saguru knew that that was more his resting face than anything else; or rather, Shinichi Kudo spent his entire life rather unimpressed and unenthused by the people around him.

"These things tends to be flashy." Saguru tried to say dismissively, but it came out flat. Shinichi gave him a baleful look, and lowered the camera.

Saguru struggled to not openly slump in relief.

No, wait—Shinichi turned on his heel and went over to the big shoulder bag he left with that morning, pulling out pieces of a tripod.

"Care for an interview?" Shinichi smirked, and Saguru wanted to balk and back out, but held his ground instead. They had done this countless times before, Saguru would never forget the first time: when he was twelve and an amateur and really shouldn't have left his boss's side as often as he did, and found himself cornered by his own boss's sharp-eyed son. The aftermath of that graceless interview would have been far more disastrous had Shinichi been a more reputable reporter at the time, instead of a kid with too many resources at his fingertips.

Instead, he flashed a smile of his own, forcing up the confident air he wore when on a case. God, he would take a good mystery over this right now. "Apologies, but I really must decline." He tried to make the denial sound as casual as possible, as if he wasn't that intimidated little kid anymore.

Shinichi sighed through his nose and set up the tripod with quick, practiced movements. Thankfully, his bright eyes were turned away, back to the desolated cityscape.

For a moment, Saguru counted himself lucky that Shinichi didn't push the issue.

He should have known better. Because when he looked behind him, he saw Hattori blazing towards them like a particularly vibrant rocket.

"Yo, Kudo! Saw ya take a dive there! Ya alright?" Hattori asked, cementing himself as an epitome of sensitivity, and still ignoring Saguru entirely.

"Just fine, thanks to Angel," Shinichi replied, taking the comment with his usual grace, meaning Hattori got a look so scalding it made plasma blasts seem cold. "Seems like one of you can do something right, at least."

Saguru nearly groaned aloud, because he knew exactly where this was going, and Hattori pulled back, shoulders shooting up defensively. "That's that supposed to mean? We beat the monster, didn't we?" The issue with hotheads, Saguru felt, was that they were predictable. They were easy to lead, because they reacted to things emotionally before critical thinking could catch up to them. And Hattori Heiji, for all his intelligence, was first and foremost an absolute hothead.

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there. It would be difficult to retrieve whatever remained of the hellish creature, considering even
the initial sludge had been swept away in the torrential downpour. The Overseers probably would
want samples for testing, and Saguru was going to have to look his seniors in the eyes and tell them
to check the sewers.

"Come on, we stopped that thing! Without us, that thing would have stomped all over Tokyo!"

"Oh really? It seems like about seven minutes into the battle, Angel and you knocked over the
monster and caused an immense amount of property damage, particularly to the Higo Foods
storage facility. How do you intend to apologize to the building's owners and the people who
worked there?" Of course Shinichi hadn't missed that. Shinichi didn't miss anything.

"Hey now, we were savin' the city! The beast would have destroyed it on its own anyway!" It
didn't take a detective to tell that Hattori's temper was mounting. The air around them even turned
notably warmer.

Shinichi, though, didn't even sweat in the face of an angry human solar flare. It took more than a
couple degrees to melt this iceberg, apparently. "Maybe, but there were at least seven other
strategies you could have pursued to avoid the additional destruction. Why didn't—"

"We had to do something!"

"Tell that to the people." And there it was. The trap snapped shut, and Hattori was hooked. And
Saguru was way too exhausted to stop it.

"Fine! I will! Turn that thing on right now!" Hattori shouted, pointing at the camera, which
Shinichi quickly flicked on with a satisfied smirk. Shinichi held out the microphone to Hattori, who
tried to reel himself back in before he ended up growling at thousands of viewers.

"Heliopause here to tell y'all that the city is safe." He started, first, before pausing to cough. Saguru
made the note to have everybody check their lungs once they returned to base. They all probably
inhaled their fair share of smoke. "Downtown got a bit messed up, and we're real sorry about the
damages. We're sorry the facility got crushed, but we did what we had to do to save everybody's
lives. Everybody can work together to handle the aftermath after, but in battle, we had to take that
thing down before it could hurt anybody else!" Hattori turned towards him. Don't do it, don't do it
—"Right, Hawk?" And the idiot did it.

Shinichi turned the camera and microphone Saguru's way, only the slight turning of his lips giving
away his amusement.

Saguru coughed as well, to cover his dismay. He could tell they were both laughing at him.

"Yes, that it correct." He said into the microphone, carefully looking into the camera's lens. "The
Overseers with release an official statement at a later time, but for now I can say this: Tokyo is
once again safe for its populace. We, the Irregulars, are here to protect the people." It was a good,
neutral statement. Years of practice at work.

Satisfied, Shinichi pulled back the microphone and turned towards the camera himself. "Thank you
very much, gentlemen. This is Kudo Shinichi with an exclusive interview with the Irregulars, stay
tuned for a complete report on today's catastrophe."

It took Hattori a solid fifteen seconds to catch up and realize what happened, before he stumbled
out of the camera's view, dragging Saguru with him. "Damn. He tricked me again, didn't he?"

Saguru took a page out of Shinichi's book and didn't ever dignify that with a response. "Just get in
They returned to base together, all slumped in their designated seats in the jet. It had been a tiresome battle for most, but Saguru was fine: he'd spent almost the entire time rescuing civilians who had gotten caught up in the wreckage. Even as the jet pulled into the base's hangar, he was still buzzing with unspent energy.

The Night Baron was waiting for them in the hangar, face hidden behind the perpetually grinning white mask. It was impossible to guess at his mood, but knew that would be true whether the mask was on or off: Yuusaku was a man that thrived on leaving people wondering.

"Mission complete, sir," Saguru said, as the rest of the team filed out of the plane at a snail's pace, obviously exhausted. They lined up before the boss, barely managing to stand at attention. Aoko kept tilting to one side, barely keeping on her feet, and Hattori was visibly slouching, a dazed look about him. Ran and Kazuha were comparatively more energetic, but that didn't mean much when the competition were practically dead on their feet.

The Baron gave them each a long look, before reaching up and slipping off the mask, revealing an easy smile. "Good work. I'm glad to see you all back uninjured." For such a high-stakes battle, they had come off easy this time. Only Ran and Hattori had taken a hit, and thanks to their advanced durability, the most they had suffered were a couple bruises and burns. If any of the rest of them had gotten hit by the burning-hot monster, they'd probably be dead.

"Yessir. No damage to the jet either." Saguru pointed out.

Yuusaku nodded, looking pleased, though Saguru couldn't even hazard a guess at whether he was genuine or not. "Good, good. Alright, full debrief in the conference room in thirty minutes. Take a rest and get something to drink, alright?"

The team notably relaxed at those words, happily stumbling off to go collapse on whatever couch or comfortable-enough looking surface they could each find. Saguru knew better to relax, the easier Yuusaku went on them directly after a mission, the harder he'd be on them a little later. Before any of them could get too far, he called after them sternly, "and I want everyone to remember to visit the med room for a lung check!"

A chorus of affirmative grunts were thrown back at him, and Saguru and Yuusaku watched them go with measuring eyes. As soon as the rest of the team was gone from sight, Yuusaku turned Saguru's way with a more grave expression.

"Initial report?"

"It was a messy battle. Hattori and Ran—" Yuusaku raised an eyebrow. "I mean, Heliopause and Angel made some rash decisions in the middle of battle, but for the most part handled themselves well against a foe over a hundred times their size. Still, Heliopause's temper and his showing off detracted from his contribution, and Angel still has a tendency to act first, think later." Personally, Saguru felt they had done well, on such limited time, information, and manpower. Teams of their size and age weren't usually capable of taking such disaster-level threats head-on. But he couldn't let pride blind him to their faults. "Banshee did well incapacitating the opponent at the right times, but still needs to remember to warn me before she screams. Tsuyu did remarkably well, considering her inexperience, but not well enough. She couldn't hold it together until the very end. We need to work on her endurance."
Yuusaku nodded, before giving Saguru a scrutinizing look. "And you?"

"Need to show better blow-by-blow leadership. If I was more quick to call the shots, almost everything I just said could have been avoided." Often, in the middle of battle, his senses got so keyed up that he wasted time absorbing it all. As a result, he tended to default back to silently observing his enemies, a habit long ingrained from acting as the Night Baron's sidekick, instead of directing his team.

It was an honest self-critique, one that seemed to satisfy Yuusaku. There was even a slight smile pulling at his mentor's lips, which did make Saguru feel better about the day's events. "Alright. Take a break, and then come back with the others. We'll talk about the rest then."

The conference room was Spartan in design and ominous in its size. Large, expansive, but mostly empty, it had harsh lights and walls lined with monitors, and single, long silver table around which they sat in hard chairs. In the front of the room was one large screen, big enough to span nearly from wall to wall.

It was also the least liked room in the entire base, but Yuusaku, for some reason, seemed fond of it. And Saguru had not doubt that Shinichi would love the spacious, minimalistic practicality, not to mention the tech: hell, maybe that was why Yuusaku liked it.

For the most part, the mission debriefing went as usual, with each member of the team taking a turn to outline his or her contributions and reflections. For the most part they all had a good grasp on their own strengths and weaknesses, and well, Hattori and Kazuha were all too eager to point out each other's flaws. Breaking up that resulting argument had been a chore and a half.

And then Yuusaku, instead of taking the floor and critiquing them to hell and back, picked up a remote and pressed a single button.

Before them, the room-spanning screen lit up, revealing the familiar image of Shinichi, armed with a microphone, standing before a crumbling cityscape. One of his webcasted breaking news reports, and going by the time stamp at the top, the footage was as recent as an hour ago.

On camera, Shinichi's eyes were piercing, and his voice strong and clear. "Damages are currently estimated to be in the millions, if not billions." In the top right corner, a box displayed footage of the extensive damage dealt to the roads downtown. It was hard to imagine that the rubble on screen had been the same buildings they had seen standing earlier just hours before. "How this event will affect the upcoming elections, particularly the Vigilante and Crime Insurance policy debates, has yet to be seen. Without a doubt, we can expect this battle to be discussed by both fronts of the Proposition 38 debate, as well." The footage shown then changed to a scene Saguru remembered much more vividly: a great black jet hovering in the air above the city, and a trio of figures flitting about the molten golem. The angles kept shifting to display different clips of the fight, and part of Saguru wanted to groan in exasperation. Shinichi must have been hopping from building to building throughout the catastrophe; probably using the very same grappling hook Saguru had gave him. And, he couldn't help but notice the shots centered on the white-pink blur that was Angel more often than not.

Shinichi, continuing his report, didn't seem sheepish about it at all. "The sponsor of the Irregulars, the Night Baron, and the International Hero Society, aka the Overseers, have yet to release statements on the actions taken today." As a group, the five of them turned to look at Yuusaku, who was watching his son's report with an easy smile. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

"Several apartment buildings were caught in the crossfire here today, leaving an estimated three
thousand people without homes. The Disaster Recovery Charity has set up temporary shelters for the victims in the Shiodome Arena and the Marin's Coffee Convention Center. The destruction of countless other buildings has left many others without jobs or support. The Sumida River's water level has also dropped several centimeters due to the actions of Tsuyu, the most recent addition to the Irregulars." Next to him, Aoko shifted uncomfortably, as the footage changed to show her, a small figure clad in blue, and the great wave of black-grey water rushing behind her. There was something stunning about the shot of her in the midst of battle, wielding actual tons of water with precision and overwhelming power. She didn't look like an amateur or a newbie: she looked like a full-fledged superhero.

Shinichi's voice, unwavering and neutral, went on. "The water will likely have to undergo extensive decontamination and purification, and even afterwards, it is unlikely that it will be returned to its original water source. The ecological ramifications of this are as of yet unknown." As the report went on, each teenager began to gradually slump in their seats, abashed. Damage reports were always demoralizing, but this one was particularly rough.

"Alright, I think that's enough." Ran said, muting the sound. On screen, the report continued on, Shinichi's mouth opening and closing soundlessly, as they all turned to look at her. "I think we've all got a good idea of what we did good and bad this time."

"Excellent catch with my son. Not so excellent catch with the Higo Foods facility." Yuusaku summed up, perfectly. Ran and Hattori shifted uncomfortably, but Saguru was sure that they could turn the frustration and shame into something productive. "Aoko-kun, you did very good work today. Very impressive. However, when using such a risky tactic, you have to follow through. Either do it right, or don't do it at all." It was harsh, but Saguru couldn't disagree with the reprimand. When heroes took risks and failed, people who might not have been in the line of fire at all got hurt. As interfering parties, they were responsible for the consequences of their every action.

Aoko flushed, unused to the attention. Saguru gave her his best encouraging smile, which she returned weakly.

"Still, all in all, a much better show than the previous mission." Collectively, they all winced. Saguru didn't want to even think of their disastrous attempt at catching Kaitou KID. He still hadn't figured out just how the thief had jacked the jet, let alone managed to weasel through the state of the art electronic security system that assaulted even the Taskforce and the Irregulars themselves. It hadn't just been humiliating, but the jewels had yet to be returned. Considering KID's returns were usually almost immediate, he had probably pocketed this most recent haul for good. Which turned Saguru's mind to the other matter that he'd been mulling over.

When the dismissal was given, the others were quick to make their separate getaways. Saguru, though, hung back once again, which didn't seem to surprise Yuusaku at all. Casually, his mentor settled down as the table, steepling his fingers together.

"Shall we go over the heist again?" He asked, but Saguru shook his head.

"That won't be necessary, sir. But it is related to what I wish to speak with you about."

Yusaku pressed his lips together. It was a telling expression, one that suggested that he'd been expecting this, but not looking forward to it. "Alright, what is it?"

"Kaitou KID's identity, sir."

Saguru's mentor took a long breath through his nose. Those were the words he probably heard
more often than he'd like. "We can't do anything without proof, Saguru-kun. Unless we catch him in the act, it's out of our hands. You know the Overseers' regulations are very tight." Too tight, Saguru sometimes felt. He'd been raised to be respectful of rules and the law, but like any self-respecting teenager, Saguru had his own issues with authority.

But that wasn't the point, not now. "I understand that, sir. But it's important that the team at least know."

"Ah, this is about Aoko-kun." And there it was: the elephant in the room.

"Yes. Aoko-kun still doesn't acknowledge it." Saguru had suggested it to her more times than he could count. Casually, directly, cryptically: he'd tried every method he could think of to open Aoko's eyes to the truth. But something like pure-hearted faith, or maybe just denial, had made getting through to her practically impossible.

"She doesn't believe that her long time friend is a wanted criminal without evidence. It's understandable." Understandable wasn't necessarily the word Saguru would use.

"Yes," he agreed anyway. "That's why I ask that you tell her it's the truth. She might not believe it coming from me, but…" Saguru trailed off, letting the request stand for itself. Yuusaku turned in his chair, looking over at the screen, which was frozen on a still frame of his son. For a moment, they both said nothing.

Finally, though, Yuusaku looked back at him, with a grave expression. "You are worried that she may have a conflict of interest and jeopardize a mission?"

"Yessir." That was just one of his concerns. "And her continued interactions with him. He's been using her as a source of information on police activity, and sometimes even an easy in through security, for over a year. It's also a security concern. All of our identities are at risk, if they haven't been revealed already." Nothing quite induced paranoia like being in the same homeroom as a potentially dangerous, and possibly insane, criminal. Not that it was ever just paranoia when it came to the Kaitou KID. It wasn't paranoia when the thief really might jump him, shove him in small bag, and the flawlessly replace him with a clever disguise at any given moment.

Yuusaku nodded, and his eyes were hard and merciless. That gaze made even Saguru nervous, so he couldn't help but pity the poor fools that found themselves faced with the Night Baron on a cold, moonless night. "To be specific he's made her an unwitting accomplice in over thirty cases this year."

That caught Saguru by surprise. "You've already investigated this?"

"Of course." Well, he should probably have expected it. He'd never beaten Yuusaku in an investigation before. "And I agree, it has to stop. When KID is eventually caught, and his identity revealed, Inspector Nakamori will be lucky to get away with just being fired."

Saguru couldn't help but perk up. "So you'll speak with her?"

"Actually, I have another idea." He didn't like the smile Yuusaku flashed, not one bit. It made the Night Baron's grin look positively friendly.

News Advisories arrived in his mail everyday, cramming both the mailbox and his public email, and his work phone seemed to be constantly buzzing. Due to the constant influx of requests, he was forced to keep it on silent while in school, with an answering message instructing eager informants to leave a message with their pitch.
He usually responded to the ones that sound interesting immediately after soccer practice. Which was easy, because those were not as common as he would like. But that wasn't really a problem either, since he was inevitably bound to trip over some crime or scandal or something on his way home anyway.

Honestly, it was a miracle he made it to school at all, to be entirely honest.

Today, though, was Sunday, the day following the disaster, and there was already a total of six inviting him to cover the cleanup and disaster recovery operations beginning downtown. Normally, he would leave these cleanup jobs to the professional press, but as he was heading down anyway, he felt he might as well live stream the damage and encourage voluntary relief efforts from his viewers.

But standing before the melted rubble of what was once a street, camcorder in hand, the rush of terror that swept over him knocked his breath out like a punch to the gut. The anxiousness and dread that tinged the air and the cement was nearly overwhelming.

He sorted the feeling, categorized it. A raw sort of terror lingered in the air, matched only by the stench of soot, char, and melted asphalt; the fear of people staring up at something much larger and more dangerous than themselves, bearing down on them like an exterminator descending upon an anthill. More recently, adult worries radiated from the broken glass of the remainder of a shop window, the owner's concerns and despair over the loss of his only source of income spreading through Shinichi's fingers as he leant down to investigate the door, which seemed to have been forced open by someone much smaller than the monstrosity of yesterday.

Someone looted the place in the wake of the smoldering creature. They stepped on the glass and walked it into the wrecked shop, and the tables and pots were overturned in a way that is too unnatural to be the result of the earthquakes. Clearly much of what he presumed was valuable has been taken, based upon the empty shelves and disorganized desk.

He made these observations aloud, before stepping back into the harsh sunlight outside. Like the bright lights of an autopsy room, the sun seemed to bear down upon the desolate scene with uncaring harshness, reducing human tragedy to just another turn of the cycle of life and death.

Shinichi kept walking. This portion of the city was buzzing quietly with drawn faces and vain efforts to shift through the remains of what were once livelihoods. To his left a group of young college students, volunteers, moved chunks of molten asphalt with tremendous effort, while business owners tried to piece their door frames together and salvage anything left over.

To his right, in the shadows of the damaged buildings, there were others tucked into the alleys, peering out into the harsh sunlight with dark, furious eyes. He was careful catching them on camera, making sure that while they lingered in the background of his shots, they never seemed to be the focus. Best not to bring too much of their attention on to him.

He continued to trek along the edges of the line of the destruction, the immense footsteps sunk into the road like it was made of sand, not asphalt, occasionally pausing to interview the others lingering on the scene; dislocated city dwellers who no longer had homes, local students setting up water stands, the construction workers moving in to clear up the roads as much as they could.

They all had the same things to say; they always did. Disaster struck in this city far, far too often. Only a certain amount of desensitization and pure faith, maybe even foolishness, kept most people living here. Well, that and the terrible economy.

No doubt some incredibly high claims of the supernatural disaster and empowered malicious crime insurance were pending. Taxes would be upped too. The FDA would have to test the local bay to make sure the contaminated runoff hadn't made fishing in the waters into a poison hazard, so there
was a potential another thousand jobs lost.

It was emotionally exhausting just to think about all the consequences of a few hours of terror. There was a certain difficulty to sorting through the pain, compartmentalizing it, when all of it felt so far out of his control.

But thinking of what he came here to do and focusing on his objective helped; it was always easier to tackle problems one knew how to go about solving.

And that's why he followed the destruction all the way to the end, until he found the start, deep in the warehouse district. Only there did the destruction lead away.

This was where the monster first appeared. The area had been reduced to nothing but rubble studded with steel reinforcements and the remains of tattered buildings, a large crater in the center spanning seventy meters across. The surrounding buildings had all suffered, most completely caved in, and other with huge chunks blasted out of them, as if the monster had been swinging madly around.

By sight alone he couldn't decipher what the area had originally held, but the map app on his phone landed his position in the center of a factory belonging to some computer manufacturing company, TQ Electronics. Just blocks away from the warehouse he had been in yesterday—

In fact, according to the map, Satoshi's warehouse was directly in the line of destruction the monster had carved. Shinichi stared at his phone, and then checked the area again, a strange idea forming in his mind. The path the monster had taken through the city was strange: it didn't seem random, but didn't look entirely deliberate or planned either.

Shinichi investigated the area for a while longer, but there wasn't much he could find on his own in the wreckage. Which left one place left to go.

The route he had walked yesterday hadn't changed much, most of area being thankfully spared despite being so close to the disaster zone. That itself was a relief, he felt, as he looked up at the same dilapidated dwelling he'd been in just a little over twenty-four hours before.

Daichi met Shinichi at the entrance. "Figured you'd be back, after what happened yesterday." He grumbled, his arms crossed. He stood in the doorway like guard, but Shinichi paid it no mind, recognizing posturing for what it was.

"Is everyone alright?" Shinichi asked, peering around Daichi's larger form, trying to gauge the situation. For the most part, the quakes of yesterday seemed to have only disturbed some dust. At least, there was no sign of the ceiling caving in.

Daichi looked him in the eye and glared. His interest was clearly unappreciated."Yeah, the worst we got were a couple shakes. The kids were scared, but nobody got hurt."

"That's good." It was a relief to hear. Even if the golem hadn't trekked over this area, all it would take to endanger the residents of a dilapidated place like this was a good, long earthquake.

"Yep. Now leave." Daichi's voice was hard and sharp. He held his composure well, but not well enough. Shinichi could see the sweat on his brow, and the uneasy shifting of his stance. He was even more unhinged than yesterday.

"Not until you tell me what has you so scared." Shinichi said, resolute, and Daichi flinched slightly under his gaze. As tough as the other teen was, Daichi was still young, and still vulnerable, with a lot of younger kids counting on him. That kind of pressure and constant fear could break anyone
down. Daichi's defenses crumbled easily in the face of interrogation. "A fu—fricken' volcano just trampled everything a couple blocks over." Daichi tried, correcting his language out of habit crafted from endlessly trying to be a better influence, but his voice shook. His eyes were darting around, no longer able to keep eye contact.

"You were scared before that too." Shinichi pushed, sternly looking Daichi in the face. Backing down from this wasn't an option.

"Look, you're just here about that kid, right? I told you everything I know."

"I went to the warehouse. He wasn't there, but someone else had been. A group of professionals that roughed the place up, and as I suspect, took him." For what, Shinichi had every intention of figuring out. But the ideas already forming in his head were unnerving enough on their own.

Daichi flinched openly, face pale, and Shinichi forced his shoulders back down. With a softer, but still firm voice, he continued, "I know you, Daichi-san. Kids don't just disappear under your watch." Shinichi wasn't blind, he hadn't missed the scars scattered across Daichi's fists, arms, and face, not even on the first day they met. Scars like that only came from street fighting, taking too many hits without the proper protection or medical care afterwards. There was no doubt in his mind about what Daichi fought for. "And considering how anxious you are, I'm guessing that this isn't the first runaway that's suddenly disappeared," Daichi flinched again, teeth clenched and hands fisted. Pain lingered in the twists of his expression, and in the wet edges of his eyes. Shinichi's heart sunk. Not only was he right on the mark, but it seemed the situation was even worse than he originally thought. "How many, Daichi-san?"

For a moment, the question hung between them like a discarded cinderblock plummeting to the bottom of the ocean: heavy, slow, but inevitable. Daichi took a harsh breath, looking wrecked. The broken expression made him look years younger. "I—I don't know. Six, from this area. And others, from all across the city. Thirty, maybe forty, tops, from what I've heard on the streets."

Forty kids.

Forty vulnerable kids were snatched off the streets.

Shinichi had to take a breath, too, as horror twisted in his gut. Sort, compartmentalize, focus on the objective, he told himself, pushing away the horrible feelings that suddenly kept rushing in from Daichi, the building, the city itself. Disconnect.

"And since all these kids were technically already missing, you've got nothing for the police." He said once he'd gathered himself, and Daichi nodded, like he'd given up entirely.

"They wouldn't believe us anyway. Nobody has seen anyone get taken, and they leave nothing behind." No witnesses and no evidence. That meant only one thing: professionals, probably paid. But possibly not hired. Jobs like this weren't the kind of thing that freelancers could be trusted to keep quiet about.

"Were most of these kids taken from where they were staying?" Shinichi asked. If he could get to each crime scene, he might be able to notice something nobody else had, especially since it seemed unlikely anyone but a couple of scared, inexperienced kids had checked over each site.

"We don't know—probably. A lot of places have been burning down recently. A warehouse a few districts over went up in flames just a couple weeks ago. I know a group had been living there, but haven't heard from them since."
Missing persons, kidnapping, arson possibly committed by some organized crime group covering their tracks, and some connection to the destruction of a quarter of downtown. Just thinking about it made his blood pound.

"When did this start happening?"

"I don't know. The first one from here disappeared four months ago." Four months. That was a long time for kids to be missing, and an even longer time for a crime scene to sit undisturbed. Nevertheless, he had to try.

"I'm going to need names and places; and if you can't tell me them, I need you to tell me where to find someone who can."

The conversation from the day before weighed heavily on his mind. Yuusaku had said he'd think it over, but that didn't put Saguru at ease. It was frustrating, going to school six days out of the week, and having to face a wanted villain that sat in his classroom, spoke with his classmates, and mocked his teachers. Everyday, his skin crawled as he sat at his desk, knowing he was showing his back to one of the world's most clever criminals. Just attending class was an act that required constant vigilance and awareness of his surroundings, lest the thief get close enough to place a tracker, a bug, or any other kind of trap.

He spent every moment at school keyed up, unwilling to become a liability and security risk like Aoko, and on the look out for anything that could be evidence.

At least his enhanced senses helped. It was difficult to bug him without his knowledge, when he could sense even the slightest increase of weight and the shift of a single hair. It didn't matter how silently the thief could move, because it was physically impossible to move quietly enough to avoid Saguru's hearing.

Small mercies. But it didn't change that he'd have to do it all again tomorrow, or the part of him that wanted to, that reveled in the challenge. School certainly wasn't boring anymore.

But Saguru needed to catch KID. How could he ever surpass Yuusaku if he couldn't even catch a criminal in his own classroom? He'd never be the world's greatest detective like that.

The thoughts, plans, and insecurities spun in his mind, winding around in endless little circles. And like always, when he got anxious, his became far too aware of his surroundings, his senses ramping up to a near intolerable degree. His head pounded with each distant footstep and laugh, until he fled to the only guaranteed quiet room in the manor: the library.

The Kudo library was an impressive room: large, expansive, and well stocked. Soundproofed and peaceful, it had stolen Saguru's heart the moment he walked in nearly seven years ago. Ever since, it had served as a sort of sanctuary for him, a place he could sort through his thoughts and clear his head.

And it was special for another reason. After all, he wasn't the only one who found the quiet, still room comforting. As expected, he could hear the familiar, soft sounds. Even, gentle breathes, a strong, steady heartbeat, and the sweet turning of pages. Shinichi was lost somewhere in the shelves, as per usual.

Relaxing, Saguru made his way over, finding the other teen perusing a shelf of encyclopedias. Not an unusual choice of reading for Shinichi, who, like Saguru, absorbed information and facts like a sponge. But it did suggest that Shinichi was in a work mood, and probably didn't wish to be
Saguru was all right with that. He didn't really want to talk right then either.

Except, as he moved on, he heard a book snapping shut and Shinichi hurriedly looking up. "I need to talk to you," Shinichi called, and Saguru turned back, surprised. Shinichi rarely opened a conversation so seriously, not unless it was about a case. But school started up again the next day, and Shinichi had just finished up a massive scoop. There wasn't any time for picking up another case.

Unless, it was about the battle the day before, and the lead Shinichi has briefly mentioned.

He thought back to yesterday, to the sight of a form tumbling free from a careening helicopter, and his muscles tensed under the stiff fabric of his dress shirt. Shinichi shouldn't have even been in the line of fire, and as a civilian, he had no place in that copter on the front-lines. Which mean that somehow, something he was working on had led him there. And that made Saguru uneasy. "What about?" Saguru asked, and Shinichi met his eyes with a sharp gaze.

"A possible lead on the disaster yesterday." Not monster, disaster. It was unlike Shinichi to use such general terms; he was a man of specifics.

"A lead?" Saguru prompted carefully. He wasn't entirely sure he liked where this was going. Whatever happened yesterday, he was sure everyone would prefer if Shinichi stayed out of it.

"Yesterday, I started investigating the case of a runaway."

"A runaway?" Saguru repeated skeptically, without thinking. He'd been expecting something else: a murder, or scandal, or fraud. Not something as benign as a runaway. Shinichi gave him a disgruntled look at being interrupted, and Saguru raised his hands apologetically. "Sorry, I'm just surprised. You usually work much larger cases." Shinichi had a knack for finding the biggest, nastiest conspiracy in town, or the most convoluted homicide, or the most contrived kidnapping.

"No case is too small." Shinichi said, his bold posture not quite haughty, but far from humble. It was a pose Shinichi had apparently mastered from birth, because it had been just as polished and sure when they first met practically decade ago.

"And no case is too large either, right?" Saguru filled in the rest, and got another venomous look for his efforts. He stared right back, used to it. "Don't posture, we both know which kind you prefer." Shinichi had just returned from spending his holiday in India investigating structurally unsound factories, after all. Small time reporters just didn't do that, especially not ones in high school. Shinichi ignored the implications easily, shrugging them off with the ease and grace of a practiced interrogator.

"A runaway adolescent that was living in an abandoned warehouse by the docks disappeared from the streets roughly a week ago."

Saguru raised an eyebrow, not seeing where this was going. "So?"

"That warehouse was destroyed yesterday," Shinichi said, gravely, as he pulled out his camera and showed Saguru several pictures. Some were of an old, decrepit building, others inside it, in the gloom of dust, and the rest were of wreckage. So Shinichi had been in the area before the attack even began. No wonder he was able to respond so promptly.

"I'm not sure what you are saying. Half of that area was demolished yesterday." Shinichi's fingers fidgeted along the camera, drumming its edges, before they stilled. Saguru knew better than to
think it was a nervous motion. More likely, it bared Shinichi's impatience with him. "The...fire monster from yesterday appeared near or in a factory. From there, it destroyed the area, with no identifiable pattern." Shinichi explained, "but then, it made a beeline for the warehouse blocks away. It walked right over it and then did the same thing and started rampaging. From there on there was no sense to its movements, like it didn't know what to do."

"Kudo-kun, what you are saying—" Saguru tried to cut in, but Shinichi barely paused to allow him a word in.

"It was panicking. It started off confused, then tried to go to the warehouse, and once there, for some reason, started to panic." There, Shinichi stopped, eyes sharp on Saguru's face, judging his reaction, most likely.

For a moment, Saguru considered facts Shinichi was presenting, and the proposed hypothesis. While such a pattern of movement and behavior would suggest something of the like if the culprit were human, they weren't talking about a spooked crook or a confused civilian. The closest the inferno from yesterday was to humanoid was in its most basic form. It resembled a sort of flaming giant at the first glance, but it had to have been made up of some kind of dense, temperature resistant substance to not collapse in on itself, melting down like lava. There couldn't have been anything human about it, not unless it was something like Hattori, who had an ability that was so rare that it bordered on almost impossible. But Saguru wouldn't know the nature of Heliopause's abilities, only Hawk would.

So instead of complying, he dismissed the idea of it, as he would normally reject such out of bounds thinking. "What's your evidence for this? It sounds like wild conjecture." Shinichi pinched his lips together, eyes going suspicious and contemptuous. Saguru wanted to wince under the look, but held firm.

It was ridiculous, some days, this heartless charade, always keeping his mouth shut, and lying when Shinichi wanted honesty. It felt especially wrong to do it here, in the room where they first met and bonded as kids. These endless, half-accusatory, half-denying dances around each other were constantly pushing them all apart. There was a time when it hadn't been so hard, when they were both children with a limitless future, chasing each other around this huge manor and endlessly chattering about their favorite books. Back when Saguru didn't really grasp the severity of the secrets they kept, and didn't understand how painful lying could get. Years and age and a thousand little bitter things held against each other had piled up almost tangibly between them.

But despite it, they both kept trying to close that distance, kept on trying to connect.

Just like now, as Shinichi took a sharp breath, held the camera out to him again, and insisted, "Come look at the rest of the footage I took yesterday, and the birds eye view pictures of the destruction. You'll see that there's clearly—" But Saguru couldn't. Yuusaku had made it clear time and time again that they had to keep Shinichi as far out this life as possible.

It hurt, it was frustrating, but he pushed the camera away. "It sounds like coincidence, Kudo-kun. Aren't you drawing connections between two completely different events?" As he spoke, he could see Shinichi's already cold eyes grow icy, angry and fierce. He kept going anyway. "What possible link could there be between a missing kid and a walking volcano?" he said, like the idea of it was especially foolish, as if he were was mocking a politician on TV.

Shinichi tensed up, predictably insulted, but maturely didn't rise up to the attack on his intellect. "That's what I'm trying to figure out—"
"You're reaching. You want an excuse to stick your nose into what happened yesterday." That, at least, was true. Even if this theory was less crazy than it sounded, he had no doubt in his mind that Shinichi wanted the two events to be connected, wanted a reason to get involved. "But this is too dangerous. You should keep out of this one, focus on your schoolwork, or soccer. The regionals are coming up soon, aren't they?"

"This is more important than—"

"It is? Or do you just want it to be so you feel like you're doing something?" Coming from anyone else, the words might have been careless. But Saguru chose each deliberately, as they were the one's that would discourage Shinichi the most. "You can't be that confident in this theory of yours, or you would have brought it to your father. Instead you bring it to me." That was the fatal blow, metaphorically. A sure fire way to get to the usually invincible Kudo Shinichi: press the Yuusaku button.

Predictably, Shinichi's expression visibly twitched, hurt rippling across his face, before cold detachment fell back into place. "I didn't bring this case to father because I have every intention of solving it on my own." Shinichi said coolly, before storming away. It was a sadly familiar sight, these days. One that used to make Saguru wallow in guilt for days, but now had become something of a relief.

Alone again. He sighed. So much for peace and quiet: his head was pounding. But that conversation didn't leave his mind either, even as he tried to stop thinking and just relax over the course of the next few hours. He had dismissed Shinichi's theory—conjecture, whatever that was—easily out loud, but inside he wasn't so sure. Shinichi was fiercely intelligent and observant, and an excellent behavioral analyst. The other had proven his investigative ability a thousand times over, again and again, despite endless obstacles. In the end, Saguru had no choice but to consider his words, but the implications of them made something twist in his stomach. Shinichi was suggesting that the monster the day before had feelings, and that it had been rampaging not out of malice, but out of panic. It was too disquieting to think about.

As of yet, they had no leads on how the disaster had begun. For all intents and purposes, the inferno had seemed to just erupt in the downtown area with no warning besides some strange energy fluctuation in the whole area. The League had been monitoring the fluctuations for days, but had learnt nothing from the seemingly sourceless radiation. They hadn't been able to spare the manpower and effort to investigate the area on foot or in depth, and now they had paid for their inattention. A boy had disappeared last week. The fluctuations had begun in the same timeframe. Coincidence.

But was it ever coincidence when Shinichi was involved? He would have to look into it, if only to assure himself that for once, Shinichi was chasing the wrong scent.

And if Shinichi wasn't... Well, Saguru would just have to keep him out of trouble.
"And then KID-sama appeared! Like a star!"

_The star and the baron, dancing across the sky._

_the baron the baron is his father father father father_

"God, Ran, he was amazing! He just appeared out of the darkness under this spotlight!"

_A dark, empty room. A spotlight on the center. A spotlight on the star, the star is falling falling falling hitting the ground_

_White stained red, red seeping across the ground, glittering like ruby, ruby like the stone clattering free in the dark, dark like the baron the baron the baron killed-

"Everyone watching was like 'Woah!' Like, everyone was screaming."

_His own face reflected back at him on the other side of the stage, pale and slack with blue eyes wide open, open like the ceiling revealing the sky, revealing the face of the star no no no no father father_

"Even on the TV you could hear how loud it was. And the Irregulars just couldn't keep up! KID was in and out with the jewel in no time!"

_the baron the baron like a shadow, mask grinning grinning grinning, hands red with blood and ruby the ruby the ruby all this for a ruby_

"Alright, Sonoko, we get it."

_Murderer. Murderer murderer murderer_

_That's not his father._

_The baron is not his father._

"Really, because I'm pretty sure Kudo-kun here didn't listen to a word I just said."

Only half awake, Shinichi untucked his head from his crossed arms, blinking blearily in the bright afternoon light. Both Ran and Sonoko were watching him, Ran seated at a desk, Sonoko on top of it. "As if I could sleep through your obnoxious voice, Suzuki."

She made a face at him. "Oh look, he lives."

"I wasn't asleep." He'd barely even dozed, having just put his head down for a couple minutes as class winded down. His head had been spinning with thoughts and half-constructed plans and ideas and a lost boy's picture. As his mind had clouded, he felt like he remembered something, some distant recollection that came to him in the spaces between Sonoko's words.

What had he been thinking of? He felt like it had been important.
Sonoko snorted and slid off the desk. "Whatever. I've got to get to club. You should hurry, too, Kudo-kun." The brunette waved to Ran as she hurried off, following the last vestiges of their class out the door. Soon enough, it was just him, Ran, and the day's clean up crew dusting down the boards.

"Are you alright? Tired?" Ran asked, and her eyes were tracing his face. He hoped he didn't have imprints of his sleeves pressed into his cheek.

"I'm fine. That last class was just so boring."

"Well, the teacher wants to make sure everyone remembers what we learned before break. Not everyone has your memory." Ran smiled, showing him her notebook. The page was lined with careful notes. She hadn't always been such a dedicated student, but since she started missing more school this year, she'd started working harder in the classes she did make. If he had half her dedication to education, he'd be top of the class.

Well, she could use the grades on her school record, since she quit karate. A regional champion suddenly missing tournaments and competitions, and ultimately leaving the club entirely didn't look too good to universities.

Shinichi knew that one from personal experience. The soccer coach really wasn't going to be happy to see him after he skipped out on training camp again.

Together they moved out of the classroom to the lockers. He didn't feel guilty when he took out his sports bag anymore, but he could remember how he used to.

Ran looked at his bag, eying it suspiciously. It was bulky, but not in the right places for his soccer things. "You're skipping practice, again?" Ran gave him a disapproving look as she toed off her shoes, trading her indoor ones for her outdoor pair. "Honestly, Shinichi! The big tournament in coming up! Your coach is going to kill you!"

He shrugged. It wasn't like he had much choice. He almost didn't even bother coming to school at all, but he was already on the homeroom teacher's last nerve. If he skipped the first day after vacation, he'd probably spend all of the next day's classes outside with a bucket, which always managed to be even less interesting than class itself.

Ran prodded the bag with her foot. "You're going to investigate something, aren't you?"

Shinichi didn't bother with a reply, since they both knew she was right. Instead he gave her an expectant look, waiting for the inevitable insistence that she came along to keep him out of trouble. He didn't know how many times before that they'd played this game, but they both knew it well enough to guess each other's next move. He'd try to run off on his own, playing coy like he didn't want her to come chasing after. And she'd catch him anyway and declare that if he was going to go anyway, he might as well not go alone.

She pursed her lips at him, and he bit down on a smile. He loved that look. "Is it dangerous?" she prompted, seriously.

That question didn't have a simple answer. Everything he did somehow always turned out dangerous, whether it be walking home from school or going to a pottery class. Ran, though, seemed to be in a firm state of denial about that, as if she believed if he just shut his eyes and stopped looking for trouble, it would stop showing up at his door. He settled on the middle ground. "Shouldn't be. There have been some suspicious incidents-"
A sharp ringtone interrupted him. Immediately, Ran slipped her hand into her pocket and flipped her phone open, reading something intently. He hadn't thought she was waiting for a message. What did it say, and who was it from? Curious, he stood taller, trying to peer over the top of her phone. She flipped it shut with a smile. The same smile she wore as kids, whenever she was nervously hatching a stupid plan to get her parents back in the same room, and trying to hide it from him because she didn't want him calling her an idiot again.

He didn't like that smile, but he'd been seeing it more and more recently these days. A dark feeling squashed his curiosity, and suddenly, he didn't want to know.

Ran shoved her phone back in her pocket and snatched up her bag. In an instant, she was by him and heading out the door.

"Sorry, but I have to go! Urgent business. I'll call you later, okay?" She waved with an apologetic smile as she ducked out the exit. Soon enough, she'd disappeared in the crowd of other students leaving the building.

"Right." He said to no one, feeling his eyebrow twitch in aggravation. That was so suspicious.

He tried not to feel disappointed as he made his own way out, but it was hard not to. While Shinichi didn't mind investigating alone, hell, he even preferred it that way, something about watching Ran's retreating back always left a bad taste in his mouth.

He refused to overthink it, though, as he boarded a bus downtown, instead focusing on the case ahead of him.

Daichi and his net of vagrant informants had been able to provide him a list of places to check out. If there was anything to find, his best chances at finding it was by heading to each place personally.

He disembarked deep downtown, just blocks away from the first destination on his list. Despite the bright sunlight and the handful of other people around him, he felt uneasy. While this district hadn't been so much as touched in the recent attack, the stench of melted concrete and the skittish atmosphere permeated the air even here. Life went on, but the terror was still fresh in the city's memory.

And he couldn't forget the shadowy figures he'd seen the other day, gathered on the edges of Tokyo's gaping wound like a flock of blackbirds. Somehow, they seemed ominous.

Knowing what he did now, part of him wanted to run into them again. The other part recognized that was a very reckless train of thought.

After all, once, he was a forgettable passerby. Twice, he was recognizable.

A hand caught his shoulder.

Shinichi jerked underneath the grip, pulling away. His heart did a little leap in his chest.

Hattori Heiji grinned apologetically, pulling back. "Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to spook ya."

"Hattori! What are you doing here?" Shinichi asked, and the Osakan detective grinned wider.

"Investigatin' stuff." Informative. "Whatcha doin'? Lookin' for a story? I'll give ya an exclusive, if ya want." Ugh. They'd done that one before. Shinichi had been tempted to just title the article 'Awkward.'
"No thanks." Shinichi rolled his eyes and turned away. He wasn't in any mood for nonsense.

"Now wait a sec, Kudo!" Hattori tugged him back by his shirt collar, a clingy arm stubbornly entrapping his shoulders as the detective slung it over him. "These addresses. What ya got 'em for?" Shinichi found himself blinking at his own note, hanging in front of his nose. Instinctively he checked his pocket, and well, nothing.

"Just some places of interest."

"Don't tell me…" Hattori gave him a long considering look. Just great. If this were Hakuba, he'd probably already be dragged home. "You're investigatin' the arson cases too!"

"Uh." Shinichi said very intelligently. The what?

Wait. The fires at all the warehouses. To someone who didn't know about the kidnappings, all the different events would look like a suspicious pattern in supposedly unrelated arsons.

Well, investigating a couple weird fires was a lot less dangerous than a shifty group of kidnappers. He could totally get away with this, if he played his cards right.

Hattori was chattering away. "Great minds really do think alike, eh? That's what I came up here for. I should have known you'd be on it." After the whole mess in India-so much fire. So, so much fire-that was actually a fair assumption. A wrong one, but Hattori had a way of coming to perfectly reasonable wrong conclusions.

"You came all the way here to investigate the arson cases?" Shinichi had no idea just how much time Hattori spent actually in Osaka. Couldn't be much, these days.

"Well, ya know how it is. 'Cause of that new rail system, travel's so quick and cheap. I figured I might as well look into it."

Shinichi raised an eyebrow incredulously. Hattori spluttered. "Aw come on, ya know arson is my specialty!" Things did have the most bizarre tendency to burst into flames whenever Hattori was in town. It was probably a miracle that a historic city like Osaka hadn't burned down already.

Oblivious to Osaka's impending fiery doom, Hattori shook the list. "I was about to go check some of these addresses myself, plus a couple of others."

That refocused Shinichi. "Others?" He'd been almost excessively thorough in his interviewing of the city's misplaced youth. It was unlikely that he'd missed any crime scenes.

"Three or four more that aren't on your list."

"Really?"

Hattori pulled out his phone and presented Shinichi with a similar list. There were a couple addresses he didn't recognize, and a few missing. "Yup. How about we work together?"

"Us? Work together?"

"Don't look so surprised. Yeah, I know, your old man doesn't want ya in the detective business. But I figure that won't stop ya, so we might as well just go together."

Shinichi's jerk reaction was to say no. He'd never really worked alongside anyone before, and there was a fair chance Hattori hadn't run into him by coincidence. This could be another one of his father's machinations. But on the other hand, working with someone didn't sound so bad. It would
certainly be refreshing.

And he wanted to hang out with Hattori.

Shinichi bit his lip, uncertain, before realizing what he was doing and reining his expression back in. Hattori wasn't a sneaky guy, and there was no guarantee this was part of a harebrained scheme. Maybe someone just wanted to spend time with him for once, and he shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Shinichi forced his paranoia to the back of his mind and took a chance. "...Alright."

Hattori grinned, obviously pleased. "Great! Let's go!"

They visited several of the sites in rapid succession. Practically all the buildings had been razed to the ground, leaving behind husks of rubble and scorched remains. In another time, there would have been very little they could tell without each building's individual blueprints, but this was the era of Google Maps and search engines. It was easy to find pictures of what each building once looked like, inside and out. Most of the scenes had a great deal in common: old, out of use buildings. For most, a little investigation revealed why. Not enough exits and fire escapes, no ramps, halls too tight, foundations too careless.

At visiting the last address on Hattori's list, an old factory in the eastern quarter, they settled down to discuss.

Except Shinichi was still playing catch-up on whatever was going through Hattori's head. Thankfully, Hattori began. "So what are ya thinking? Insurance fraud?"

Insurance fraud. It made sense, if one didn't know about the whole missing kid thing. "Normally, yes. All the buildings burned down were old, not in use, but still owned. None of them could be sold without prior renovations to meet up with the city's safety standards." The city had been updating its workplace codes almost troubling often over the past three years, trying to hone worker evacuation and accessibility down to an art, not to mention requiring large building to have strong, sturdy foundations to prevent as many collapses as possible. "The owners will probably win big on insurance if they have the right lawyers working the claims, and so many cases in such a short period could be attributed to the debates over the upcoming insurance laws. The owners' might have been afraid that the policies would change."

But Shinichi knew that wasn't quite the case, but it was also one hell of a coincidence.

"That's exactly what I was thinkin'." Hattori nodded. "Problem being, almost all the buildings were owned by different companies and insured by separate agencies."

"They can't all be insurance fraud," Shinichi said, uncertain how else to go on. He hesitated to spill everything he knew. The last thing he needed was any of this getting back to his father, and Hattori tended to have a big mouth.

"If we add your list to my list, we've got a total of nineteen buildings, twelve companies, and seven different insurances." Hattori stared at his phone contemplatively, before huffing out a breath. "How the hell do we tell which ones to focus on? It'd be a pain in the ass to investigate 'em all."

Shinichi shifted on his feet, weighing his options. But didn't he already decide to take a chance? He wasn't one to go back on his decisions. "Hattori, subtract my list from your list."

"What?" The detective blinked at him.
"Just do it."

Hattori held up the two lists side by side, frowning. "That leaves five buildings."

"Who owns those five buildings?"

Hattori checked their notes, a knowing grin already spreading across his face. "Tendou Motor Supply Co. LuckyFish. Petrola. Ah! Tendou Motor Supply Co. again and… Petrola."

They grinned at each other. There was nothing quite like the feeling of honing in on a target. "We need to look into LuckyFish." Shinichi had never heard of the company before, but that wasn't really surprising. It would be impossible to know every single business in a huge city like Tokyo.

"I bet they're a shell company for one of these guys." Hattori pocketed the lists and pulled out his phone for some quick research. "Looks like we've got our insurance fraud. But what about the other places?"

"Unrelated arson cases." Shinichi said confidently. Hattori glanced up at him, brow furrowed.

"Okay...? Think someone in those companies noticed the arson cases and decided to use them as camouflage to cash in?"

"That's exactly what I think." However, he wasn't entirely convinced the other arsons had nothing to do with fraud. It could be a two birds one stone situation. He'd look into each individual case anyway. The thought of all that legwork and research made him want to groan.

Hattori was still watching him, a little suspicious. "But how did ya know that all the one's on your list were unrelated?"

"Because I wasn't investigating the arson, specifically, from the start." Shinichi fessed up with a shrug.

Hattori blinked. "Then...why?"

"Kids have been going missing from the streets throughout the city. And almost every time a kid disappears, a building nearby goes up in flames."

"And you don't think the kids got caught in the fire."

"No. I think someone is trying to cover their tracks."

"Hell of a dramatic cover-up. Haven't these guys ever heard of soap and water?"

It was a bizarre way to handle things. But the only reason Shinichi had a lead at all was because, for some reason, they missed one. Why was the warehouse he visited a few days ago left still standing, or alternatively, why did all the others need to be so thoroughly destroyed?

Wait. The buildings that weren't on Hattori's list. They hadn't checked those, and he hadn't thoroughly looked into them. It was possible one of them had survived.

"Why don't we go find out?" Excitement bubbled in his veins at the thought of another lead. He couldn't help throwing Hattori a smirk. "I've got an idea."

The first building wasn't burnt, but it had collapsed in on itself, like a birdhouse someone had shattered with a hammer. The second had been destroyed in the disaster on Saturday.
The third remained, and best of all, it was easy to break into.

Hattori watched him jimmy the lock. Hakuba or Ran would be disapprovingly breathing down his neck, but Hattori just seemed curious. When the door gave and swung open, they found the insides to be almost well lit. For the most part, the factory was a wide-open expanse, littered with dusty machinery and boxes and barrels that had been abandoned. The ceiling was lined with frosted windows, illuminating the doors leading deeper into the building in the back.

It was a creepy place. The atmosphere was bad, and not just because of the dust. Shinichi felt suffocated—no, enclosed in a place he couldn't escape.

The door swung closed behind Hattori, the lock automatically clicking back into place, and Shinichi forced himself to take a deep breath. Something about this place was wrong. It felt almost like they were being watched.

A trap.

"Hattori, try the door."

"What?" Hattori grunted, but he seemed to catch on to Shinichi's nervousness. He first tried the doorknob, but it didn't budge. Then he tried to twist the lock. Except the lock's knob was missing. There was nothing to turn.

A door that could only be unlocked from the outside. Not a good sign.

"Uh, Kudo?" Hattori looked around the room again, this time ten times more wary. "This seem weird to ya?"

Shinichi didn't bother with a reply, heading further into the factory. The only way out was through now. Just great. As he walked, he rummaged through his bag until he found his camcorder. It was a comforting weight in his hand, and their hazy surrounding seemed a little less confining through a camera lens. Just to be safe, he hit record.

The same feeling was clawing up his throat, drying his mouth. He felt like an animal being corralled, forced to run himself right into the snapping jaws of a bear trap.

The worst part was not knowing if the feeling was his own, or someone else's.

They stopped at the doors at the other end of the room. "Guess we gotta chose one." Hattori sighed. Each had been labeled, once, but if the blocky black lettering had ever meant something, there was no telling now. They checked each, but all the doors lead down almost identical halls that weren't nearly as well lit as the main room. Figuring that finding an exit was probably first on their priorities, Shinichi chose one closest to the adjacent wall.

Hattori activated the flashlight on his phone. It wasn't much, but it helped. Shinichi didn't think he could handle the dark closing in on them too, especially in such a narrow hall.

Carelessly, he bumped his hand into the wall. A rush of fear coursed through his arm like ice water.

Whoever had been trapped here before hadn't had a flashlight, and they had been terrified of the dark. But turning around hadn't been an option for them, either.

A child, Shinichi realized. This was the primal, unfiltered fear of a child. They passed more doors. Offices, it would seem, but the windows of each door reflected most to the light Hattori shined
through, so it was hard to tell.

Shinichi brushed his fingers over each doorknob, opening the mind he usually tried so hard to keep closed. He wanted to know, and for that he needed to feel.

Hope, fear, frustration.

The child had fought with each door, clawing and shoving, but none of them gave. There was nowhere to hide. Each time he ran further into the hall, hearing the pounding of footsteps behind him alongside the pounding of his own heart, he tried another. One them had to open, one of them just had to give, they were going to catch him, they were coming he had to run there was nowhere to run hands were reaching towards him in the dark he couldn't see but they had to be there monsters of the dark bogeymen that stole children-

"Shinichi!" Hattori shook his shoulder, breaking him free from the memory. "Do ya hear that?"

Shinichi froze, listening. Those pounding footsteps weren't just in his head.

"Come on!" He grabbed Hattori's arm and forced him further down the hall. As they ran, he kept one hand on the wall. The child had been running and running, there had to be a way out, there just had to be.

Despair hit him like a train.

Hattori stumbled to a stop. A dead end.

Cautiously, Shinichi tapped the far wall. He needed to know the end of the story.

Pain of an impact. No no no. Cold hands, harsh grips, his screams resounding off the walls.

"Damn. Guess we gotta go back. Thinks it's the cops?" Hattori sighed, turning around and flicking off the light.

God, Shinichi wished. But he knew it wasn't.

They crept back the way they came, and this time Shinichi didn't touch anything. He needed the calm of his own mind, his own confidence. Whatever was waiting for them, he could handle it.

He'd faced down thugs before. He'd been thrown from helicopters and buildings. He'd been held at gunpoint, and he'd held a gun of his own. He'd been in collapses and fires and messes beyond his own imagination.

Whatever was waiting on the other end of this hall, he'd shine a light right in its face and reveal just whatever it really was.

Heiji hadn't been expecting trouble.

But the moment they opened the door they came through, Shinichi hissed right into his ear, "Get down!" Shinichi dragged Heiji down by the arm, hiding them behind the bulky machinery. On the far side of the room, past tall boilers and steel catwalks, the door farthest from them slammed open. A group of men marched in, and god, Heiji only needed one look at them to tell they were bad news. No innocent mechanics or factory workers could ever look so suspicious, dressed up in black and on the prowl. At the head of the group was a behemoth of a man, taller and more muscular than anyone Heiji had ever even seen before, dressed for business but with a face more
suited for a shootout.

Heiji was pretty sure Shinichi was expecting the latter.

"It's them." Shinichi said, with a voice softened by breathy surprise. His face was caught in an expression of excited intrigue, his eyes narrowed and bright. Heiji couldn't really blame him, his own heart was hammering, but part of him did wish the crazy reporter could chill for half a second. "We have to get closer."

Well, Heiji wasn't exactly that good at being careful either.

They crept closer, moving slowly and quietly between covers. Shinichi's eyes were constantly darting around, but there was a distinct coldness to his expression now: it was a face that meant business. Together they measured up the group of thugs as they lurked around the premise, obviously searching for something. Even in the echoing room, it was difficult to make out the words being said, but it seemed like whatever the bad guys were looking for, they weren't finding it, and that pissed them off.

The big guy had a hideous moustache to go with his 1960's hat, which would almost be too cliché to take seriously if there wasn't something so inherently intimidating about him.

Heiji could totally take him though. There wasn't anything to be worried about.

Except Shinichi was with him.

Yeah, picking a fight now would definitely impede on that secret identity thing.

Oblivious to Heiji's ramping concern, Shinichi held up his camera higher, to get better shots of the thugs and their faces. From the distance, Heiji had thought they were all wearing sunglasses, but now that they were closer, he realized they were wearing black masks with sharp hooked noses, like bird beaks.

Heiji liked this situation less and less. He'd never run into thugs with bird masks before, never even heard of them, but somehow, that wasn't comforting. "No sign of the package, sir." One of the masked men reported to the big guy.

"Check the other halls." The big guy snapped back. The others hurried to comply, moving in groups to each door. It was easy to tell who was in charge.

"We're still behind quota, Tequila sir." One lackey hung back at the big guy's side. He must have been higher ranked than the others or something.

"Tch, a city full of mangy runts and yet, we can't find any. There's got to be at least one in here." Tequila growled. Tequila. What a name. Heiji focused on him. He could probably take the big guy with just minimal use of his powers, but his priority was getting Shinichi out safely.

He was so focused, that he failed to react in time. The lackey looked up, right in their direction. "Seems they've wizened up a bit." They threw themselves down out of sight, but not fast enough. Heiji felt a chill run down his spine as Tequila caught his gaze before he was down. "Or maybe not."


"Run." Shinichi said, quick and simple, slinging his bag firmly over his shoulder, before he booked it back towards the exit. Heiji quickly scrambled after him. Fuck the lock, he'd break the door
down if he had to.

They kept low, ducking and weaving as they dashed between shelters. Just when they were dashing across the open floor, two sharp sounds sent them scrambling in opposite directions for cover.

Gunshots.

"Cover the exits! Don't let them escape." Tequila barked. The birdmen came running at his command, spreading out through the room. "And preferably, get them alive!" Preferably alive. Comforting.

Heiji peeked over the top of his—bench? Yup, he was hiding from guns behind a concrete workbench. He, who could melt bullets before they could even touched his skin. Seven bird-creeps were making their way across the warehouse towards him. The others were heading right for the exit, guns in hand. And Shinichi was roughly fifteen meters away, stuck behind a boiler and still filming. More thugs were pouring out of the halls, emerging from the shadows like bats in a cave.

Too many to fight off without his powers.

But if they had abandoned the halls...

Heiji took another glance at Shinichi. Tequila said he wanted them alive. Shinichi would be fine. Heiji would be back in a couple minutes, tops.

He took a breath, and let it out. "Sorry, Kudo!"

Shinichi turned his way. "What-?" But Heiji was already running, back the way they came. The bird creeps were caught off guard, and reacted to slowly. In an instant, Heiji had broken their line and was sprinting back into the hall they had escaped moments before.

"Hattori!" Shinichi yelled furiously, somewhere behind him.

The last thing he heard from the room was Tequila's voice. "What a fool, cornering himself. Grab the other one."

Three minutes, later, Heiji took another deep breath and readjusted his mask for a better fit. He was flying low, as close to the factory as he could manage, and peering through the windows into the main factory.

Tequila stood in the center of the room, surrounded by his lackeys, two of which were restraining Shinichi's arms.

Heiji felt a little bad for those two. Shinichi's glare alone was terrifying.

"Where the hell is the other one?" Tequila was yelling. He was holding Shinichi's camera.

"Seems like he broke down one of the office doors and jumped out a window, sir." One of the thugs reported. He shuddered when Tequila shifted to look at him.

"Tch." Tequila turned away and the thug visibly relaxed without the boss's attention on him. Instead, Shinichi became the new object of the bastard's ire. "So all we've got is some measly fucking reporter?" Shinichi glared back at Tequila with icy eyes. Neither of them flinched under the sharp gaze of the other.
Heiji held his breath, muscles tensing. Where was Kazuha? Probably still kilometers away. She wouldn't arrive in time if things came down to a fight.

Inside, the stare down continued. Shinichi held his head high, despite his position kneeling on the floor. It would be a cold day in hell when Kudo Shinichi bowed underneath a criminal's glare.

Suddenly, Tequila snarled and smashed the camera on the ground at Shinichi's feet. Heiji jerked forward, keyed up and ready to burst in, but Shinichi didn't even blink, not until the scraps began to spark.

The thugs holding Shinichi lurched back, dragging him across the floor with them.

The camera exploded. It erupted into red and blinding white and black smoke. The force of it knocked all three to the ground.

None of them got back up.

"Shit, Kudo!" It was stupid, hanging back to get a grasp of the situation! It was stupid; he should have known it was stupid, because it was how Hakuba did things. Heiji should have just charged headfirst like he always did.

With anger rushing through his veins, he pulled back his fist, feeling his entire being being rippling with burning power. One blast was all it took to shatter the factory wall into half-melted debris, and immediately, all eyes, and guns, were on him.

Heiji didn't care, shooting down through the opening into the factory.

"Stop right there!" He barked, but he didn't really expect them to listen. "By the authority of the-" A bullet interrupted the rehearsed spiel, melting into nothing just centimeters from his cheek. Fine by him, the whole 'surrender now' bullshit was his least favorite part. "Guess we're skipping right to the tryin' to kill each other thing."

He kept to the air, flying close to ceiling, so all shots were focused up. The last thing he needed was Shinichi's unmoving form getting riddled by ricochet right now. It took just a few plasma blasts to send the thugs scrambling for cover, and just a couple melted bullets for them to realize their guns meant shit.

Karma. That was just what the assholes got.

"A wannabe hero, eh?" Tequila said. He didn't sound concerned. "Came all the way here to save a reporter?" He was the only one left, standing tall and unimpressed. With a careless shrug, he gestured at Shinichi, who wasn't moving, crumpled on the ground like a discarded doll just meters away.

A rush of fear seized in Heiji's chest. But he wasn't going to give Tequila the chance to take advantage of it. "Ya asshole!" He shot right at the giant man like a molten hot bullet, but Tequila didn't even bother to dodge. They collided head on, and it was like running full force into a steel wall. Or like the time he and Ran accidently flew right into each other in their first battle.

The collision sent him reeling, skidding across the concrete. The floor bubbled against his skin. Tequila's clothes were burning, and so was his skin, but the injuries weren't as bad as they should've been. The bastard was tough.

Well, that was fine, because so was Heiji. He shot right back into the air for round two.

"You're out of your league, brat." Tequila grinned, a nasty, cruel smile that stretched too far up.
Heiji felt something like unease tickling in his veins, but he forced it back down and rushed the bastard again. There was no way the jerk could take another of those hits.

Too late did Heiji see Tequila pull back his fist.

The first hit, he took to the face. Tequila punched him with the power of a freight train, momentum carrying Heiji right into the blow. Another came from below, the uppercut catching him right in the gut.

It hurt. God, shit, it hurt.

The force of the second hit launched him right back into the air and into the ceiling, which shuddered with the impact. Then, he fell back down, plummeting right back to the floor.

Tequila was waiting with that same damn grin. The third hit was a kick to the ribs as he went back down, launching him into the far wall, which crumpled under his weight.

For a moment, the whole world went black. All he could hear was Tequila laughing, and his own raspy attempts to breath. He wasn't getting any air; it was like someone had dropped bricks on his lungs.

The pain almost overwhelmed the burning.

"What did I just say, you little fuck?" Tequila's voice echoed along with the ringing in his ears. Everything hurt. "Think you can win a fight by just throwing yourself around? Think you can save someone just because you put on a mask?"

He was lying on his stomach in the remnants of the wall, heavy stone settling on his legs and back. Just opening his eyes was a struggle. The world was blurry and took too long to focus, but when it did, Heiji shuddered. The henchmen were creeping back in, and Tequila was striding back over to Shinichi. "You lot! Grab the reporter! We're getting out of here before any other nuisances show up."

Fuck that, Heiji thought. His head was reeling, his sight was bleary, and he couldn't breath, but he'd been taught well. Trained until flying was easier than breathing. He lifted off the ground, shaking of the debris. He forced his chest to open, to expand, and the first breath was hard, but the second was easier.

The mooks scattered at the first sight of him, and Tequila turned back his way.

The jerk was still grinning. That was fine, because Heiji was going to punch that smile right off his ugly mug.

Tequila opened his mouth to say something, but Heiji charged a blast and released it in rapid succession. The plasma hit with a flash of light, but when the light faded, Tequila was still standing, unbothered. It was too weak to do much, but it gave Heiji a moment to regain his breath.

"You should have just played dead, brat." The bird mask covered Tequila's eyes and nose, but there was a dangerous air about Tequila as he reached into his jacket, and pulled out a handful of bullets. With a nasty grin, he tossed them in the air.

Heiji hesitated. What was he-

The camera.
Heiji barely twisted around the first explosion, but still felt the pressure of it rippling through the air. The force of the first sent him careening right into the second, and then the third.

The explosions weren't large, in fact, they were tiny, but they were strong, precise, and hurt. And while Heiji was dense enough to take just about any kind of impact, he felt his head reeling with the force of them.

He didn't even want to think about what would happen if one of these hit someone else.

But worst of all, the bullets were small objects in free-fall, and god dammit, he was a high-density mass with his own gravity. They gravitated towards him in the air like magnets. It was going to be impossible to dodge them all.

So why bother?

Heiji brought up his arms to give his head at least some cover, and took a deep breath. It didn't calm the pounding in his chest, or ease the burn consuming his whole being like a wild fire. He took another, just for luck, and flew right through the midair minefield. The explosions hurt like hell, and almost knocked him off course, but momentum carried him through.

Tequila wasn't expecting that. The asshole's grin fell right off his face as Heiji rushed right at him again.

And that? That was worth it.

Heiji was angry, he was hurt, and he clung to the fury, the rage. It just made him burn that much hotter. This time, Heiji pulled back a fist and charged it, feeling the burn of plasma in his palm. It was like holding the sun in his hand, he'd once told Kazuha.

She had laughed. He hadn't.

He slugged Tequila right across the face with a two thousand degree sucker punch.

That knocked the bastard back with a choked scream, but still he didn't go down. What would it take? Just what could bring this monster down?

Probably more than Heiji could offer. Plus, he had other priorities. He flew right over to Shinichi, who was struggling to sit up, blearily blinking at the ceiling. Carefully, he cooled his arms down as much as he could manage, which was sadly still probably unpleasantly hot, and helped Shinichi up the rest of the way.

Shinichi was pale, and a little listless. Not quite concussed, but he'd definitely hit his head. He put more weight on Heiji than on his own feet, and still teetered sideways.

Just a couple meters away, Tequila had a hand to his face, groaning. Heiji flinched when Tequila's hand fell away, revealing hideous red burns and melting flesh. Clinging to his sleeve and unsteady, Shinichi made a gagging sound, unfocused eyes blown wide.

There was blood caking the ground, already half dry.

Staring Heiji right in the eyes, Tequila, with one side of his mouth burned black and bloody red and hanging almost loose, smiled.
"Remember this, hero." Bile fought to rise in Heiji's throat as Tequila spoke, stretching the grisly wound on his face. "Because next time we meet, I'm going to tear your face right off and wear it."

Heiji reached into his jacket again, and Heiji tensed. This time, Tequila tossed the bullets straight up.

Heiji pushed Shinichi down and shielded him with his own body. For once, Shinichi didn't protest. The bullets came back down, and erupted into flashes of blinding light and smoke.

When the smoke cleared, the bad guys were gone.

Shinichi had spent more than his fair share of time sitting in ambulances, getting checked over for injuries. Most days, he walked away just fine. He would again, today, if a little unsteadily. The EMT prodded at the back of his head gingerly, frowning, but they both knew that there'd just be a bump there tomorrow.

He'd gotten lucky, the EMT said. Shinichi didn't bother to disagree aloud. He would have preferred to be luckier.

Shinichi didn't remember as much as he would have liked. The kidnappers-he was certain that was what they were-had been pinning him and Tequila had been staring him down and then the camera exploded and everything after that was a blur of flashing lights and deafening noise.

He distinctly remembered Heliopause heaving him off the ground, feeling too hot skin against his own, a whole lot of explosions, and Tequila's face being half-burned off. That last bit was going to be hard to forget.

He also remembered Hattori literally leaving him to the birds.

Jerk.

But most of everything was impressions of pain, anger, and the sickening desire to hurt, to crush, to cause pain. Everything else was just flashes and blurry and useless.

He couldn't write a report on this. Police and other reporters were buzzing around the area, which was filled with more flashing light and too much noise. Apparently Banshee had been there too, but he didn't remember her at all.

Heliopause and Banshee, and apparently, Hattori, had given the police a full recounting of both their shares of the afternoon's events while he was in the ambulance. The police would wait until tomorrow to hear out Shinichi, though. Apparently, he wasn't in any state to give full, sound-minded report. They wouldn't even let him back into the building to get a sample of the blood Tequila left. A reputable detective would have been let back in, probably, but not a reporter. Most policemen distrusted the media, either on principle, or because of their own previous bad relations.

Where was Hattori? Gone, like he always was when Shinichi actually needed him.

"Kudo!" Well, most of the time. Hattori suddenly emerged from the surrounding crowd, rushing over. He didn't look good, streaked with dust and sweat, and there were some scrapes exposed on his arms. What had he done to escape? Jumped out a window, right.

The sight of him just annoyed Shinichi more. Part of him wanted to ask the EMT to just shut the ambulance's doors and floor it, but the medic was already packing up and moving away with a sympathetic smile.
Too soon, Hattori was in his personal space, poking and prodding and inspecting. "Ya alright?" Hattori asked, nudging Shinichi's head to the side to peer at the back of it. Shinichi pulled away from the touch, glaring.

Thankfully, Hattori backed off a little. "Doesn't look too bad." Encouraging, Hattori smiled shakily, slumping with relief. Shinichi didn't let Hattori's obvious concern ease the knot of frustration building in his gut.

"Why are you still here?" It didn't sound like the accusation he meant it to be. It sounded too calm.

"The bad guys are long gone. There's not even a scent to chase." Hattori shook his head. Then he grinned, teasingly. It felt forced. "Plus, I can't leave ya alone, now can I?" Ha. That was funny. As true as it was false.

"Yes, sure seems like you just can't." Leave me alone. Leave me alone. He couldn't imbue the words with nearly enough bitterness.

Hattori sobered. Suddenly, he looked exhausted. There was dust in his hair, and his lip was cracked. Shinichi didn't know what happened. He didn't want to even care. But Hattori forced his shoulders back up and set a hand on Shinichi's shoulder. "Come on, let's get out of here," he coaxed.

Hattori was trying to be strong. Hattori, who had been so scared he ran, was trying to be strong for Shinichi.

Shinichi didn't need anyone to be strong for him. Hattori could go play tough guy elsewhere. "No." Shinichi snapped, and this time, the tone was just right. "Get in there and properly investigate. Get a blood sample. You're a detective, aren't you?" There was no mistaking the accusation for anything else this time.

Hattori, though, just looked confused, like a dog that didn't know why it's owner was pushing it away. "Hey-heh now, that's-

Hattori's stumbling voice was interrupted by a sharp cry. "Shinichi!" He knew that voice anywhere.

"Ran," he said, without meaning to. And there she was, breaking free from the crowd and hurrying towards them. Hattori backed away, hands in the air as Shinichi turned on him. "You called Ran?" Shinichi snapped.

Hattori looked abashed. "Ah, and Hakuba. And your old man." Oh, great. Just great. The last three people in the world Shinichi wanted breathing down his neck right now. Of course Hattori called them all.

At least Ran was a sight for sore eyes. She was flushed, and her hair was in disarray, but she was still beautiful. The nicest thing Shinichi had laid eyes on in hours.

The very second he was in reach, arms wrapped around his shoulders and held tight. Ran's familiar weight settled against him. "Shinichi! Thank goodness you're alright!"

He relaxed into the embrace almost immediately, burying his face in her hair despite himself.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He said, settling his arms around her waist as she pulled back to peer into his face. Her lavender eyes were a bit too wide.

And way too angry. Too soon, her relief was completely smothered beneath a tidal wave of
anxious fury.

She pushed him back by the shoulders, and he recognized the wrinkle in her brow. He knew exactly what was coming next. "What were you thinking? Hanging around in a place like this! Don't you know how dangerous that is?"

There it was.

Shinichi tried not to grimace under her fierce glare. He hadn't meant to worry her; there was no way he could have known that they'd actually run into the kidnappers. Or that the warehouse would be a trap.

He tried to find the words to say all that, and to comfort her, but they didn't come fast enough.

Another familiar voice cut in. It almost made him flinch. "You should have asked one of us to come with you."

Shinichi took a breath through his nose. Perfect. "Hakuba?"

His father's protégé smiled thinly. Shinichi knew him well enough to see the strain in it. But that didn't matter, not compared to the sinking he felt in his own gut. He turned back to Ran, and she wilted a little, some of the anger bleeding out.

"We came together," she said.

Oh. Urgent business, huh.

Shinichi didn't want to think about that right now. Instead, he met Hakuba's scarlet gaze right on, challenging. "I had Hattori with me, didn't I?" Fat load of help he was, though. But that wasn't the point.

Hakuba spared Hattori a glance, like he was looking at a particularly unwelcome relative at a memorial service. "That's not comforting, Shin-Kudo-kun." He said, with a voice so smooth and sure that it was almost easy to miss the error. It was a voice that was designed to convince, to deliver the hard facts and make them a little more palatable. They'd learnt that voice from Shinichi's father, side by side. "You shouldn't even be sticking your nose into a detective's case, anyway. How many times have we talked about this?"

So many that even Shinichi had lost count. But that didn't make him want to swallow the unpleasant truth.

He caught Hattori's eye. Hattori shrugged. So, Hattori had kept some things to himself, for once. Not much, not enough. Shinichi couldn't even be bothered to appreciate it.

After all, Hattori wasn't exactly stepping up to his defense, either.

And Ran had placed herself solidly on Hakuba's side, still glaring, mouth set in a firm line. "He's right, Shinichi. You ditched soccer practice today to break into a bunch of warehouses! How could you act so irresponsible! Doing stuff like this is just too reckless. You're going to get hurt."

Whatever. Shinichi looked away from the three of them, at his hands instead. There were scrapes on his palms, and his skin was pink where Heliopause must have gripped his wrist. His face felt like it was burning. Still, his composure stayed intact.

He wanted them all to just go away. He wanted to be alone in his empty house. He wanted the
comfort of those still, untouched rooms, bereft of any memories or emotions but his own.

His throat felt tight. He didn't say anything else.

What could he say? That this was important to him? That he wanted to help people, to feel useful? To connect with the world through the safe shield of a camera's lens? That he wanted to know the truth, about everything, and knew he couldn't, shouldn't know what he really wanted to know? That he tried to sate himself on any measly, impersonal truth the world had to offer him? That he was capable, he was skilled, and he was practical?

That he could do this, if they'd all just let him?

The others went quiet too, probably feeling like they said too much. Maybe pitying him. Ran was, definitely. He knew he'd see it in her eyes if he looked back up.

So he didn't.

Hakuba drove them back. Ran held his hand, slender fingers carefully intertwined with his own, grip just tight enough for him to know she didn't want to let go.

Her hand felt uncomfortable in his.

All three of them had made half aborted attempts at conversation, but while Hattori and Hakuba had eventually given up, Ran kept trying.

She always tried when he least wanted her to.

"Let's talk about the upcoming tournament, then," she said, voice lathered in faux cheer. "Think your team is ready?" His tongue felt heavy in his mouth. He didn't want to respond.

Shinichi was looking out the window, watching lights flash by, chin cupped in his free hand. "We'll be fine." The words sounded bored, apathetic, and dismissive. They didn't sound like he'd forced them out like pulling teeth.

Ran perked up, hopeful and abashed all at once. "That's good. Read anything interesting over break?"

"The new Detective Saimonji book is coming out." Hakuba chimed in.

Soccer. Reading. The violin. Boating and snowboarding and driving and trips and vacations and anything else his parents could think up to distract him. The safe topics, the encouraged behaviors.

His own girlfriend couldn't think of anything else to talk about. Shinichi's tongue felt like chalk in his mouth, dry and heavy.

In the silence, Hakuba relented. "Kudo-kun, are you going to report tonight's events?"

"No." He didn't have the whole story yet. More than that, though, if those guys were the kidnappers, and Shinichi would bet his entire blog and his Twitter they were, they had the missing kids. If Shinichi carelessly put an article out there and said too much, chances were, any surviving kids would be dead before dawn.

And Shinichi wouldn't be any closer to finding them.

Well, no, not necessarily. Tequila and his men may have gotten away, but he knew what he was looking for now.
And, there was the footage he'd taken in the warehouse. Tequila may have blown his camcorder to
smithereens, but maybe the memory card could be salvaged. He'd ask for it back from evidence the
next day.

And then, Shinichi would find those crows again. In the meantime, he'd get back to Daichi and tell
him to have everyone on the lookout for men in bird masks. If he could find someway to narrow
down the targets, he could catch the next kidnapping attempt while it was still undergoing. The
crows had mentioned something about a quota. They'd needed to bring in a certain amount of kids
for something. Shinichi just had no idea as to what.

But he'd find out.

Ran's hand tightened around his. It felt like a shackle.

Shinichi didn't hesitate to march right to his room the moment they parked in the driveway. Maybe
his father would want to speak with him, maybe Hakuba would like to passive-aggressively not-
yell at him some more. Maybe Ran would follow.

None of those things happened. Surprisingly, it was Hattori who was on his heels.

"Kudo, come on!" Shinichi kept walking, stubbornly ignoring the footsteps trailing after him.
"Talk to me! We gotta talk about this case, man!" They made it up the stairs with still no sign of
his father. Good. Shinichi couldn't deal with that man right now. Not when there was an upset knot
of emotion in his stomach, not when he couldn't seem to breath evenly. Hattori's voice wasn't
helping. "Ya can't just run away from me!"

Shinichi stopped, right in the middle of the hallway. The aggravation mounted, turning hot and
wild and furious. If Hattori had just left, or apologized, or left things be, Shinichi could have
forgiven him. Shinichi could have understood that Hattori had been looking out for his own safety.

But now? Now, Shinichi didn't want to understand. Not when Hattori was chasing him around his
own house, still acting like they were friends.

Shinichi whirled around on his heel. Under his withering glare, Hattori stepped back. "Oh? What
about how you ran away?"

Hattori winced. This time, he didn't even pretend to mistake the accusation for anything else. He
just stared Shinichi right in the eye, looking so, so tired. "I didn't run away. I had to call for help.
But I didn't abandon you." Hattori stepped forward. His gaze was steady, solemn. Shinichi wanted
him to stumble, to falter, to show any sign of lying through his teeth. Instead, he steadily insisted,
"I wouldn't do that!"

Shinichi narrowed his eyes. Fine, if they were having this conversation, he'd take full advantage of
it. He didn't feel like reining himself in or going easy right now. If Hattori wanted to talk, they'd
talk. Shinichi knew how to talk. "But you would lie to me, right? Keep secrets?" This time Hattori
flinched, looking guilty. Shinichi didn't stop. Any sympathy, any desire to be understanding or
considerate had drained away in the miserable silence of the car. All the old wounds, the
frustrations he kept bubbling under his skin, all the little slights he ignored for years and years had
been rubbed raw. "Don't try and deny it. I know my father, Hattori. I've put up with his schemes
and his mind games my whole life, longer than even Hakuba, and especially longer than you." He
knew who really deserved his anger here, knew it wasn't Hattori's fault, not entirely. But Hattori
was an accomplice. And that he made perfectly clear. "So if you're here on his behalf, you can go
tell him that I don't care whatever he is up to with you guys. If he stays out of my way, I'll stay out
of his."
Hattori's shoulder shot up defensively. "Your dad didn't send me here." He sounded sincere. Shinichi didn't care if he was or not.

"Then why are you here, Hattori?" Shinichi watched Hattori's face carefully. He looked exhausted, and frustrated, but most of all, disappointed. As Shinichi watched, Hattori masked all those feelings, and looked back with a locked jaw and determined eyes.

They both took a breath. Then, Hattori spoke. "You're gonna keep looking into this, aren't ya?"

"Of course." He hadn't ever abandoned an investigation part way through. When Kudo Shinichi caught the scent of a scoop, he followed it all the way back to the source, not matter what got in his way.

Hattori stared him right in the eye. "Despite the evil, superpowered thugs?"

Shinichi couldn't help but smile a little at that. "Despite the evil, superpowered thugs."

Hattori sighed, his shoulders sagging back down in defeat. The sight of it didn't feel like a victory. In fact, all the anger and everything was bleeding away, leaving just tiredness behind. It had been a stressful day. Hattori looked just as weary, but there was steel in his gaze as he said, "then let me help."

Shinichi blinked. "What?"

"I wanna look into this too." A quiet, honest request: a peace offering, another extended hand.

The last vestige of Shinichi's anger stirred. He nearly snarled. "Oh no, you are here for my father! You're here to keep an eye on me!"

"No!" Hattori denied, voice too loud in the hallway. "Please, I know this secret thing is hard. But it's not like there's your dad's side and your side! We aren't against ya, Kudo." It sure felt like it, sometimes. "All that I ask is that you trust us. Just...trust me?" The last bit was spoken quietly again, a whispered plea. Hattori looked earnest.

But Shinichi knew better. "Why should I?"

Hattori stepped closer again. "Because if ya do, then I promise I'll trust ya. Look, just from today, I can already tell that what you're investigatin' is way over your head. I should tell ya to stop and leave it alone. But I'm not. I'm gonna trust ya to make this decision on your own and to take care of yourself. So, we're doin' this together."

"Together?"

"Together." Hattori repeated, voice steady and sure.

"...No." For a moment, Shinichi had almost considered it. But he'd already taken a chance on Hattori. And while Hattori could look him in the eye and offer him a hand, Hattori just as easily looked away and stood back. Something like betrayal still burned in the back of Shinichi's throat. "I just can't. You...you can't have it both ways, Hattori. You can't ask for my trust and lie to my face in same breath. You can't just disappear and then promise you'll be there for me." The image of Ran, smiling apologetically as she lied again was crystal clear in his mind. When Hattori spoke, Shinichi could practically hear Hakuba's reiterating those same words, negotiating for that same trust. He felt his shoulder's slump, and he couldn't find the energy to pull them back up. Hattori's face fell just as easily, twisted with frustration and guilt.
But no regret. And that's what really cemented his decision. "Yeah, I had fun today." It felt important to confess that part. To admit that he'd actually enjoyed working alongside Hattori, until everything went wrong and he was reminded of all the reasons why he worked alone. "The investigating together part was cool. But the rest of it? Just goes to show that it's not gonna work." It never worked. Shinichi just couldn't trust anyone so easily. "See you around."

Walking away and shutting his door behind him was the easiest thing he'd done all day.

Saguru was not hot-tempered, nor was he easy to rile up. But he did get angry, and more often than not, Hattori Heiji was the object of his ire. His teammate wasn't just reckless and foolhardy, but also destructive, impulsive, and most of all, messy.

And today's incident? Was beyond messy.

The fact that Hattori had dragged Shinichi into it, or allowed Shinichi to pursue it did not help. Just the thought of it made Saguru's blood boil. When Hattori had called in, claiming Shinichi had been captured by bad guys with guns, Saguru had been tempted to tear his hair out in worry. Only Yuusaku's direct orders had him sitting tight, waiting for Ran to zip back from whatever she was doing in Nagano and give him a lift to the crime scene.

Now that it was over, anxiety was giving way to aggravation. He paced back in forth in the meeting room, while Yuusaku sat serenely in his chair.

"What the hell happened today?" The moment Hattori entered the base, Saguru sprung. The fact that Hattori looked a little wrecked around the edges didn't stop him in the least. "How the hell did you get Shinichi-kun into a firefight?"

Hattori ducked away, somehow finding the energy to bristle up. "I didn't get Shinichi into anythin'!"

So Shinichi had gone there on his own. Of course. If anything, knowing that just pissed Saguru off more. Saguru pushed right back into Hattori's face, too annoyed to be bothered with the boundaries he usually kept. "You know you shouldn't encourage him! Are you foolish?" Hattori's skin darkened with rage, going from brown to the molten black of his empowered form.

A commanding voice broke in and had them springing apart in an instant. "Stop, Saguru-kun. Hattori-kun, what happened today?"

Hattori slumped underneath Yuusaku's disappointed gaze, the strange darkness creeping away. He didn't look ashamed with himself, though, and that made Saguru purse his lips. For a moment, Hattori seemed to deliberate, and then looked right in Yuusaku's eyes with a fierce glare. "We were lookin' inta a couple arson cases together, and then some thugs in bird masks showed up and I had to leave Kudo there alone with them!" His voice started at a reasonable level, but by the end it had risen to a shout. He was scowling furiously. "Because you two insist on this secret identity nonsense!" Then, the anger just seemed to crumble away. Hattori looked down at his feet. "And now he hates me."

Oh.

Saguru let those words, disappointed and defeated, settle in. They were familiar. In them echoed years of bad encounters and stilted conversations, of dinners spent avoided Shinichi's chilly eyes. He was struck, suddenly, with the memory of throwing out his application to Teitan High the day he decided that he wouldn't take the entrance exam.
He didn't want to think about those things, so he focused on something else.

Like Hattori being a complete moron. "You disappeared, and then Heliopause just happened to show up?" That was an amateur mistake, especially for an experienced hero like Hattori. "Hattori, are you stu-

Hattori looked furious again, cutting in. "What else could I do?"

Saguru felt his eye twitching. "You shouldn't have even brought Shinichi-kun with you in the first place!"

"He would have gone to that warehouse whether I was with him or not!"

"Then you should have stopped him, instead of doing something so reckless and stupid!"

"Stopped him? Do ya seriously think there's a thing in the world that can stop that guy?" Hattori waved a hand in emphasis. "He does whatever he wants!" Saguru opened his mouth to say something else, but he couldn't argue that point.

Hattori continued on, his thick brows furrowed. "Why we gotta keep him so far out of the loop anyway? And don't feed me the same 'it's for his own good bullshit' you feed Ran! It clearly ain't doin' him any favors!" This shout, though, was very clearly directed at Yuusaku.

Saguru clenched his fists in indignation. That sort of disrespect he couldn't allow.

With a strict voice, he reclaimed Hattori's attention. "Hattori, don't be mistaken. What makes you think you're in any position to question Kudo-san's decision?"

Hattori's face flushed. "I-"

"You know nothing." And Hattori didn't. Hattori knew nothing of what Yuusaku did for his son.

Hattori recoiled, still fuming. "Because the two of ya refuse to tell me anything!"

Saguru glared. If he had to lay it out for Hattori, fine, he would. "And you want to know why? Because you can't be trusted. You can't even keep Shinichi-kun out of a case. How could we possibly trust you with anything more than your own secret identity, when you have so much trouble keeping even that secret?"

"I-that's not…" That blow hit hard and left Hattori stuttering. Saguru wished it shut him up entirely.

"That's enough, you two." Once again, Yuusaku's interrupted them. It was frustrating, having to have a disciplinary talk right in front of his mentor with a unruly teammate. He was supposed to be the leader: these were arguments he was should handle on his own.

Yuusuaku, though, didn't seem to mind. He was smiling. "Hattori-kun, none of these matters is any of your concern. Please don't worry about them." Saguru didn't think saying that would do any good. Hattori, like all detectives, couldn't just mind his own business. Still, when Yuusaku said it, it sounded convincing. "You've had a long day, it's probably best you returned home for now."

For a moment, Hattori glared at them both some more. Then, still wearing a defiant scowl, he snapped out a curt "yes sir."

Hattori marched out of the room. Saguru knew that that didn't mean the subject was dropped: it was just postponed. To his retreating back, Yuusaku called, "Thank you for protecting my son."
At those words, Hattori paused. He turned back, looking less angry than before. "I wasn't going to let that liquor creep hurt him."

"Liquor?" Saguru repeated. He had no idea what Hattori was talking about.

"Some metahuman thug called Tequila. He was leading the bird guys."

Saguru glanced back at Yuusaku, who'd brought his steepled fingers up to his mouth contemplatively. "Did you fight him?" Yuusaku asked.

The Osakan didn't answer. There was something strange about how he held himself, like he was uncertain. No, reluctant. "Hattori, what happened?"

Hattori hesitated for a moment longer. Then, he spoke. "He was throwing me around like I was nothing. Then he threatened to take Shinichi, and I lost my cool. I...sort of punched half his face off."

Saguru took in a sharp breath. Dear god.

But Yuusaku didn't even blink. "It's alright, Hattori-kun. You can give us your full report tomorrow. You're dismissed."

Once Hattori left the room, probably starting his long flight home, he turned to his mentor. "That...could have killed his opponent." Saguru said carefully. "Hattori's usually reckless, but not even he would do something so dangerous."

Yuusaku nodded slowly. "Not usually, no."

"You don't think..." He didn't want to say it.

"Yes." Yuusaku's eyes slid shut. He didn't slump or slide down in his chair, but the heavy creases in his brow and the tightening of his fingers were telling enough. For once, Saguru's mentor didn't seem impressive or in control. He looked like a tired middle-aged man.

Saguru hesitated to speak. It felt like blasphemy. "Is there anything we can do about it?"

His mentor hummed noncommittally. It wasn't an answer. Yuusaku didn't know.

Heavy dread settled over Saguru.

The Night Baron was respected worldwide for his fierce intelligence and his peerless problem-solving skills. When the world was facing crisis, its citizens turned to the Overseers for salvation. And when the Overseers faced a catastrophe, they turned to the Night Baron to find the solution. Saguru's mentor had saved the planet many times before, not with brawn, but by tackling cataclysmic problems with ingenuity and efficiency.

But if not even the Night Baron had the answer to this, then who did?

No. Saguru couldn't think like that. Maybe his mentor hadn't found the key yet, but there was still time. They had managed to keep a solid lid on the disaster so far, and would continue to for as long as necessary.

And Saguru had been raised to do what Yuusaku could not. He could find the answer. He just had to look harder for it. There was no such thing as an unsolvable problem, or a question without a satisfactory answer. Mysteries existed to be solved, and issues existed to be addressed.
Separate from his deliberations, Yuusaku stood and pulled on his cloak. Saguru watched curiously as his mentor disappeared behind the heavy black mantle.

Yuusaku fitted the white mask over his face with practiced ease. "I have other matters to attend to, for now."

"Sir?"

"The sooner we handle the security breach, the better."

Anticipation burned suddenly in Saguru's chest, alongside relief. "You'll tell Aoko-kun?"

"No. Not yet, at least. I intend to confront the problem at its root." Saguru straightened, taken by surprise. The Baron almost never went after KID personally; in fact, the Overseers went out of their way to avoid facing the thief.

"Want me to come with?"

"That won't be necessary. I will handle the night patrol alone tonight. You may return home."

He had expected that, but still it made him frown. Being left behind always stung, but when it came to confrontations with KID he found it particularly hard to swallow. "...yes sir."

It was a cold, clear night, so crisp that the stars were bright in the sky, even in the yellow glow of the Tokyo skyline. The brilliant fluorescent lights of the Tokyo nightlife reached far into the sky, illuminating a dark figure standing atop a skyscraper.

He was blacker than the night, entirely swathed in a dark cloak. Only one feature of his was distinguishable from the shadows of the unlit rooftop: his pure white mask, with its upturned eyes and eerie grin.

Behind him, the moon hung in the sky, waning away from being full by only a handful of days. A drop of white fell from it, splashing across the rooftop in a swirl of rippling cloth. It rose back up, fluttering aside to reveal a man dressed vibrantly in flawless white, face obscured by an ivory top hat and a gleaming monocle.

Kaitou KID grinned. There was nothing friendly about it.

"The Baron came all this way to see me." The thief purred into the darkness. His smile was sharp like a shark's jaw, rows and rows of vicious teeth designed to shred through the toughest of flesh. "What an honor."

The Night Baron turned to face him: only the mask seemed to move, twisting around the still blackness of the rest of his body. The Baron wasted no time with pleasantries. "Turn yourself in." It was a command, harsh and terrifying in the night that was suddenly too quiet.

KID didn't seem to care, leaning forward. His smile only spread wider, a mockery of the empty expression carved in the Baron's mask. "You first, I insist." He curled over in a perfect bow, hellfire bright eyes burning from under the brim of his hat. The fierce, defiant gaze never left the Baron's.

Another mockery: a grotesque charade of gentlemanly manner.

The Baron simply continued on, voice cold and stern. He knew best: for the thief, for the people,
for the world. "Whatever you think you're doing, it's wrong. And it's endangering a lot of innocent people."

KID straightened, almost choking on a laugh so coated with derision that it wasn't a laugh at all. "Funny, according to reports, that's all I've ever done."

The Baron took a step forward. "You could have at least left her out of it." He spoke like a judge at his podium: residing over the court, the Baron stood over the accused and all of Tokyo. He loomed over the thief, but he hadn't always. There had been a time that they were the exact same height.

That era had passed, and the world had moved on, Tokyo careening forward in the wake of each new disaster. Humanity's ascension was a tide that never quite stopped rising.

KID's smile fell away, replaced with a mouth curled down with contempt. The facade of politeness had cracked under the strike of the gavel. "You didn't leave her out of it."

"She came to me and asked me to teach her. She chose to be a hero." The Baron did not offer the words as an explanation or a justification. They were simply the truth.

"Those are two very different things." The thief jeered, shoulders rising. It was impossible to tell whether the action was aggressive or defensive. "If she's made her choice, then that's fine. I'll take full advantage of it, since I've already made my own."

For a moment, silence settled between them, a dead end. The Baron was still, impossibly so. It seemed to frustrate the thief. Finally, the Baron spoke again, giving his final decree. "Tell her the truth."

KID didn't acknowledge the finality in the Baron's tone. His own voice was hard and cruel with scorn. "Like you did?" Those three words struck harder than anything else said that evening. The Baron shifted back, just a hair's breadth. The movement was so minute, few would have noticed. But KID had always been one of a kind. "Spare me your hypocrisy. What about my predecessor's murder? Where's the world's greatest detective when that mystery needed to be solved? Where's your truth and justice, when you're the one with blood on your hands? I don't see you coming clean and standing to trial."

"I didn't kill you father." The words resounded in the cold air. The wind picked up, catching in their individual cloaks. Black and white rippled alongside each other with the contrast of the sun peaking over the horizon.

KID snorted derisively. "It was an accident? Bullshit. You know what they call it when you accidentally murder somebody? Manslaughter."

Impossibly, the Baron stood taller, a column of unmoving obsidian. He was a bastion that could not be moved. "There were circumstances outside your understanding, that day." The words were delivered like a speech given by the educated to the ignorant, only bereft of fact or explanation. No one cared if the ignorant understood or not, so long as they were quiet in their incomprehension.

KID bristled, the dignity of his regal stance lost in a fury that belied someone much younger than he should have been. "I can't believe this. You don't even sound guilty! You don't even care, do you?"

"No. And neither will she. Your father was the victim of his own crimes, and she will understand that. Tell her the truth, or I will."

KID struck like a viper springing from coil, drawing a silver gun from his coat in a flash of white
and blue. The weapon settled against the Baron's chest, threateningly pressing into the dark cloth.

The Baron did not move, unthreatened. "You think you hold all the cards?" KID's voice regained its steady tempo, confident and bold. A showman's voice. He playfully circled the gun's barrel around, prodding. "You think you can drop ultimatums? Well, how's this one. You tell her anything, anything at all, and well..."

He drew back in an instantaneous, fluid movement, dancing back with the wind. The cocky grin returned full force. His finger tightened on the trigger. "I'm not the only one here who wears a mask."

The Baron ducked the razor-sharp card that sprung free from the gun's barrel. Still, it nicked the side his mask, leaving the slightest dent. He'd been distracted by the card's number and suit: the ace of spades. "You cannot-"

KID laughed. "Reveal your identity to the world? No, because you would just reveal mine. No, nothing so dramatic." KID snapped his gloved fingers. In a puff of smoke, the card was back in his hand. He traced his fingers over it fondly, turning it over and over. "You know, I've met your son. He's superb, isn't he? Clever, earnest, and absolutely ruthless." KID's digits graced over the card's sharp edges, tapping in time with his words. The Baron shifted, almost uneasily. "Oh, he's just fantastic. I read his blog too, you know. After all, he always unearths the best dirt." His voice was light, friendly, and almost genuine. The thread of the conversation had almost turned pleasant. KID held the card close to his face, inspecting it appreciatively. Not at all threatening.

But the Baron had gone very tense. KID went on. "You tell her anything, you even mention my name, and I'll tell him everything about you." These words? They were undeniably a threat, and they were delivered with a cold, vicious conviction.

The card was released, fluttering down to the floor. A final poisonous pleasantry was delivered. "Have a wonderful night, Baron." The thief waved jauntily as he wandered towards the building edge. There he paused, with one last thing to say. "Feel free to tell your son I say hi." The patronizing cheerfulness of his voice may as well have been nails on a chalkboard for how it seemed to grate on the Baron's ears.

KID gave one more charming grin before he slipped over the edge, disappearing into the night with nothing more than a flap of cloth in the wind.

The Baron remained a little longer, absently grinning at nothing.

Chapter End Notes

spoilers: the real villain is me
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 4: Drop to the Floor

He started his mornings early, hours before sunrise. And breakfast. He didn't get to breakfast until thirty minutes before school, which was plenty of time to make some toast and throw a couple of eggs into a pan.

When he finally sat down to eat, he was starving. After his morning exercises, the slight quake in his muscles and the heat rushing under his skin was pleasant and cathartic after nights of cold thoughts and colder dreams.

The TV flickered to life, bringing up the national news: not the channel he had last left it on. He huffed a breath into his toast, spraying a couple crumbs across the countertop.

The subconscious mind was such a frustrating thing.

In bright fluorescent colors, the TV created a frustrating picture: a woman with a round, plump face and deep red lipstick, with intelligent eyes glimmering behind her thick rimmed spectacles. Edogawa Fumiyo, official spokeswoman of the ISHA, aka the Overseers, smiled pleasantly, harmlessly, at a crowd. Against the red and blue of the ISHA paraphernalia, she was standing in stark contrast in the velvet green of her suit behind a polished podium. She spoke in clean, unaccented English with a powerful voice, comforting and bold in the face of millions eyes worldwide.

He didn't hear the words she said, too busy trying to breath steadily around the mounting pressure in his gut and the twist of nausea rising up his throat. The rush of hate in his blood and the cold, anxious feeling of his heart beating in his chest was bitter and familiar, like taking a shot of espresso in the morning. Some people drank coffee; he drank his own hate and fear and terrible helplessness.

Then, the spokeswoman was gone.

On screen, Shimizu of TMS was addressing the audience from behind a white table. Behind her was a backdrop of a city street lined with fluorescent signs decorated with vibrant Chinese characters before a sky of glittering skyscrapers, crowded with bodies and picket signs.

"—in the wake of the attack, authorities called in the Overseers to take control of the situation in Hong Kong."

He swallowed his toast, feeling rough crumbs scrape his throat all the way down. It settled in his gut alongside his simmering rage. The TV screen flashed, changing channels.

Another reporter, this time standing before a familiar propaganda poster of the ISHA, the world's most renowned vigilantes lined up before a shining light. "—the protesters were given the order to disperse. When they refused, the Overseers were forced to intervene—"

His eye twitched. He only allowed the movement because he was alone. The channel switched almost instantaneously. "—leaving fifteen dead and thirty injured. The unregistered vigilante responsible has still not been apprehended but authorities assure—"
Anger twisted into disgust.

Not fast enough, a different news channel appeared, just displaying a on-sight reporter standing before a school flying the American flag, speaking in clear, crisp English. A script of subtitles scrolled by on the bottom of the screen. "—a young high-schooler in Minneapolis, Minnesota has been hospitalized. Current witness reports suggest that he was assaulted by a fellow student with possible metahuman abilities—"

The woman disappeared in a burst of white, replaced by two men, displayed in separate boxes on screen, obviously in different locations. They were both glaring at the camera. One was speaking, in a sharp, rushed tone, in unaccented English. "—we can no longer pretend that we don't have a discrimination problem in this country! These metahuman kids are persecuted and bullied until they lash out—"

The other interrupted in a burst of agitation, arguing right back. "Threatening an entire class of middle-schoolers in not just lashing out! This kid is obviously dangerous and unstable—"

Kids shouldn't be dragged into this. The media had no business arguing about the actions of children on international news.

He reached for a glass of water to wash the crumbs out of his mouth. The next channel didn't last even more than second."—Overseers—" A second was already too much.

His hand tightened on the glass.

Metahumans. Always throwing their weight around.

"—crime rates in Tokyo have been increasing exponentially for years now. There's been a significant increase in supernatural incidents over these past three years. Statisticians and social scientists have been baffled by this unprecedented phenomenon, and while theories are being presented, we still have very little idea as to why—"

Government scientists, always looking in the wrong directions. It's like they didn't even want to find a solution."—thankfully, the Overseers have risen admirably to protect—"
Or maybe they really believed they'd already been handed one. Idiots. "—we can only thank the Overseers for their incredible acts of altruism and bravery—"

They'd get a solution, alright. Whether they wanted one or not.

"—the next generation of heroes—" Heroes, they said.

"—I don't feel threatened. I know the Overseers will protect us—" The Overseers.

"—I mean, you couldn't have the Overseers without metahumans—" Overseers. Overseers. Overseers.

The screen turned black with a static sound. Kaito relaxed his fist, easing the tension out of his fingers. He should know better by now, like his mom, than to watch the news. His mom had wanted to throw the TV out entirely when he moved back in, but he had insisted on keeping it in case any friends came over. He had told her he would be fine, he wouldn't watch it.

His acting skills must have finally caught up to hers, because she believed him.

With a sigh, he booted up his laptop and brought up a web browser, clicking on a site saved in his favorites.
Kudo Shinichi's website had a simple, stylish design and was easy to navigate. Some days, Kaito felt like it was the only reputable news source left in Tokyo.

Or maybe he was biased, because wow, was Shinichi hard on heroes.

On the front-page were the day's links to numerous news articles Shinichi recommended, each one coupled with his own personal commentary. Front and center was Shinichi's own most recent column, a reaction to the same matter the TV had mentioned: the protest that had torn apart Hong Kong in the wake of a metahuman attack.

He scrolled down, noting the familiar headlines of Shinichi's original articles. All of the links were purple.

City Council Meets to Amend Upcoming Insurance Proposition

Disaster Recovery Efforts In Tokyo Begin

Irregulars Confront Threat in Tokyo: Damages Estimated in Millions

Giant Burns Through Downtown Tokyo: Emergency Broadcast

Sakura Loom Responsible for Deaths of Workers in India

Community Mourns Loss of Beloved Baker

Homicide: Baker of Popular Cafe Murdered

KID Announces Heist—

-to be on the same day as police conference.
Kaitou 1412 announced his plans for his next heist last night by hacking into the MPD's website and posting a notice, along with a variety of unflattering pictures of prominent law enforcers. Notably, the declared heist will be held two weeks from now in London, correlating with an upcoming International Police Conference hosted by the European Union. In all likelihood, this is not a coincidence, or rather, this is a challenge to the police. More than that, this may be another attempt by KID to provoke the Overseers. As I have theorized before, KID, since his resurrection, has been challenging the Overseers to confront him directly. As of yet, though, the Overseers have yet to act in response to the revival of Kaitou 1412, beyond a handful of official statements full of coded language and red tape that the average citizen would have difficulty dissecting. Aversion tactics, as if the triumphant return of the world's most famed thief was a unpalatable trend that will eventually blow over. Thankfully, the media has not been so tight lipped.

Before his revival, KID often clashed with the International Superhero Association, particularly the Night Baron. However, after the skirmish and resulting accident of the 13th of February nine years ago, Kaitou KID disappeared entirely from the public eye...

Response: Kaitou KID Thrashes Teen Heroes; Steals 400 Million Yen Diamond

Overseers Do Not Respond to KID's Challenge—and instead send in their sidekicks.

He smirked as he reread the blurb. It was nice to know his intentions hadn't flown completely over everyone's heads. Like all mischief-makers, he lived for the reveal, to know that someone had unraveled the riddle and discovered the intention inside. He glanced at the time as he opened the full article, slightly disappointed to see that it was nearing the hour. Time for school.
The walk to school felt a little surreal. There was something weird about spending a whole week skipping around the world, saving lives and taking down bad guys, and then having to go back to her ordinary high school like nothing at all interesting happened over break. Her school uniform felt too loose and too vulnerable, completely impractical in comparison to the comfortable costume she had taken to wearing after joining the team.

Hakuba's presence grounded her a bit, and made the transition a bit easier. He did not usually walk to school, but she liked to think the reason he made an exception today was for her own comfort and to help her adjust to the shift. She was grateful for it, because even after a day of rest, her muscles still ached with over-exertion, and her head felt like it had been stuffed with cotton.

But he seemed worried this morning, his usual polite attentiveness overwhelmed by concern, if the creases in his forehead were anything to go by.

"Are you thinking about Saturday?" She asked, once the quiet became too much. They were still a good five minutes away from the school, where they wouldn't be able to have this kind of conversation.

Hakuba granted her an apologetic smile. "Yes. I'm sorry, but something about what Shinichi-kun said is bothering me a bit." Shinichi-kun. She felt strange when she heard Hakuba call their mentor's son by his first name, considering when speaking to the other boy directly, he always said 'Kudo-kun'.

"About the missing kid?"

He nodded. "He seems to think the incidents are related. Why? It seems to just be coincidence."

"Well, it makes a better story, I guess."

"Shinichi-kun is not the type to give in to sensationalism." There Aoko had to agree. Kudo was a brutally honest person, especially for a reporter. He seemed to take a great deal of pride in exposing the truth for all to see, never once chasing after the silly, unconfirmed stories other news people chased like wolves. But at the same time, no story was too small or too cruel for Kudo to publish, or at least as far as she knew. Additionally, he always seemed to jump from a single, untelling observation to a confident conclusion, and then chased the idea to its eventual fruition.

"Yeah, but he's always making strange connections from little details." She had never once heard of him being wrong, but...

"True."

"Though, you do that too." Hakuba wasn't too different from the other sharp-minded boy in that manner.

Hakuba sniffed, offended. "I do not. And it's a detective's job to always be attentive to the smallest details and to make deductions based on observations."

Aoko frowned, because, honestly, she hated how her teammate, and leader, put that particular philosophy into action. "And Kaito must be Kaitou KID because he's smart and can do magic tricks." Just the mere suggestion of her best friend, since she was just a little girl, the boy who gave her a rose on the first day he met her to cheer her up, being a super villain, of all things, was enough to upset her. Kaito was mischievous, but he certainly wasn't evil.

"That's not my reasoning." Hakuba denied, but wisely didn't pursue the issue further, lest Aoko
found herself a mop and started swinging (she would never live that one down, would she?).

She knew she had a tendency to get unfairly angry when Hakuba brought it up, but some part of her couldn't help but feel it was justified, considering just how cruel Hakuba's suspicions were. Maybe that was also unfair, because Hakuba didn't know, didn't have any reason to know, why his theory was so disturbing.

So she didn't continue either, carefully setting her jaw shut and ignoring the burning of her eyes. She hadn't even intended to start a fight about it.

So they... just stopped talking.

They were approaching the school gates, anyway, where topics like that were dangerous territory.

In their homeroom, Kaito sat at his desk, reading something on his phone with a bored expression. Briefly, his eyes flickered towards them, a flash of something there, and then back down. And suddenly, she felt guilty. She had been so busy over the spring break that she hadn't managed to fulfill any of the plans they had made. She hadn't even been able to go see the new Gamera with him, like she had promised she would.

But when she sheepishly approached his desk, he set down the phone with a grin and twinkling eyes. Just like that, she couldn't help but feel like she was already forgiven.

"Well, if it isn't the missing lady! Where have you been?" The magician teased, showing off his best mischievous smirk by leaning over the desk towards her.

"Sorry," she grinned right back, "but Kudo-sensei took us to a crime prevention convention all the way in London! It was so cool!"

Well, it wasn't entirely a lie. They had gone, to intervene a 'mass-contamination of law officers with hallucinogenic gas' scheme. After that mess was done, there had even been time for an attempt at capturing KID during his heist the next day. Though, admittedly, that had been a rather embarrassing disaster.

But she would get that damn thief next time.

"Really, you were in London?" Something she didn't like flickered in Kaito's eyes. Suddenly, she regretted mentioning London. "Did you go to the KID heist?" The question was casual, not even a hitch, but lacked some of the usual exuberance she once associated with Kaito's every movement.

For a second, she hesitated to answer. "Yeah. I got to see the Irregulars almost catch him."

"Now I know you didn't go." Kaito clicked his tongue, picking up his phone and showing her the screen. A familiar news site clearly presented an article reading "Kaitou KID Thrashes Teen Heroes; Steals 400 Million Yen Diamond".

Aoko deflated. It was frustrating seeing such reports when they all worked so hard. She wanted to catch the longtime and infamous super villain: for her father, for Kaito, for the taskforce, and for Hakuba too. It was the whole reason she joined the Irregulars in the first place. She wanted to be able to say she was in the hero business just to help people and fight monsters like the other day, but in the end, she still had to go home to a lonely house and hope her father didn't get spend all night uselessly going over the same reports again. If she caught KID, all that would come to an end. They could have time as a family again, and maybe Kaito would finally be able to smile the same way he used to.
But so far she'd proven to be better at taking down monsters than thieves.

"Don't look so down." Kaito's voice brought her back to homeroom. "KID's gone uncaught for over two decades. A bunch of amateurs like the Irregulars didn't stand a chance. They should have just left it to the big shots." Kaito slumped back, lackadaisical and careless. The cold steel in her eyes made her mouth go dry. "But I guess the Overseers are just too busy to care about something like that."

The lazy, uncaring sourness in his voice almost made her flinch. She bit the inside of her lip, drawing into herself, trying to think of a way to disagree without being… inconsiderate.

"The Overseers would be foolish to waste their time with the likes of KID. And, I think what the Irregulars did was admirable." Aoko jolted, turning to find Hakuba a meter away, and flushed. She had been so happy to see Kaito after the long break that she'd forgotten Hakuba was even there. He smiled at her, proud and comforting. She couldn't help but stand taller. "Not to mention what happened Saturday."

"Well, it wouldn't be Tokyo if there wasn't some kind of giant monster wrecking havoc." Kaito muttered sarcastically. He had a point, with the rising number of disasters, natural and not, they'd all been growing desensitized over the past few years. It all had seemed so big and out of her control, and yet so far away before she'd developed powers that Aoko had never paid it much more thought than she would a monsoon or earthquake. Now, though, she could move water with her mind and fought super villains after school. "The Overseers didn't even show up for that either."

Hakuba's lips were drawn in a tight line. "I'm sure they felt there was no need."

Aoko knew exactly where this conversation was going, but couldn't bring herself to stop it.

"Well, they've been wrong before. Didn't you guys watch Kudo's broadcast?" Kaito's handsome features settled into an aggravated sneer. It was an expression she had difficulty getting used, when Kaito first came back to Ekoda. Now, it was familiar and didn't bother her as much. "Not that I think the Overseers themselves could have done much better. Who knows, they might have just wrecked more of the city." Kaito's voice was rising near the end of his accusation, catching attention from their peers. Some of their classmates had been watching already. Shoulders tensed defensively all around the room.

Aoko winced as Keiko came up to her side, frowning and shoulderign Hakuba out of the way. "Geez, Kuroba, you're always like this." Almost everybody Aoko knew was an Overseers fan, almost zealously so. So was she, in some ways. Everybody knew somebody who knew somebody who'd life had been saved because a selfless hero had put himself or herself in danger instead. "Shouldn't we all just be grateful that the Overseers risk their lives to protect us?"

Kaito rolled his eyes, exaggerating the movement. "Sorry if I don't buy into the brainwashing our super powered police state tries to spoon-feed us."

Around the room, people bristled, glaring at Kaito with unveiled resentment. Aoko intervened before things could get any worse, keeping her voice light but firm in an effort to disperse some of the tension building in the room. "Nobody's being brainwashed, Kaito. I think it's a good thing people look up to heroes. The world needs more of them."

Kaito's dark, brilliant eyes turned back to her, gleaming. "Oh, would you join the Overseers if you had a chance, Ahoko?"

She felt her face turn red and her shoulders rose. "Of—of course!" she stuttered, looking around the room for help. "Who wouldn't?"
Her classmates all agreed heartily, nodding with grin. In an instant, the room for flooded by conversation, everyone excitedly chattering in each other's ears.

"Man, what I'd give to be an Overseer!"

"And to have super powers!"

"I've dreamed about that ever since I was a little kid!"

In the mounting chaos of laughter and teenage fancy, Kaito stood from his desk and began to saunter towards the door, face pulled in a scowl. "Kaito!" She called after him, following.

He gave her a bemused look, pinching his brows together. "I'm just going to the bathroom before class starts."

She didn't believe that. "Okay," she said anyway. The next words she said with no small amount of trepidation, biting the inside of her lip in between breathes. "But...you know what happened to your dad wasn't the Overseers fault, right? It was that awful thief's fault." Kaito's eyes met hers, saturated and dark, and his face gave nothing away. She struggled to find what she wanted to say, around the burning in her chest. "The Overseers work hard to stop stuff like that. To...make sure nobody else has to grow up without a father." The words seemed to choke her on the way up. "Or a mother."

For a moment there was silence. Kaito studied her face, as if measuring how much she really believed that. His eyebrows went up, a soft, questioning expression. "Then why don't they catch him, Aoko?"

His voice, prompting, hurt. "They're trying!" The burning in her eyes was just from the bad air quality, she told herself as she tried to reign her emotions back in. "I'm...sure they're trying."

Kaito pierced her with a look, dark and pitying, like she was a stupid kid who didn't understand the realities of the world. "Whatever." He muttered, turning away, but she didn't need to see his face to recognize the disdain in his voice. "They're all nothing but cowards and freaks." She watched his back as he moved down the hall, something hot and heavy rising in her throat.

"You're not the only one who's lost somebody, Kaito!" The words burst out before she could swallow them back down, and they rang through the empty hall.

Her next breath tasted like ash in her mouth. Just the stupid air pollution.

Settling back down at her desk felt like admitting defeat, and she distracted herself with messing with her backpack so she wouldn't have to meet anyone's eyes. Somewhere in front of her, Hakuba was looming and gesticulating quietly. "You can't say it's not suspicious!"

"Oh, come on, Hakuba-kun." Her words came out with only half the brevity she meant them to have. "He just says all that to be contrary and rile everyone up." Kaito was that kind of infuriating guy. "It's like when he supports the rival baseball team, or makes fun of new trends. Or... when he plays Devil's advocate for the antimetas. He just likes to get on people's nerves. Kaito doesn't mean half the stuff he says." And if he was cruel about how he went about it... that was practically expected. Because Kaito was angry and lashing out at a world that couldn't seem to find a place for him.

Hakuba snorted ungracefully, disdain coloring his tone. "We're in agreement there, Aoko-kun, but I
think we have very different ideas of which half."

Aoko bit her lip and busied herself with pulling out her notebook and pencil case.

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Shinichi knew the Tokyo MPD main headquarters probably too well for a second year high-school student. He'd been here at least one a month for as long as he could remember, usually to follow up on witness reports or provide the police with evidence from one of his investigations, but sometimes for questioning.

Today, it was somewhere between the first and last.

Fine, so maybe Shinichi had been illegally trespassing.

But Hattori had apparently kept his mouth shut about the whole lock picking business, so things didn't look too bad.

Takagi tapped his pen on his police notebook nervously, eyes shifting from the page to Shinichi's eyes with slight trepidation. Behind him, slouching in a chair in the back of the room, a larger, rougher man was fiddling with a toothpick, worrying it between his teeth.

Takagi made a sound, drawing Shinichi's attention back to himself. "Ah, Kudo-kun, what makes you say these, uh, birdmen are kidnapping children again?"

Shinichi felt his mouth twitch in disdain at the officer's summary. As if such a complicated situation could be summed up so simply. But if there was one thing Shinichi knew, it was how to use his words, and how to use them with such certainty that skeptics wasted so much time searching for his doubts that they forgot about their own. "I told you, runaway kids have been disappearing for months now. That warehouse was one of the sights some of them were last seen, and it was rigged up as a trap."

Takagi chuckled. It was a weak sound. "Come on, Kudo-kun, you know something like that is hard to believe…" The officer's almost jocular voice faded underneath Shinichi's smothering glare.

Takagi's partner leaned back in his chair, posture casual, but his eyes were sharp, meeting Shinichi's gaze head-on even when Takagi backed down. Date Wataru was the image of a good cop, reliable and tough and just rough enough around the edges to be intimidating. He was the sandpaper on Takagi's flipside. And when he spoke, it was with a hard, firm voice. "The kids could just have moved elsewhere in the city, because of all the recent fires. Some of them went home. Nobody has actually seen anyone getting kidnapped."

"No," Shinichi had to acquiesce that. There were no witnesses, or if there had been, they'd disappeared in the ashes of each blaze. "But they definitely were kidnapped."

Date didn't look impressed. "What makes you so sure?" Not for the first time, Shinichi wished Date wasn't in the room. Manipulating Takagi was much easier when his more keen partner wasn't hanging around being skeptical.

He had felt it. But he couldn't tell them that. Metaphysical psychic visions and invasions weren't considered viable evidence in court, because of the difficult matters of mental illness, freedom of thought, and the right to privacy. "Look, I have pictures of one of the other warehouses." Shinichi had learnt from an early age that photographic or recorded evidence was the only kind that would make it in both the public eye and the courtroom. He fished his fresh prints out of his pocket, pushing the glossy photos over the table for Takagi to see. The officer glanced over them, uncomprehending.
"This just looks like a soon to be condemned building to me, Kudo-kun..."

"Pay attention to the footsteps in the dust and the graffiti. None of these match the styles of gangs in the city—"

Takagi interrupted, shaking his head. "Looks right to me...sorry." Shinichi could feel the heavy weight of Date's no bullshit stare and bit the inside of his lip. Takagi was usually very open and credulous to his thoughts and theories, but today it almost seemed like the officers in the station were resolved to discourage and dismiss him.

Resisting the urge to express his frustration, Shinichi switched tactics. "Tequila said they were there to pick something up, that they had a quota to meet. They were talking about city kids." A quota for children: the concept itself was inherently terrifying, and just got worse the more he thought about it.

Takagi hesitated uncertainly, briefly glancing back at this partner. Date, taking his cue, stood up and came to the table. He leaned over the edge, first glimpsing at the photos, then meeting Shinichi’s glare with steady, certain eyes. "They could have been talking about anything. Probably drugs."

Drugs.

Tequila hadn't been talking about drugs. But the word did catch Shinichi's attention. Drugs, pharmaceuticals, experiments...

Unaware of the new turn Shinichi's thoughts had taken, the two officers exchanged a quick series of glances and motions, obviously communicating in a way only longtime teams managed to. Regaining confidence, Takagi straightened with a tight, uncomfortable smile. "Look, Kudo-kun, you had a stressful day yesterday, and you've been working a lot recently. You're tired and stressed, and it's making you come to wild conclusions. I'm sure if you take a break and relax, you'll come to realize that there's no evidence of these incidents being related."

Shinichi kept careful control over his expression, forcing all the anger and aggravation out of his face. He didn't need platitudes. He didn't need a break. He needed someone to help him find over two-dozen kidnapped children and bring the monsters that hurt and terrorized them to justice. With his mouth set in a firm line, he refused to show just how desperate he was. "I'm not being irrational, Detective Takagi."

The officer's gaze was earnestly concerned, but Shinichi couldn't stand how it reminded him of Ran's worried glances and secretive eyes. Takagi's voice was just as fretful. "You fell out of a helicopter on Saturday, didn't you? Are you sure you're alright?"

He had forgotten about the helicopter, actually. How come he was the only one who could see what was important in this damn city? "Just a hazard of my work. I'm not traumatized, Detective."

"Nobody's saying you are." Takagi's voice was placating and well practiced. Obviously, it was something he learned comforting kids and anxious parents. "But these kinds of near death experiences can have serious affects, Kudo-kun. If you need to talk with someone—"

His carefully controlled temper snapped free, and suddenly Shinichi was standing. The chair behind him clattered, almost tipping over to the floor. The next words came out too loud, too vicious. "I need to talk with someone, alright. I need to talk to you, the police, about this kidnapping ring!"
Date's hand slammed down on the table, and both he and Takagi flinched away from it. There was a finger in his face suddenly, Date towering over him even from the other side of the table, Date's rugged features twisted into something commanding and fierce. "There is no kidnapping ring, kid! Just you, working yourself up over some strung together conspiracy theory!"

Conspiracy?

Conspiracy?

If there was a conspiracy, it wasn't about the machinations of the birdmen!

Shinichi took a breath, and recognized defeat. Continuing to fight this would just hurt his own case. From the start, there was nothing he could do to convince these men. They had decided he was wrong from the beginning—no, someone had told them he was wrong. Or at least told them to make sure he thought they thought he was wrong.

Ugh, he was so going to write a nasty column about this.

Shinichi retook his seat, forcing a casual posture. Both Date and Takagi stared at him, caught off guard by his apparent nonchalance. And, no doubt, they were suddenly feeling awkward for losing their cool.

They weren't the only ones that could play mind games. And they certainly didn't get to be the ones who walked out of the room feeling mature.

He let the silence reign for a moment, giving both officers a chance to collect themselves. Then, he prompted, "so what's going to happen to the case of the birdmen?"

Takagi notably relaxed, looking relieved. While the detective could handle himself in high-tension situations, he'd always been weak to social confrontation: he took the reprieve Shinichi offered almost gladly. "The Overseers have requested jurisdiction over it. It'll be handed over to them, probably."

He hid how that rankled him. If the Overseers were going to be handling the case, then even if it was properly investigated, Shinichi would never know the full details. He'd get the same watered-down version they fed the rest of the public.

Not that the regular police were likely to throw him a bone this time around either. Shinichi slumped back in his seat with an aggravated sigh. It was hopeless, without evidence, nobody would listen to him.

"You're lucky Heliopause got there when he did, Kudo-kun. We're all glad you're alright."

Evidence. His camera was in evidence. "What about my camcorder?"

"What?"

"Is my camcorder alright?"

Takagi blinked, furrowing his brows in confusions. "No—no, it's in pieces. Melty pieces. It's, uh, probably unfixable."

Shinichi had figured as much, but… "And the memory card?"

"Also ruined."
Of course. "Everything on it's completely irretrievable?"

Takagi checked the notes on his clipboard, then shook his head. "Sorry. We couldn't get anything off it."

The police couldn't, but Shinichi had connections they didn't. Maybe Professor Agasa could get something off the card, and if not, Shinichi had other resources. "When can I expect to get it back?"

Takagi stared at him, mouth hanging open. "You want it back?"

"Yes."

"Well, uh, we weren't expecting you—" Both officer's phones buzzed in unison. They looked at each other, then Date checked his while Takagi turned back to Shinichi. "I mean, it's evidence. And the ISHA investigators will probably want it. They might be able get more from it than we will."

Great. "And then?" Date frowned at his phone, expression grave. With a headshake to the door, a clear message of we have to get going to Takagi, he was out of the room.

Takagi watched him go, obviously wary of whatever news they'd received. Distracted, he answered, "We'll get it back for you. Promise." If the Overseers were taking his camera too, it'd be months before Shinichi saw it again. Takagi stood from his chair and gathered his clipboard. "Listen, I have got to get going. No—no more breaking into ware—anywhere. No more of that. And try, try to stay out of trouble. Please. I don't think Inspector Megure's blood pressure can take much more of this."

Megure's blood pressure. Ha. It would take a lot more than high blood pressure to take down Megure.

But Shinichi recognized a dismissal when he was given one. He gave Takagi a quick noncommittal nod, and watched the officer hurry back into the hall. Outside, the station had gotten considerably more busy, officers and office workers hurrying around with tense faces and lots of urgent commanding voices.

Something was going on.

Good. He needed to get his camera back, and he needed a new scent to chase.

Thankfully, he knew exactly where to find the evidence locker. And where better to accidentally overhear bad news than the MPD Headquarters?

Three minutes later, his thoughts were rushing as he listened in on a furious conversation: "There's been a break in. A security guard called in, saying that a large group of men with guns and armor were busting in—"

A break in at a military research lab.

Shinichi paused. Two other research labs had been robbed months ago, in quick succession. One private pharmaceutical company, the other a Chemical Engineering building affiliated with Touou University. By the time the police had arrived at one, the other was already being cracked open.

Now, a high-security facility under the protection of the Japanese military was being hit. The timing was strange, since the sun had just set, and the night was only barely setting in. It was still early.
Shinichi grabbed his phone, pulling up the military base's address, and put in a quick search.

They had stayed together as school let out: Aoko followed Kaito out of Ekoda High and into the denser streets of the city. Some part of Aoko felt the need to make up for the morning, and the rest of her just wanted to spend more time with Kaito.

Now, hours later and their homework done, the tension of the morning seemed to have slipped out of him entirely, his trademark easy going slouch falling over his shoulders easily, and the harsh edges of his face seemed to soften in the hazy evening sun. She liked this Kaito best: elfish and relaxed, slotting into his environment like the world was made just for him.

He caught her looking, deep indigo eyes finding hers. A little flustered, Aoko scrambled for something to say. "What did you do over break, while I was gone?" It was a fair question. She still felt badly about leaving him alone for the entire break, since he rarely ever went out with anyone else.

Kaito shrugged carelessly, inspecting the store windows they walked by. Whether he noticed her embarrassment or just didn't care wasn't clear. He had a way of seeming disconnected from everything, even when melding perfectly into a crowd. "Worked on some new tricks, mostly, and visited my mom."

Aoko blinked. She hadn't realized that she wasn't the only one to leave the country. "Is she still planning to stay in Las Vegas?" Kaito's mother, Chikage, was a distant, vague figure in Aoko's mind. While she'd seen the woman often when she was a child, it had been years since then. But Aoko would always remember how easily Kaito's mother could get her laughing until her sides ached. Sadly, that jolly woman wasn't the one trapped in her memory these past few years: instead, Aoko's clearest memory was of the tall, black figure of a widow standing before a grave.

Kaito hummed. "I don't think she ever intends to come back."

"Oh..." Aoko tried not to sound too disappointed. When Kaito had suddenly moved back into his old house two years before, Aoko had been expecting his mother to not be far behind. "Why did you? Come back, I mean." Losing was parent was hard enough, but leaving the other at such a young age? She couldn't even imagine leaving her dad to live on her own, and her dad wasn't even the most present father around.

Kaito smiled, just a little, and gave the city street a fond look over, his eyes lingering on the tall, dark figure of the clock tower on the horizon. "I like Japan more than America, I guess. I never really thought over there as home, you know?" But as he looked away from the tower, back towards east, the corners of Kaito's lips turned down, just slightly. "And, I...I didn't want to run from it anymore. I want to face it head on." His eyes focused on the shadows of Tokyo is the distance, all towering skyscrapers and sharp steel edges.

Aoko took a step closer to him, bumping his shoulder with her own. "I'm glad you came home. I missed you, you know." She'd said the words before, and she'd probably say them again, but it always felt important to say them.

Kaito turned back to her with a laugh, eyes twinkling in the sunlight. "Don't be so cheesy, Aoko!"

He nudged her right back playfully, fingers prodding towards her hips to tickle her with a mischievous grin. Giggling, she pushed him away, trying to control her breath enough to pretend to huff.
These were the moments that made it all seem worth it: that made the rest of the world and all its ensuing responsibilities and fears fade away.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, sharp and urgent. Instantly, she sobered, and Kaito pulled away.

A message from Hakuba, sent to the entire team: there had been another lab robbery, and the detective was sure the culprits were going to strike again.

"I need to make a call," she said as she moved away at a run, aiming for the less populated alleyway down the street. Thankfully, Kaito didn't follow, and instead pulled out his own phone.

A relief, because she had no idea how to explain the conversation she was about to have.

She activated the comms hidden in her earrings, swinging them up into her ears and was immediately met with a flurry of conversation.

"Got any ideas where they're hittin' next?" Kazuha's voice was sharp, urgent, but still had a unnerving echo that was somehow worse over comms. Times like this, it made Aoko queasy.

Hakuba hummed. He sounded less concerned than Kazuha, managing a tone that sat perfectly between relaxed and serious, like he had everything under control. "Too many possibilities to say for sure. Every lab in Tokyo is a target. But I think I've narrowed the list down to the most likely hits."

"How many you got?" Hattori was on the line as well, and Aoko would bet Ran was listening in too. She'd probably been the last to enter the conversation.

"Four." That was still too many.

"And there's five of us. How should we split up?"

Hakuba paused, just for a moment, before he answered. "Ran and Aoko will pair up—"

"What?" Aoko yelped into the mic before she could stop herself, aggravation prickling her nerves all over again. "Hakuba-kun, Ran should go with you!" She didn't need a babysitter! Especially if Kazuha was being allowed to go alone, despite having been on the team for a couple months longer than Aoko herself.

Hakuba's voice turned stern, "Aoko-kun, you're not supposed to be going solo—" Not supposed to do this, not supposed to do that. She hated being underestimated.

"I can handle myself! I've got superpowers! A bunch of thieves will be no problem." Probably. She'd been doing really well, the past couple of weeks! And had practically saved the day on Saturday, even if her performance hadn't been perfect. And Hattori had been the one to screw up yesterday, and he still got to act solo.

Hakuba made a frustrated sound, like a teacher faced with a disobedient student. But before he could speak, and maybe yell at her, Ran's calm voice cut in, soft and reasonable. "How about you two team up, then?"

It was a better suggestion, she had to admit: Aoko had the superpowers, and Hakuba had the combat skill and training.

It was good enough for Hakuba, at least, but maybe he just didn't want to waste anymore time arguing about it. "Fine. Aoko and I will take Nanyo University. The rest of you, split up the other
three locations. Aoko, I'll meet you there." There was no room for any more protests. Aoko frowned, knowing no one could see it, and tried to ignore the sulky feeling in her gut. But it was quickly fading anyway, with the buzz of adrenaline and nerves of a mission.

"Got it." She affirmed and cut the comm connection, turning back out of the alleyway to find Kaito on the other side of the street, leaning against a storefront window, still playing with his phone. She hurried across to him, picking up her pace into a run, already planning the fastest way to the university. "Sorry, Kaito, but I have to go!"

He looked up as she rushed right past him. "Wha—hey! Aoko!"

She felt a little guilty, ditching him half way through their day together, but this? This was important. She was doing something important. Something that mattered.

And that made it worth it.

Except, apparently Kaito wasn't getting the message. He appeared by her side, matching her pace easily, as if they were just on a jog. "Hey, hold up! What's the problem, where you headed?"

She barely glanced at him, instead focusing on finding the subway station. "I have to get to Nanyo University right now!"

There! The stairs down under the road came into sight on the next corner, and she took the steps four at a time, dodging in between less-than-pleased commuters.

"Watch it!" Someone snarled as she barreled her way to the ticket machines, Kaito still hot on her heels. Hell, he was outpacing her, slitting through obstacles like it was easy. Even as she struggled with the ticket dispersal, he was already through the turntables, calling back to her. "What for?"

Shit. Why would she be going to a university all of a sudden? What was it Hattori always said? When in doubt, blame Kudo-sensei? Right. "Uhh, a seminar!" The machine finally spat out her ticket. She ripped it free and all but jammed it into the turntables. "I completely forgot that Kudo-sensei wanted us to attend a seminar there today. If I go now, I should still make it!"

He tried to hurry right past Kaito again, but he popped right back into view. "I'll come with you!"

"What? No!" Her answer came too sharply, trying to figure out which line she wanted. Kaito caught her arm and dragged her over to a train waiting on the left. The doors were about to close, but they seemed to pause just long enough for them to slip through.

She glared at Kaito as the train lurched into motion, but he just grinned back, completely unrepentant.

"Why not? I've been meaning to check the place out anyway. And I'm not sure you'll actually get there without me." She would have figured it out eventually! Just, maybe not in time to make the right train. Not knowing how to argue, she looked elsewhere, out the windows into the darkness, at the other passengers, at Kaito's fingers tangled in one of the canvas handles hanging from the roof. He had such strong hands, a little rough, a little too defined. A workman's hands.

He filled the silence for her, unquestioning. That, at least, she was grateful for. "We're lucky it's so close by."

Something told her she wasn't getting rid of him anytime soon. Hakuba was going to kill her. "Ye—yeah..."
Kaito got them to the university in record time, that is, until they reached the front gates, which were very obviously locked. From within the guard booth, a man in a cap and badge glared at them as Kaito argued with him uselessly. "Look, you can't come in." The guard grumbled, obviously tired.

Aoko tapped her foot impatiently, and bit her lip. She tried to give the guard her best innocent look, widening her eyes in the way that always worked for Kazuha. "But there's this seminar I really have to be at and-"

The guard wasn't having any of it. "That's just too bad. It's getting late, classes are ending, and the campus is on level 1 lockdown. Only students and faculty with ID are allowed on campus right now." Great, she was going to have to break in. Though, this was a convenient chance to leave Kaito behind and change into costume.

Just as she was contemplating the best thing to say, a new voice called out from behind the gate. "Ah, is that you, Aoko-san?" Another guard was hurrying towards them, badge glinting in the low light of the falling twilight.

The guard in the booth frowned at his fellow. "You know this kid, Miwa-san?"

Miwa! She remembered him as one of the many officers she met over the years. He had worked with her father for a while, and had always been nice to her, even letting her dress-up in gear or teaching her the ropes.

"Yes. She's Inspector Nakamori's daughter. I met her back when I worked on the KID taskforce a year ago." Miwa smiled at her, nodding. "What are you doing here, Aoko-san?"

This was really a stroke of good luck. "There's a seminar I need to get into today for my job."

"Really? Well, what's the harm? Let's let them in, Nishiki-san."

Finally, a stroke of luck. Aoko could hardly believe it. Miwa led them through campus at a jaunty pace, but Aoko had no idea where exactly they were being led. "Hey, Miwa-san, what's going on? Why's the campus of lockdown all of a sudden?"

Miwa made a face. "We got a tip saying that we are gonna be targeted by those guys robbing research labs. We don't think the tip is real, but considering what's going on at the military base, we figured better safe than sorry."

Kaito perked up immediately. "Who was the source?"

"You two won't believe this, but they claimed to be Kudo Shinichi on the phone."

"Kudo Shinichi?" Aoko squeaked, embarrassingly. Thankfully, Kaito did too. "Really?"

"The boss is a big fan of his blog, so I think that's the only reason we're giving it any credit at all." A beeping interrupted, calling Miwa's attention to his radio. He gave them an apologetic smile. "Sorry, kids. Gotta get back to work." They watched him hurry away, unashamedly listening. "Miwa, here...What? The Overseers called?"

Kaito's shoulders tightened. For a moment, she felt dread drip down her back. But Kaito relaxed and turned back to her with an easy smile. "Guess we'd better get to that seminar, huh?"

Aoko tried to hide her relief, and led them inside the first building she landed eyes on. She had no
idea what department this building hosted. "Ye-yeah. Actually, Kaito, why don't you go on ahead and get us seats? I need to run to the bathroom."

"Sure. What room is it?"

"Uh..." This was a terrible idea. Oh god, she was going to have some serious explaining to do once this was over. "Room 4067!" Please, let this place have that many rooms. "On, uh, the fifth floor? I'll catch up to you there!"

Kaito gave her a look. "Fifth floor? Hey, Aoko, hold on! This building has only got four floors!"

But Aoko was already gone.

Figuring out which lab was the next target had been the easy part. There had been four likely targets, all relatively low security university labs, with three kilometers of the military lab. Three he disregarded due to the heavy traffic, highways, and city hubs that laid between them and the thieves' original position, which left two. The routes to reach those labs would take too much time: time the culprits couldn't afford. One was placed too closely to a police station, which would decrease response time by up to fifteen minutes.

All that had been left was Nanyo University's Biochemistry and Human Genetics Building.

After writing a quick note on his blog, vague and moderately coded, but still specific enough that someone with a bit of effort could figure out where he went, lest something happened to him tonight, he called up the campus police.

Three rerouted calls later, the university had been warned. Getting on campus itself hadn't been difficult.

But now that he was at the Genetics building, locked down and surrounded by campus police, he wasn't sure what to do. The thieves, whoever they were, were professional. Would they hesitate before a thin line of soft campus officers, or would they call the whole job off with the threat of a quick police response? Or, would they simply force their way through?

And most importantly, where should Shinichi best position himself to catch them in the act?

A minute passed, his mind running with too many ideas, before the line of police broke temporarily, responding to some commotion on the other side of the building.

Recognizing a chance for what it was, Shinichi drew the hood of his sweater lower over his face and sprinted for one of the building's door. It was protected by a old fashioned keypad.

What luck.

Shinichi took a steadying breath and tentatively dragged his fingers over the keys. When he closed his eyes, memories came to him, and he moved his fingers along with the muscle memory that came rushing in.

6.7.2.4.9.

There was the soft, dull click of door unlocking. Shinichi slipped in, as quick as a viper, as voices started coming back, sharp and urgent. The police line was reforming.

He found himself in a concrete stairwell, another door leading into the beige halls of the Genetics
It was a typical university hall, as far as he could tell, long hallways lined with identical wooden doors marked by number and nameplates. Checking the map showed that the building was levels and levels of lab rooms and the occasional lecture hall, topped by offices and administration.

Not the kind of place one usually expected to be hit by a militant group of thieves. What was the MO? Not quick cash, that was for sure.

"Good evening!" A voice called to his left, with an unforgettable lilt. Shinichi turned to find a man in all white sauntering up to his side, with a broad smile of shiny ivory teeth.

Shinichi stared. "Kaitou KID! What are you doing here?" Of all places for KID to show up, this wasn't one Shinichi would have ever predicted. The first ridiculous conclusion that came to mind was that KID was part of the lab thieves.

Yeah, right. There was nothing glamorous about robbing a university: and something told Shinichi that the Dean of Chemistry wasn't hoarding the Crown Jewels in his office.

Recognizing his incredulous look, KID shrugged. "Heard somebody else was robbing the place, figured I'd drop by and research their techniques and maybe seize some spoils for myself." Oh, man. Kaitou KID really did read his blog. Or maybe he was a university student. Maybe a university student that read his blog. "What are you doing here, stringer?"

Shinichi paused. He had only encountered the internationally infamous thief a couple of times before. The first meeting could only be called that generously, when Shinichi was covering a story by popular demand of his readers. KID had announced that he was going to steal away a local landmark, sparking a ruckus throughout Tokyo. Shinichi had successfully deduced that KID's intentions weren't quite hat everyone assumed right from the start, and ran interference, but in the end, he and KID had only caught glimpses of each other.

The next time, Shinichi had hunted the thief down for an interview, trying to catch a scoop on the enigmatic man's identity and motive.

The interview, if it could even be called that, hadn't gone quite as he expected, aka really out of hand aka batshit insane, but they had maintained an simple acquaintanceship since. He had discovered many other things about KID: namely, that the thief was an excellent conversationalist, when he wasn't being an absolute nuisance, and that talking with him was a lot easier than it should have been.

"Getting a story, duh. Somebody needs to figure who these guys are and what they want." It was easy to say that kind of thing to KID. The thief's cocky confidence had a tendency to make Shinichi's own bold certainty, the burning fire that kept him going, the sure knowledge that he was the only one for the job, rear its head and present itself proudly. And KID could hardly judge him for his lack of faith in the more official avenues.

KID laughed. "Can't think of anyone better...but, ah, how did you even get in here?"

"Are you, of all people, seriously asking me that question?" Shinichi muttered incredulously. "I've got a freelance press pass, you know."

"Right. I should get myself one of those."

Shinichi doubted KID didn't already have tens of them. But there were more important things to discuss. "KID, what are you really here for?"

"Maybe I want to help."
Not comforting. Shinichi himself had written articles on what Kaitou KID seemed to consider helping. "Help stop the culprits, or abet them?"

"Haven't decided yet. Feel free to convince me, stringer." That wasn't an answer, but Shinichi didn't have a chance to push the issue. There was suddenly a great deal more noise filtering in from outside, and he and KID exchanged quick looks. Coming to a mutual agreement immediately, they made their way towards the source, carefully darting around corners and between doorways. Soon, they found themselves on a landing, peering down into a more open room that broke into separate halls. A group of men, dressed in dark body armor and armed to the teeth were in the process of splitting up into pairs. In less than a second, Shinichi had his camera out, snapping a quick picture. By his side, KID let out a low whistle, almost indistinguishable from his breath, and pulled out...binoculars. "Well, look who we have here."

Shinichi ignored him, focusing on the picture as the military-grade strike team dispersed below them. Their uniforms didn't seem to have any identifying characteristics, except for what looked like a red smudge on one of their left shoulders. He zoomed in on the scrap of red, and as the picture refocused, it revealed a badge, a lean, feline figure on deep scarlet. He stared at the mark for a moment. It was familiar, somehow, and he struggled to realign the image to a distant recollection.

Red Cat. Red Cats. Something was missing—"The Red Siamese Cats?"

KID glanced Shinichi's way briefly, quickly catching on. In the shadow of his hat, he made a face. "That's such a mouthful." It certainly wasn't very catchy. But Shinichi supposed these particular bioterrorists had given up on good publicity ages ago. "Who are they?" KID asked, and Shinichi looked at him, surprised.

Because, seriously? An ageless master thief deeply embroiled in the criminal underworld and a renowned super villain didn't know about the Red Siamese Cats?

Typical KID. Too busy boosting his ego, and being all around mad, to pay attention to the important happenings of the world.

"An eco terrorist group from ages ago." Shinichi explained, moderately annoyed and recalling what he knew of them. He'd been just a kid when the Cats had been last notably active. "Their leader is supposed to still be in jail."

"Guess they found a new one."

He took a better look at the group, using the zoom on his new camcorder. One of the armored men was definitely taking point, but was probably just a field team leader rather than the actual brains behind whatever this operation was attempting to achieve. "What could they possibly want from here, though?"

"Who cares?" KID grumbled, the binoculars disappearing from his hands. "The Irregulars are already here. They'll take care of it."

Shinichi froze. The Irregulars were here already? "Are all of them here?"

KID shrugged, turning away from the troop of terrorists below to examine the halls for other points of entry and exit. "I have no idea. I just saw the blue young lady." Tsuyu. That was bad. Something about his expression must have given his concern away, because KID was suddenly focused on him, expression tight. "Why, is she in trouble? Do these guys have dangerous powers or something?"
Shinichi shook his head, taking KID's concern in stride. "No, they won't have metahumans with them." Or at least, it would be completely irrational if they did. KID was obviously suspicious about his answer. "What makes you say that?"

"The Red Siamese Cats are a bio terrorist organization that started as a metahuman hate group. They blame metahuman activity for the decline of climate stability and increase of environmental disasters." It was not an entirely unpopular opinion, just one that most supporters didn't like to speak aloud.

Nor was it entirely unfounded.

"Oh, great. Angry purists with guns and explosives." KID muttered sarcastically. "The only thing that could make this better is if they were racist. Oh boy, are they racists? I hope they're racists." Shinichi glared at him, as if that could make the wacky thief take this seriously. KID put up his hands in a placating gesture. "Ok, ok, if they aren't metahumans, what's the problem? The Irregulars should be able to handle this easily."

"No. That's the problem. These guys are specially equipped to take down metahumans, with a vengeance. The Irregulars are in serious trouble." Shinichi had seen what some antimeta technology was capable of, and it wasn't pretty. And that was just the stuff the police and government used to control rogues and villains. Who knew what the Cats were packing, and how willing they'd be to use it on a hero still so wet behind the ears. "Especially Tsuyu: she's inexperienced, and terrible at hand to hand combat." It was obvious from the way Tsuyu moved that she wasn't well accustomed to the battlefield. Maybe later in her career, with the proper teaching and instruction, she could have the same fluid, trained movements of the other Irregulars, but right now she'd be mincemeat to professionals like the Cats.

Heart beating fast, Shinichi started to pull himself to his feet, half a plan forming in his head already. KID caught his arm and dragged him back down before he could get far.

"Whoa there, where do you think you're going?" KID hissed, and Shinichi glared at the white-gloved hand gripping his forearm.

"I have to warn her!" He snapped right back, trying to jerk free. He hated being manhandled. But KID held fast.

"You'll just get in the way, stringer. I'll go warn her. You—"

Shinichi felt a familiar rush of outrage. "I'm not just sitting here—"

KID's lips thinned into a severe line. "She will." KID said with a grave certainty that stopped Shinichi cold. The sudden seriousness of the thief's manner was unnerving, but he could respect this cold assurance more than the thief's usual antics. It made KID seem almost reliable.

But Shinichi knew better. KID wasn't exactly much of a fighter himself. "Be careful."

The anger faded as quickly as it came. Shinichi considered the proposition. "We should switch then, because I'm not half as sneaky as you, and will Tsuyu even listen to you?" As far as Shinichi could tell, all the Irregulars hated KID with a passion. He, at least, was a familiar and trustworthy, if troublesome, presence to them.

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The cold facade shattered as KID grinned, broad and full of shining white teeth. "No need."
Shinichi huffed, but allowed the break in tension. "I'm serious. Watch your back."

"Come on, you saying you wouldn't love to write an article on my death? I'd bet you could put together one hell of an obituary."

"I can see it now. Idiot Thief Antagonizes Armed Terrorist into Shooting Him Dead. Hurry up and get in there."

"Heh, see you later, stringer."

Aoko could feel water flowing through the lab, moving through the pipes and winding in the walls and floor. She used the distant, tickling pull of it to ground herself. There was something calming about the flow of water, always present in the back of her mind.

Didn't stop her rapid-fire heartbeat, though. She was glad that the armored man she was creeping behind couldn't hear it, and doubly glad Hakuba hadn't arrived yet. Hakuba's super hearing powers were kinda freaky sometimes.

The thief was moving smoothly down the hall, on the lookout for something, but Aoko didn't have the first clue as to what. Hakuba might have been able to make some guesses, but her comm helpfully told her he was still three kilometers away.

She was on her own, just like she wanted. Except, of course, for the sharp voice in her ear. "I'm only minutes away, Tsuyu. Do not make a move before I get there, understood?"

Aoko bit the inside of her lip. She could hold back and wait for Hakuba, or she could strike now, capture one of the intruders, maybe get some information out of him, or at least steal his radio or something.

And there were still seven or eight other intruders spread throughout the building, doing who knows what. Could she really afford to waste time waiting?

No.

Aoko took a deep breath, in through, the nose, and then released it as she called the water waiting in her pack out. Two gallons would be enough for an ambush.

"I don't that was a good idea." Aoko froze, her blood like ice in her veins, but as a voice whispered from behind her, smooth and too familiar, the chill was lost in a rush of fury. The intruder disappeared down the hall. "It's not a good idea to take on an opponent head on when you don't even know what they're capable of."

**KID.**

She swung around, a tendril of water whipping out like a viper. KID sidestepped out of the strike smoothly, that same infuriating smirk on his lips.

Aoko wanted to smack it right off.

"You're apart of this too?" She snarled, snapping the water back and around in an instant. Kid ducked, allowing the water to pass over the top of his hat by a hair's width.

"No. The opposite, actually." He said, in that velvety, amused voice she was coming to despise. Suddenly, though, he was close. **Really close.** "These guys are bad news, miss. You have to be
Aoko scrambled back, her water whip striking at the thief's feet to keep him from following. "Right. That's why they're robbing a university." Aoko didn't know what this place had that KID wanted, but she sure as hell wasn't going to be fooled by his tricks. "I don't care what you're doing here." Aoko took a deep breath, calling out to the water all around her, and felt the answering tug of the water in the walls, building pressure. "I'm taking you in!" All at once, the water burst out, coming through the sprinklers above their heads and the water fountain down the hall, pouring in from all sides. KID's patronizing smile faltered as he tried to dodge out of the way of the torrential spray.

His hands were up, suddenly, like he was surrendering, but still he danced in between the streams of water she had shooting from all over the hall. "I really shouldn't be your priority here, miss." Yeah, right. Aoko wasn't going to buy that bull. In fact, she wasn't going to listen to a word this trickster said. She tried to catch him off guard, bringing the water up behind him, but just as she had it crashing down over him, he was rolling out of the way. "These guys are specialists in taking down metas."

"Hold still, you bastard." Aoko growled, getting frustrated. Why couldn't she hit him? Water was gushing in from all around them, gathering into long, shimmering tendrils that had all the speed and power of pressurized hoses, but KID was as agile as he was quick, and his movement patterns were practically nonsensical. One moment he'd be back flipping backwards, then he'd catch himself on one hand, twist like a snake, and somersault underneath her next strike.

What was this guy, a professional gymnast?

"I see this isn't working." KID said, not even out of breath, as he flipped gracefully through the air. The white cape flapping behind him didn't seem to hamper his movements at all. "For either of us."

"You think?" Aoko wanted to scream. The bastard was right there, and she couldn't get a hit on him at all. Already, she could feel a ache building behind her eyes, the concentration of controlling so many streams of water so precisely taking its toll.

"So how about we just take a breath and talk this out, okay?" KID gave her a little friendly grin, and Aoko took a sharp breath, something she didn't understand twisting in her gut. She stilled the water throughout the room, forcing herself to take another breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. KID eased, settling back into his relaxed stance with a widening mi. "Great. I'm on your side this time, miss."

"Slowly. Patiently. Hakuba was always telling her to slow down. Aoko forced her shoulders to relax, and tried to find her voice. "Okay." The word came out soft and ragged, breaking in the middle. She swallowed, and tried again, stronger this time. "Okay."

KID looked pleased.

Aoko hit him with a water jet so strong it blasted him down the hall, right into the wall. He hit it with a solid thunk, the wall shuddering with the force of the impact. "Like hell you can fool me, asshole!" She yelled as he crumpled to the ground, limp.

"Tsuyu? Tsuyu!" A sharp voice was crackling through her comm. Heart beating impossibly fast in her chest and something giddy bursting up her throat, she answered swiftly.
"I got him, Hawk!"

"What? Got who—I told you to wait for me."

"Kaitou KID!" She declared, triumphantly, something like a laugh bubbling out as she watched KID struggling to get back on his feet, only to collapse back to the flooded floor. One of his arms wrapped around his torso, shaking.

His hat was knocked slightly askew, and for the first time she caught a glimpse of his eyes. His face was twisted in pain, but his gaze was still focused and bright and furious. But it was a strange flavor of fury, not what she was expecting.

If she didn't know better, Aoko would think KID looked betrayed.

"KID? What—why—No. Tsuyu, tell me everything, right now!" Hakuba's voice refocused her, and as KID tried to get back to his feet, one hand bracing the wall, Aoko called the water back to her command.

"KID's here. He tried to trick me with some stupid warning." A new jet formed, crashing into KID with just enough force to elicit a breathless shout and pin him to the wall.

"A warning?" Hawk's voice was weirdly desperate. Like he was worried by that, or something.

"He said that the thieves are, uh, antimeta specialists. Or something like that." Aoko watched KID struggle against the water, annoyed by how stubbornly his hat and monocle stayed on. "But don't worry, I didn't fall for it. I got him good too. He's not going anywhere."

"Antimetas? Shit, Aoko!" Aoko blinked. Hakuba never approved of using their real names while in the field, even over their private comms. He sounded too panicked to care, though. "You've got to get out of there now!" Aoko huffed a breath. She didn't know what Hakuba was freaking out about. Whatever these antimeta specialists were, they couldn't be that bad, even if they were actually here. Which they definitely weren't.

But KID wasn't giving up. In fact, he was fighting against the water pressure harder, one hand forcing itself up in the face of the water jet. Huh, almost looked like he was trying to point at something. "I'm just outside—"

Something struck Aoko, hard, and suddenly her whole body was burning. She screamed, pain spiking through her every nerve, and her concentration broke entirely, all the water in the room raining down as she collapsed to the floor. The whole world blurred, but she could just barely make out KID hitting the ground next, shuddering down like a broken doll.

Her whole body was quivering, limbs spasming out of her control. Had she—had she been electrocuted?

"First rule of battle, bitch. Always watch your back." A gruff voice said as she heard heavy footsteps approaching. A pair of military boots stopped in front of her. "Holy shit, is that Kaitou KID?"

Aoko forced herself back up, finding herself facing the intruder from before. He was burly and tall, his face hidden behind gas mask and helmet, and in his hands he gripped a metallic bo staff. "The boss is gonna love that." He muttered as he turned, watching her sway unsteadily on her feet. Even without seeing his eyes, she knew he was eying her disdainfully. "You're out of your league, freak."

The intruder spun the staff in his hands, movements smooth and practiced with expert precision.
Aoko watched carefully, waiting for him to lurch forward and strike, focusing on the water beneath their feet, ready to slip him up.

Instead, he slammed the staff down on the floor.

Less than a second later, it crackled with electricity, and she felt her whole body convulse, as the electricity coursed through her.

"Tsuyu!" Somewhere, Hakuba was yelling. In her comm? No, sounded—

Arms caught her as her legs gave out beneath her, and the hall filled with smoke. "Tsuyu, are you alright?" Hawk's mask was before her eyes; hazy from both her spotty vision and the cover Hakuba must have created to distract the intruder.

"Hold on," she said, uncertainly, as she felt herself being dragged away, "KID...he's gonna get away..."

"He already did. Disappeared just as I dropped the smoke pellet."

Goddamn it. Her eyes were burning again. Must be the stupid smoke.

Suddenly, Hakuba jolted to a stop. Aoko could already hear the electricity crackling.

She should have just stayed with Kaito.

Shinichi didn't know why the Cats had broken into this particular office.

But he was going to find out.

It was a standard office, for a professor. On one side of the room, there was an overflowing bookcase. The rest of the walls were lined with framed photos from over the professor's career, in particular a graduation photo and numerous shots of different lab teams from over the years. Most were of the same people, all middle-aged and Japanese, with different sets of smooth faced interns. He even recognized most of the photo locations, except for the ones that had been obviously taken in the lab, with starch white walls and counters lined in glassware and sand baths.

One stuck out. It was a picture of a more diverse group, all still wearing bold white lab coats, standing together before a Greco-Roman style lecture hall, the United Kingdom's flag drifting lazily in the wind behind them.

The group varied in skin tone and age more than any of the others shown, from elderly white guys to the Professor, to a tall Indian woman, to a teenage girl with strawberry blond hair. The girl couldn't have been older than sixteen, but she held herself with the confidence and poise of an experienced scientist. Maybe it was the severity of her regal face: she wasn't exactly smiling at the camera.

Curious, he carefully lifted the picture off the wall. The girl couldn't have been a daughter of one of the scientists. Everyone in the picture stood like equals.

Shinichi tugged the photo free from its frame, finding that it's back was marked in scrawl.


A series of English names. At the very end of the list, the writing read: and the prodigy, Miyano Shiho.
Nothing else had been written. Shinichi took a picture of the photo, front and back, and then set the frame back in its place on the wall.

He moved on, further into the office, carefully snapping photos of anything that seemed out of place. Eventually he made it to the desk, where stacks of papers had been overturned and scattered across the wood surface. Someone had impatiently tried to reorder them, but the disturbance was still clear.

Some of the books on the shelf had been knocked over.

A distraction. Whatever the thief had been looking for, he hadn't found it in either of those places.

Shinichi took another glance around the room, this time focusing on what wasn't immediately in sight, and discovered a small filing cabinet was tucked under the desk, dark grey and rusting on the edges.

He traced his fingers over the handle of each drawer, slowly probing each. The first was worn white, the silver paint chipped away by continuous and frequent use. When he tugged it open, he found the bottom and the rails were dented from being left open and crashed into repeatedly. The drawer was marked by a single, continuous presence: stressed, weary, but not unpleasantly so. A tired mind that still had a fondness for its work.

Shinichi slid the drawer shut and moved on to the next. This one had seen less use, and his skin prickled as he gingerly dragged his fingers along the cool metal.

He took a deep breath, and gripped the handle more surely, imagining his fingers being covered in gloves, imagining jerking the drawer open, searching.

The memory hit him hard, it was so fresh. His hands were clothed in black, and his body felt heavy, armor weighing him down. The drawer didn't open smoothly, creaking with disuse, and he jerked it more forcefully.

It was only partially filled with files, folders all a professional manila, labeled with names and titles in printed black kanji. In his mind, though, he only focused on one, zeroing in on his target.

A name, a title. He needed something precise.

The memory sharpened, focusing in on a single label.

*Miyano: Notes on Probable Chemical Pathways of Metahuman Abilities.* In an instant, Shinichi let the memory slip away, only to find that the target was missing: the file was nowhere to be seen.

Damn. Better than nothing though.

Abandoning the thief's tracks, Shinichi slid into the computer chair and booted up the old desktop, only to be immediately blocked by a login screen.

"Great, just great." He muttered to himself.

"Hit a dead-end?" A voice asked.

Shinichi jolted, half scrambling out of the chair before he could stop himself. And that embarrassing squawk? Absolutely did not come from him. "KID!"

The phantom thief blinked innocently, ignoring Shinichi's moderate conniption completely. He
looked less put together than when Shinichi last saw him, particularly because he was *dripping wet*. KID even seemed to be holding himself tentatively, like he was injured. Obviously, the conversation with Tsuyu hadn't gone so well.

Ignoring Shinichi's questioning look, KID pointed at the computer. "What are you doing?"

Shinichi took a steadying breath, in through his nose, and refocused. "Looking into something the professor was working on. I think it is what the Cats were after." KID's sudden appearance was convenient. "Can you get me into this computer?"

"Easily." KID snapped his fingers, and immediately the infuriating login screen disappeared, revealing the typical loading screen as the system started up.

Shinichi stared, not quite believing it. KID hadn't even touched the computer. "How did you—No, it doesn't matter."

The background and icons appeared on screen. Shinichi hurried to access the professor's files, finding a mess of documents, slideshows, and barely organized subfolders.

Clicking his tongue, he went straight for the search bar, typing in Miyano. Various documents popped up, including one named *Miyano Dissertation: Metahuman Abilities and the Probable Causes*. There were several others, hundreds of pages long theses going by the sheer size of each document: *Metahuman Abilities and the Theoretical Limits..., Mutated Growth Hormone and DNA Degeneration Behin..., Effects of Gene Therapy on Me... Transcription Factors and Gene Promot..., Beta-Metas—*

He stared at all the different files, uncertain how to go on. He didn't know which was the right one. Or if there even was a right one.

KID whistled in his ear. Shinichi had no idea when he had gotten that close. He ignored the sound, and how tense his shoulders had gotten, and instead pulled a flash drive off his keys and inserted it into the computer's port.

He'd just download them all and look through them later.

"Nice work, stringer." KID said, and Shinichi froze when a white-gloved hand settled on his shoulder. Carefully, he turned to look at KID, who was grinning at him.

He shouldn't have shown this to KID. He should've been smarter than that, he realized as KID snapped his fingers and a burst of pink smoke hit Shinichi right in the face.

Those thoughts came too late. The world faded into black with nothing more than short laugh.

Chapter End Notes

;)
When Shinichi woke up, he was in the office alone, his head rested on his arms on the Professor's desk. The lights were out, and the flash drive was gone. When he scrambled back to the computer, relieved to find the system still logged in, and retyped his search, his heart sunk. There were no files containing the name Miyano, or any of the other keywords he could remember.

KID had been thorough. All evidence had been wiped away like it never existed. Damn it. He'd make that damn thief pay for that.

Even the memory card he'd nicked back from the police was gone. What KID could possibly want with it was anyone's guess, along with just about everything else. Why would the Siamese Cats want research on metahuman abilities? And why would KID want that same information? And did either of their motives relate back to the crows and the missing kids?

These questions were just a few of the countless he asked himself as he sprinted back through the building, to where he could hear some kind of conflict unfolding.

He found himself led to one of the foyers, where Hawk was locked in a heated battle with three heavily armed Cats.

And Hawk was losing.

Shinichi could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he threw himself back around the corner before anyone saw him. Cautiously, he pulled out his camcorder and peered around, dissecting the situation in seconds.

Hawk was moving more clumsily than usual, his typical grace hampered by a slippery floor and minor injuries: bruising to the lower back, left leg, and right forearm. By the smell of burnt rubber and the electricity crackling from the bo staves wielded by two of the Cats, Shinichi felt it was fair to add electricity burns to that list.

Tsuyu was in worse shape, barely managing to stay on her feet and out of the way as Hawk and the Cats danced around the room. Despite her obvious exhaustion, her brow was furrowed in concentration as she forced thin water tendrils to whip at the third Cat, effectively making her just enough of a nuisance to keep Hawk from being overwhelmed by the numbers.

On the ground were two discarded automatic rifles, their triggers and safeties frozen over with ice; Shinichi hypothesized that was a collaboration between Tsuyu's hydrokinesis and Hawk's liquid nitrogen pellets.

There was no sign of KID, but that didn't mean he wasn't still hanging around somewhere. This was Kaitou KID after all.

The third Cat was up to something, dodging one of Tsuyu's swipes and pulling some kind of canister from his belt. Whatever it was, it gave Shinichi a bad feeling, and his mind immediately turned to explosives.

"Hawk, watch out! The tall one is about to use something." Shinichi said, not bothering to raise his voice: Hawk would hear him, even if he whispered. And the last thing he needed was to attract the
In response, Hawk rolled across the floor between his two opponents, just managing to slide between their crackling staves, and came back on his feet to charge the third Cat.

Instantaneously, the Cat switched targets from Tsuyu to Hawk, tossing the canister right into Hawks face. It broke open with a hiss, a large net bursting forth. Hawk attempted to dodge, but slid on the wet floor, skidding right into the net.

"Hawk!" Tsuyu yelled as the other vigilante went down; he was completely entangled and hit the floor hard. She made an abortive move towards him, retreating right back as all three Cats zeroed in on her, advancing with staves ready.

"Well, shit." Shinichi muttered, thoughts racing as he tried to find something to help. He didn't have much by way of weaponry, but his tripod could work as a makeshift weapon of blunt force trauma. Not that he stood much of a chance against trained professionals with something like that.

He did have his soccer ball, though. He could at least distract the three with a well placed ricochet ball, long enough for Hawk to get free.

"Forget them!" The tall one snarled, just as Shinichi was reaching into his bag. "We've got the objective. Let's get out of here before any more of them show up!"

Reluctantly, the other two Cats backed off, their staves still sparking threateningly. Shinichi watched them carefully as they moved towards the other end of the the room, making their way to the exits at the end of the hall. Hawk was still struggling with the net, sawing at the cables with a throwing knife, and Tsuyu was wavering on her feet, just moments from collapse.

The door slammed shut behind the Cats, and they were gone. Shinichi forced down the instinct to pursue, and instead stepped out into the room, camcorder in hand.

Hawk zeroed in on him immediately, finally throwing off the net with a frustrated snarl and storming over. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Getting footage of the break-in." Shinichi raised a brow at Hawk, struggling not to smile. Hawk was soaked and limping, looking more like a particularly clumsy duck than his namesake. "Figure the police are going to need it. Seems the Cats somehow knocked out the building's security cams."

"Are you crazy? Who figures out that there's going to be a crime somewhere, and then goes there?"

"Reporters." Obviously.

Hawk made a strangled sound and threw his hands up in the air.

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The mission had been a complete, horrific failure. The culprits had been right in front of him, and not only did they get away, but they handed him his arse on the way out.

Saguru was understandably furious.

"Are you mad at me?" Aoko asked, sitting in the co-pilot's chair of the jet. He didn't look at her.

"I'm not mad." Just disappointed, he almost said, but he bit his tongue on it. He was pissed at Aoko, honestly, and didn't feel like joking around.
Silence fell between them, stilted and awkward. Aoko was fidgeting in the corner of his vision, but Saguru just stared stonily forward, pretending to busy himself with the jet's controls.

If Aoko noticed that the autopilot button was lit, she didn't mention it. He hoped she got the message to shut her mouth before he snapped.

But instead of taking the hint, she twisted her hands around and muttered, "You are mad."

God, they were really doing this. Saguru could feel his already peaked frustration boiling over. "Aoko-kun, you disobeyed my direct order and went ahead like a loose cannon."

Aoko winced and bit her lip. "I thought…"

"Aoko-kun, you disobeyed my direct order and went ahead like a loose cannon."

"You thought what, Aoko-kun?" He couldn't help but cut her off, voice hard and mean. "That I give orders for the fun of it?"

His tone had her tensing, her own infamous temper flaring. As if she had any right to be mad, when she had thoughtlessly ignored the mission plan and endangered herself and any civilians in the vicinity. "That I could handle it!"

Oh, that was just rich. Really. "That's irrelevant to ignoring orders."

"What was I supposed to do? Just sit back and let them steal whatever they were after?" Not that she'd been very successful at stopping them even when she acted proactively.

"I'm sure Kudo-sensei will go over with you in-depth all the better options available to you during debrief. But if you'd like a preview, I could give you a list of other strategies you could have employed ordered from most efficient to least."

"That's not fair! It's not like I knew they could beat me! I thought they were just normal criminals!"

"That's something you should have accounted before you charged in like a loose cannon!"

Aoko opened her mouth, furious and indignant. Then she snapped it shut and slumped in her seat, consternated and unhappy. For a moment, there was quiet as they both stewed in their tempers. Then, Aoko spoke again, sulkily. "Who were those jerks anyway?"

"The Red Siamese Cats. Antimeta specialists."

"KID said something like that too.

KID. Right. Another unexpected factor in the day's disaster. What was his purpose for following the Cats? What was he after? Saguru highly doubted that KID had been there to look out for Aoko, considering he hadn't attempted to help them during their losing battle. "Did KID say what he was doing there?" Maybe he'd let something else slip to Aoko. The thief often underestimated her perception skills.

"Not really." Aoko huffed, and Saguru felt his fingers tighten around the controls. Useless. "But Kudo-kun was there too."

"Don't remind me." Yet another infuriating factor; Shinichi. Except this time, Saguru was almost, almost grateful for the meddling. If he knew Shinichi, and he sure as hell did, then Shinichi probably had figured something out about the Cats, or the very least, what they were after. Considering Saguru's own disastrous performance, he could hardly complain about Shinichi putting himself in danger or getting in the way, especially if Shinichi had managed to be more
useful than all the Irregulars combined in this case.

They returned to the headquarters with very little other conversation, both mulling over their own mistakes during the chaos. Saguru had to admit to himself, at least, that a portion of his anger was borne from worry. When he'd arrived to discover Aoko already in battle, and losing at that, he'd been terrified that she would be hurt. Watching her collapse from that electric shock…

He hadn't kept his cool as well as he should have. He'd let—which, no, he still was, letting his emotions get the best of him. And considering who was in the building with him, which could very well have been a fatal mistake. He would have to be better next time: think more clearly and compartmentalize properly.

The Baron and the rest of the Irregulars met them in the hangar. Saguru's teammates were in varying states of worry and unease, but despite the uncomfortable atmosphere of the room, it was impossible to judge the Baron's mood behind that grinning white mask.

"Hawk, report." The Baron's voice told him nothing, clipped and firm as ever.

Saguru heard Aoko shift awkwardly behind him, obviously worried about what he was about to say. Not that it made a difference what he reported, as the Baron probably already knew exactly how the mission had gone down, or would soon even if Saguru said nothing.

Forcing down his sympathy for Aoko, Saguru focused on giving a concise summary of the night. "We identified the thieves as the former bio-terrorist group the Red Siamese Cats. Tsuyu confronted them and Kaitou KID alone. They had antimeta technology, and we were unable to prevent them from escaping. Both of us have electrical burns and a few other minor injuries. Kudo Shinichi was also on site, but remained uninvolved with the conflict. Kaitou KID's purposes in being there, or how he knew of the break-in, are still unknown." The last part was blatantly a lie that the Baron would no doubt see right through. KID had been there because Aoko had led him there. It was that simple.

The Baron was silent for a few tense seconds. All eyes were shifting between the cold ivory of the mask and Aoko's uncertain face. The Baron made his decree in clipped, strict tones. "Aoko-kun, I'm taking you off all missions."

The verdict settled over them all like a heavy fog, and Saguru saw Kazuha wince from where she stood in his periphery vision. Aoko balked, mouth open, and then bristled. "What?" She snapped disrespectfully. Saguru felt any sympathy he had for her die with the rush of indignation that hit him as she continued to snarl at their mentor. "You're taking me off-duty?"

The others were all shifting uncomfortably around them, not daring to say a word. The Baron, in contrast to Saguru's rising horror and frustration, barely seemed to care for Aoko's lack of due etiquette. "Yes." He said simply. "This disaster has made it clear that you still need more training before we can trust you to handle yourself appropriately in the field."

"Handle myself? Handle myself? I took down the Kaitou KID!"

"And what do you have to show for it?" The Baron's voice was soft but cutting. Saguru recognized the tone as same one that Yuusaku so often used with Shinichi. There was a certain lilt to it that made people feel small and foolish: the kind of voice that hit hardest with teenagers, with their developing egos and fragile self-esteem. "Was KID captured? Incapacitated? Did that help the mission? Prioritizing targets and objectives is essential when taking initiative in the field." Aoko winced at that. Saguru took no small amount of pleasure in how well his own critique of the situation mirrored the Baron's. "You let yourself be distracted from the mission by an unexpected
party, and put both yourself and Hawk at risk of being killed. That is unacceptable."

Aoko swallowed, the sound of it booming in Saguru's ears. He tried to turn his attention away from her and let her fade into the background like the others, just the regular sensory static that filled his everyday life. Tried to ignore the rising guilt and shame that quickly swallowed up his annoyance and pride. But he could see the slight shaking of her hands, the blood vessels in her eyes dilating with retrained tears, and god, he hated himself. He was a terrible friend and leader. He should have pulled his head out of his arse and taken responsibility for the mission going awry, instead of preening in his own vindication. But it was too late to spare Aoko's feelings, and the crack of Aoko's jaw creaking open to mutter "yes sir," seemed to echo in the too quiet too loud room.

Saguru knew that every member of his team was silently pleading for dismissal.

They weren't sent home for two more hours: quiet, chastised, and uncomforted.

When Aoko had been a little girl, her best friend, Kaito, lost his father in a meta-attack.

The disaster had been a violent conflict between the Overseers and Kaitou KID. One of KID's usual, careless tricks resulted in the destruction and collapse of tens of building in downtown Tokyo. Forty injured. Four dead. An accident, some people said.

Numerous accounts of manslaughter, Aoko called it. And she was validated in that, because KID disappeared for years afterwards, no doubt terrified of being confronted with his crimes and having to face justice for all the lives he'd taken.

And Kaito, poor, miserable, heartbroken Kaito, escaped the hounding media, victim memorials, and haunting memories of his father by moving to California with his mother. And Aoko, young and still reeling with grief she didn't quite understand, refused to let him go. It didn't matter if there was eight thousand kilometers and sixteen hours between them: there was telephones and email and eventually video calls and chats. And they were separated, but okay. They were okay, because there was no way the smiles Kaito gave her through her LED laptop screen were fake. And if Kaito seemed to hate the world a little, that was also okay, because he would grow out of it. He'd understand, someday, that the world was good and innocent and only one heartless criminal was at fault for taking his father away, and that criminal was gone.

Except, someday seemed further away than ever, because then Kaitou KID came back, to rob the world of more of its treasures.

And then, Kaito came back to Japan, and Aoko finally had a chance to make someday come just a little sooner. She could finally show him how much the police were working to improve the world, how much the Overseers sacrificed to protect people from disasters and monsters and bad guys with too much evil in their hearts.

So she took him with her to heist locations and events and parties, made him feel involved in the defense of the law and righteous. And it was helping: Kaito was getting better. He'd been smiling more cheerfully for months now, and his moments of dark anger came more rarely. So when her mom had died alone while she was with Kaito and her father at a heist, she had refused to let her own grief ruin their progress. She liked it when Kaito smiled at her, so she was going to make him smile. The brilliance of his beautiful smile made her want to show him all the wonderful things in the world.

Someday, their future together would be just a brilliant.
But today sucked. It wasn't fair, what Hakuba and Kudo-sensei had said. They just didn't understand. What was she supposed to do? Let criminals like KID and the Cats go? The world would never be a better place with scumbags like them walking the streets and hurting people. Every moment wasted when bad guys were in front of her could mean another innocent kid losing a parent.

Aoko struggled against the burning of her eyes, rubbing her face with the soft sleeve of her sweater, and tried to focus on the stir-fry sizzling in the pan. After such a terrible night, she was glad to be home, but she struggled to find the energy to make a proper dinner for herself and eventually, if he came home, her dad.

What would her dad think if he came home to find her crying into a skillet? Pathetic.

And where did KID get off, pretending to care? He didn't care about anyone or anything! All he did was endanger people! Did he really think she was so stupid that she'd let him trick her? Except he had in the end, didn't he? He'd acted as a distraction to give the Cat a chance to catch her off-guard, instead of the other way around.

Because of him, she'd been relegated back to being a stupid stand-by trainee. He just had to steal away everything good from her, didn't he? He couldn't even let her have this one thing!

Why couldn't he just go away and disappear from her life?

And what was that stupid noise?

Aoko looked behind her to look at the kitchen island, but her vision was too blurry with tears to make out much more than the faint glow of her phone's alight screen. She couldn't even read the name of the caller ID, but somehow she just knew exactly who it was.

She took the call.

"Ahoko!" Kaito's voice immediately huffed over the line. Right, she had left him at the university. Shit, she was such an idiot. "I don't like being ditched you know!" Thankfully, Kaito didn't sound too genuinely bothered. There was a certain layer of amused teasing layering his words. Aoko was grateful, because she didn't think she could handle Kaito being angry with her too. "I've been calling you for hours!"

"Sorry, Kaito." Her voice came out as a croak. She cleared her throat to cover if and tried not to sniffle. "Everything just became such a mess."

"Did you miss the seminar after all?"

"Yeah. My boss and Hakuba-kun are both really mad. I got yelled at in front of everybody." The tears came again, overflowing from her eyes before she could stop them. She hoped Kaito couldn't tell.

"Aoko..."

"But let's forget about that!" She didn't want to talk about it anymore. No, she didn't want to think about it. She wanted a distraction. "Let's—let's talk about how I can make this up to you." The words just came out. She wasn't thinking straight—was barely thinking at all.

"Hah?"

"There's this new amusement park, over in Beika...I was wondering, if well, maybe, you'd want to
It had been a stupid thing she'd been considering—daydreaming about, really—for weeks now, since well before the start of break.

"An amusement park? What is this, a kiddie field trip?" Aoko snorted at that. They had some good memories of those.

"No, it's—it's a date."

Oh blast, she said it. She said it aloud.

The other side of the line went quiet. Very quiet.

Aoko felt her heart plummet. Of course, of course, after ruining everything else today, she'd have to ruin things with Kaito too. Of course after hitting the bottom she had to grab a shovel and start digging herself deeper.

Over the line, Kaito cleared his throat. Aoko tried to steel herself for the answer, eyes burning. Oh well, it's not like she wasn't already going to cry herself to sleep tonight.

"Ohmygodyes." He sounded strangled.

What?

"I mean, uh, sure. If you insist."

Aoko couldn't help but laugh, joy and relief blooming in her chest so big and vibrantly she almost forgot she'd ever been upset at all.

"I like you, Kaito. I've liked you all this time."

The next day, Aoko was walking on air.

Not, like, literally, though that would be cool. Not like Ran could. But like, figuratively. Or something.

Semantics aside, she was going on a date with Kaito.

She was going on a date with Kaito!

The thought made her whole body tingle, cold and warm all at once. She felt like her blood was fizzing inside her. Her cheeks hurt from smiling, but it was a pleasant ache. Even the bruises and burns she had from the day before barely seemed to hurt.

She couldn't even bring herself to feel nervous about reporting in for morning training, even if she knew Hakuba was probably still pissed at her and that she would have to face their mentor's crushing disappointment. All that mattered was that sometimes bad things happened so something good could. Sometimes fate tested people in order to reward them when they pushed through.

"You look cheerful, Aoko-chan." A friendly voice called from down the hall that led back up to the surface and the Kudo Manor. Aoko glanced behind her to see Ran slipping down the hall, already dressed for training and fashionably athletic as ever. They met each other halfway and turned towards the entrance to Headquarters together. "I'm glad. I was worried you would be down over what happened yesterday."
"Yeah," Aoko said, not really wanting to talk about it. Instead she focused on the security scanner seated above the steel sliding door that opened into the main hangar of the base. A burst of shining blue light swept over her, confirming her identity from the patterns of her retinas to her fingerprints.


As the six-inch thick and plated door slid open to admit them, Ran looked at her with worried eyes.

"I'm okay, really." Aoko insisted. "Something really good happened last night." Aoko assured, and she was grinning again just at the thought. It was a struggle to not dissolve into giddy giggles as she explained. "I finally asked Kaito out! And he said yes! We're going to Tropical Land on a date tonight!"

There was a sound of something heavy and metal hitting the floor with a clang!

"You did what?" A familiar voice snarled, and holy shit, Aoko was so sick of being yelled at.

Hakuba stormed up to them with a scowl, his usual cool left behind with the wrench he had dropped on the floor. He must have been working on the jet, because his usual impeccable appearance was streaked with oil. His already frizzy hair was a complete mess, too, and Aoko couldn't bring herself to feel intimidated. Ran glanced between them as they settled into a stand-off, Hakuba looming and Aoko refusing to back down.

"I asked Kaito out! We're dating now!"

"That's the problem!" Hakuba snapped. "Are you stup—" Hakuba's voice cut off as Ran's foot stomped down on his foot, hard. With a wince, he took a step back and a deep breath. Under Ran's narrow-eyed warning glare, he collected himself before asking much more calmly, "we've talked about Kuroba, Aoko-kun."

This again. Aoko couldn't contain a huff of frustration. "Yeah, ten thousand times. But you're wrong about him!"

Hakuba looked at her, for a long and quiet moment. Her face flushed with how pitying he seemed. He looked like the doctors at the hospital that day, resolute and sympathetic and oh god she did not want to know what came next.

"Fine," Hakuba said, despite her mounting dread, "if you won't believe me, maybe you'll believe him."

The police had confiscated the footage of the break-in. And his copy of the footage.

Thankfully, Shinichi did everything in triplicate. Take that, Officer Date.

He searched every library and database had access to, which was a lot, and the ones his father had access to, which was an absurd number, for articles, papers, and research done by Miyano Shiho. He found a fair share of papers on chemistry and chemical engineering, and pharmaceuticals that mentioned her in their long lists of collaborators, but any mention of metahuman abilities was almost conspicuously absent. The papers on the computer didn't seem to exist publicly, not even in the scientific community. Google searches for any information on Miyano Shiho proved just as
fruitless. Frustratingly so. There wasn't even a short newspaper mentioning the novelty of a prodigy girl working at Oxford alongside prominent scientists.

He had to get those files back from KID, but in the meantime he organized a meeting with the professor from Nanyo, hoping the elderly man could shine some light on the situation and why he had papers that had obviously never been publicly announced or published saved on his computer.

It was frustrating, knowing he had had evidence in his hands twice and lost them both. To KID. And now all he was left with was dead ends and a classroom's worth of missing kids.

Somebody up there hated him.

He'd have to keep scouring the city for clues, but there was really only one way forward. He had to find KID and get back the evidence; had to find an uncatchable thief and steal back his shit.

It didn't even sound easy, it sounded impossible.

So Shinichi made a couple quick calls. Arranging the bait was easy, and his contact took the request of ASAP with great enthusiasm. Shinichi was lucky the crazy old man had more energy than a city power plant and twice as much moxie.

Within the hour, a challenge notice was on the web, and Shinichi could just imagine the hired security and the police task force scrambling to get themselves together in time. He wrote a quick blog post about it and posted the notice of his front page. Somehow, he just knew that KID would find out the news from him first.

KID would regret being such a dutiful reader of his site. That was for sure.

Nothing felt real.

The wind in her hair, the sensation of moving one foot in front of the other, the sound of people chattering in the distance: she felt disconnected from it all, moving on auto-pilot through the crowds. Faces passed like water, indistinct and ephemeral, and the flashing lights seemed out of hazy dream.

The only thing that she seemed conscious of was Kaito's presence at her side, leaving her skin crawling and tight. She could not remember a time she felt more uncomfortable.

Hakuba and Kudo-sensei had been reluctant to let her go, but she hadn't let them dissuade her. Or rather, all the words after the accusations, the explanations, and the painful, cold truth had just deflected off her. She barely heard them, not around the cacophony of sound in her ears and the bitter repeat of denials swarming around in her head. Eventually they let her go, with the condition of wearing an impressive total of seventeen bugs. She barely noticed those, and couldn't bring herself to care. None of that seemed to matter right then.

Kaito could tell something was wrong. Aoko hadn't been able to bring herself to smile when he arrived, face flushed and eyes bright and eager. Then he had fished, trying to understand her mood and lure her out of her reticence. Since then he had sobered, watching her warily in between quick glances to his phone.

Her eyes felt hot, burning. Her tongue seemed to be too big for her mouth. Her hands kept trembling.
"Is there something you want to ride?" Kaito asked, putting away his phone with something like regretful expression. She didn't—couldn't look at him anymore, and instead pointed.

"The Ferris wheel." Her voice sounded robotic to her own ears.

"Okay."

The line moved quickly. Aoko couldn't decide if she was grateful for that or not. Some part of her wanted to just run away, to go cry her eyes out in a bathroom somewhere until the whole world disappeared. The rest of her wanted to hurt Kaito-badly. She wanted to punch him, hard, push him into traffic. She wanted to scream and yell and shove him in a fountain and drag him under and-

She wanted to talk. She wanted to understand. She wanted to hit the pause button on her life and go back home and do something else.

Aoko clenched her hands into fists, feeling her stomach churn, as they boarded one of the carriages. Kaito settled on one side, her on the other. Facing each other now, she could no longer avoid looking at him.

It was almost funny. He didn't look any different, but the way she saw him had changed completely. Suddenly, some part of her wanted to laugh. Because it was at least a little funny, wasn't it? That her best friend was also her worst enemy, the person she'd sworn defeat. The reason she'd given up on being a normal girl and dedicated herself to revenge.

"Aoko." Kaito's voice was uncharacteristically soft, so different from his usual teasing tones, and she shuddered from how unnatural it seemed, that Kaito would address her in such a way.

But she didn't really know him at all, did she? All those times he called her name in fondness, annoyance, lacing the two syllables with humor and love all at once, weren't exactly honest.

The Kaito she'd known for so long hadn't been Kaito at all. He'd been a caricature on strings, pulled by the darker, more solemn and viciously calculating counterpart she was faced with now.

And that's the hardest part, wasn't it? Figuring out what was an act put on to distract her from the painful truth and what was genuine, what was misdirection to draw attention away from the cold and vengeful person that inhabited Kaito's skin.

"I know now." She said simply, but inside she was screaming, yelling. The words seemed almost awkward in comparison.

"Know what?" Kaito prompted, his head tilted. He looked like the perfect picture of innocence. Did he think she was dumb? Of course he did. He had to.

She was, must have been, to have been blind to this fallacy for so long.

The glare she gave him, eyes brimming with tears she couldn't keep in anymore, must have gotten the message across. Kaito stiffened, his face going slack and empty.

That was all the answer she needed.

"So it's true." The words tasted bitter in her mouth and filled the gaps in her teeth, heavy like gum. "You're Kaitou KID."

Kaito frowned at her. "Seriously, Ahoko. Not you too."
The fury that had felt so distant, so far away, suddenly rushed back into her as fire ignited in her veins. She burst out of her seat, hunching in the close quarters of the carriage, and yelled in Kaito's face. "You really are going to deny this?" The nerve of him. After everything, after so many years of lies, he was still trying to spin this absurd facade.

"Aoko—" Kaito tried, and Aoko heard the blood rushing in her ears. The carriage seemed to quiver under the weight of her fury.

"You really don't respect me at all, do you?" She snarled, and it was almost, almost satisfying when he flinched from her, like she had actually lashed out. But it wasn't. It just made her feel emptier. "You think I'm stupid! You think I'm some idiot you can lie to and use however you want!" The words left her in a harsh shriek, her voice breaking. And with them gone, no longer filling her up, she felt herself deflate. Her tears felt hot as they streaked down her cheeks.

Kaito watched her, face twisted with—something. Concern, maybe. Frustration, possibly. Not guilt. His dark eyes seemed too cold and dry in his face, and she hated him for it, for how her throat closed around a lump and how her own eyes burned hot and wet.

"I don't think that. I—" He said, voice not quite desperate as he took a breath and steadied in the shifting carriage. "I like you. I always have."

Yesterday, she would have given anything to hear those words. Now, despite the sincere way Kaito formed them, they seemed superficial.

"Why should I believe you?" Her voice sounded cold to her own ears, thick with suspicion and raspy with emotion.

"I wouldn't lie to you. Not about this."

The second wave of anger hit her like a riptide. It was a tepid fury, colder than before. It felt more like hatred. "You'd lie to me about anything so long as it suited you." The list Kudo-sensei had shown her was burning white and black in her memory, every instance of Kaito using her against her father, the Irregulars, the world. And most damning, the incident of nine months ago. "You've been doing nothing but lying to me! It's what you do! You lie and deceive, as if people's trust is something for you to abuse! As if laws are okay to break so long as you don't get caught! That you can take anything you want so long as you're wearing someone else's face to do it!"

"You've been lying too! All that bullshit you've been spewing lately, about internships and seminars and conventions; all pathetic attempts at covering up what you really are." A freak. There was that barely veiled hate again, layered in the accusation in Kaito's tone.

"I do it to protect people!" She screamed, remembering Kaito and his mother standing like black statues against a setting sun before a grave, remembering how pale her mother looked against the hospital sheets. "You're hurting people! You've hurt my dad! You've hurt me! Because of you, I'm lucky to see my father a couple of times a week! Because of you—because of you, my mom died alone!"

"You want to talk about parents?" Kaito stood up then, shooting from his seat as violently as a striking cobra. She flinched back from him a step, for the first time hating the height he had gained on her since they were kids. "What about mine? Did your buddies in ISHA fail to mention that?"

Oh, how dare he! Aoko was done with feeling sorry over Kaito's damned father. "Don't you try to make this about your dad! You don't get to pull that shit right now!" For years he'd been playing that card, and Aoko took it because before she'd have done anything to make him happy, and after
had understood the pain of losing a parent. But Kaito had been using that against her all this time, blinding her with his troubles and begging *fix me, fix me* with dark eyes and a broken smiles until she couldn't see anything else. "You're a criminal! A super villain! Just like he was!"

The words, when said aloud, hovered in the air between them. Kaito's eyes were smoldering, but his face was miserable. "You said you liked me." He murmured, and suddenly Aoko couldn't stand anymore. She slumped back into her seat.

"I didn't know you." It was painful to admit that. How well he had duped her into thinking she understood him wholly, when really she didn't comprehend anything about him at all. The brilliant, compassionate boy that gave her a rose when she cried was gone, if he ever existed at all.

"That's not true." Kaito said. He reached for her, calloused hand pausing in the space between them, as if waiting for her to reach back. She pulled her hands further away, clutching them to her breast.

"Is it? Do I know you?" His eyes were staring into her own, pleading. They were such a beautiful, mysterious color, but Aoko was starting to realize that beautiful and mysterious also meant dangerous. "Was anything between us real?"

"Yes. All of it." He insisted, and she wanted to believe him so badly.

"Shit, this is so fucked up. This is so, so fucked up." There weren't words to describe how twisted the whole thing was. Kaito and her. Her dad and his dad and her mom. Kaitou KID.

She forced herself to think of all the years they had been together, all the wonderful moments of friendship, of the overwhelming affection that consumed her when he smiled. Did he hold all those things just as precious?

Then there had to be a way to make this right. She wanted to be a hero, right? That meant doing the right thing. That meant reaching out and giving people second, third, fourth chances. "If you really love me, if this is real and not just another game to you... Then, turn yourself in."

Kaito's hand pulled away, and she clenched her eyes shut at the sight of it. This was her ultimatum. "What?" He asked, as if he didn't understand. She forced her eyes open and looked into his face and tried to see and comprehend, to perceive the way Hakuba could.

He was staring at her with horror plain across his face. She felt the same, but forced the revulsion down. She could bear to see Kaito in chains, behind bars, locked away, if it meant they'd have a chance at that someday. "Go to jail, do your time, and when you get back out, we could... we could — " Have everything they'd ever wanted together.

"We could *what?*" Kaito snarled, and she shuddered at his vehemence, the contempt burning in his eyes. "I could *what*, Aoko, live happily ever after with you, reformed? A good little citizen? I should just let it go?" He loomed above her, face twisted, and suddenly, she really could see him the same way Hakuba did. And it burned. "Should just give up my freedom and my dreams? Forget about my father, forget about his murder, and lead a pretty little vapid life with *you?*"

Vapid. That's what he thought of their time together. That's what he thought of the someday she'd been chasing after for years.

Shit, shit, shit. It hurt too much to breath suddenly, and she couldn't help but screech against the pain. "I'm trying to do the right thing!"

And those words seemed to just turn all the fire in Kaito off. He stood before her, still and
unyielding. As he began to speak again, steady and vicious and perfectly pitched, she could see disdain in the edges of his mouth and the lifting of his nostrils.

"You all think you're so much better than everybody else, don't you? Like to pretend you know what's best, that you can decide who's good and who's evil. Like to play judge, jury, and executioner just because you woke up one morning with superpowers? Like to interfere where you aren't wanted, enforce your ideals on everyone else just because they don't have the means to stand up to you?" The words seemed to swirl around her like receding waves, soft but insistent, and she couldn't find space to refute him. "Even now, you're acting like you have some sort of moral high ground. Bullshit, Aoko. You didn't join the Irregulars to save and protect. We both know you didn't want Kaitou KID behind bars for the greater good. This is all about payback because you think KID tore your family apart." The carriage was back at the ground now. She hadn't even noticed it descending. "But you know what, Aoko? Your amazing, heroic Overseers tore my family apart."

With a shudder, the carriage settled down at the platform and the door squealed as the door swung open. "And I won't stop until they pay." And with those final words, Kaito stormed out. She tried to chase after him, yelling his name in unrestrained fury, but like the thief of her nightmares, he disappeared from her grasp long before she ever reached him.

The challenge had been announced very suddenly, but it was hardly out of character for KID to accept a spontaneous invitation. Shinichi was rather impressed with the setup they had managed in a few scant hours. Everything had been put together flawlessly, from impressive security systems to a secured and easily defended venue.

Now, he could only wait for the target to arrive. Shinichi didn't doubt that KID would, because KID was too egotistical to let a threat to his reputation go unaddressed. Which was good, because Shinichi had words for that thief. Words he'd been tempted to just post on his site, because fuck professionalism.

At the very least, the heist site wasn't the worst that had ever been chosen, despite the rush. Shinichi was technically not supposed to be allowed on the site of a heist since the Nara National Museum Murder Case, organizer or not.

Thankfully, Shinichi had connections. Namely, one passionate sponsor of his website also known as Suzuki Jirokichi, who just happened to be the owner of a stunning art piece right up KID's alley and was more than happy to have an opportunity to rub it in KID's face.

"The usual deal, Kudo-kun!" Suzuki guffawed as they shouldered past a furious Nakamori. "I look forward to being on your front page tomorrow!"

"Much obliged." Shinichi replied with a smirk that didn't promise anything positive. With Suzuki, press was press. What that press actually said rarely mattered so long as his picture was front and center.

Of course, with how Shinichi intended for tonight to go, a very different picture may end up heading his site by the end of the night.

The hopeful heist site was a wild mess of activity, like always. Once upon a time, he would have done what he could to manage it, but Shinichi had long ago realized that trying to keep the KID Taskforce organized was harder than herding cats and twice as fruitless. At this point, the Taskforce was more bark than bite, anyway. Everyone knew that the only ones that actually stood a chance at catching KID were the Overseers, and well, they weren't coming.
Funny how that worked.

The Irregulars would probably show, but Shinichi didn't care about them tonight. He had only one objective, and he knew exactly how to obtain it.

After all, the sudden announcement severely limited KID's preparation time, which meant the thief wouldn't be able to pull off anything too flashy. And that made him predictable.

So Shinichi slipped through the mess and venue, going up. KID would be reactionary, and when KID had to react and not plan, he moved to higher ground.

The venue's neighboring building's roof wasn't very impressive or maintained, but it did have a convenient place to lie in wait for the night's guest-of-honor. So Shinichi settled down with his camera ready.

Almost an hour later, once his body had grown cold and stiff in the night air and he was starting to think KID was going to stand them up after all, there was a strange shift in the air.

It was almost imperceptible in the dark, but a black mass touched down on the roof. A man in a black cloak that undoubtably concealed a folded hang glider stood, moving as silently as the moon crossing the sky.

Shinichi bit his lip, waiting for just the right moment. The man pushed off his black hood and cloak, revealing familiar white, and just as he started to lift his top hat and monocle to his face, Shinichi pushed the button.

A harsh flash of light cut through the dark, briefly illuminating the stunned face of the white-clothed thief. Shinichi pulled the camera back to himself in an instant, recoiling back around the corner of his hiding place with a grin twitching at his lips. Behind him, KID spluttered, before calling out in a strangled voice.

"Hey, wait!"

Like hell that was going to work, Shinichi thought, rushing back towards the stairwell. Nobody had ever gotten a clear photo of the phantom thief's face, despite his only coverage being a monocle and a top hat. Most of his continuing intrigue came from his incredible use of lighting and misdirection and known talent for disguise; the sweat that had been dripping down his cheek proved that it wasn't a latex mask but his true face hidden under the brim of that hat tonight.

Shinichi was only meters away from the stairwell back downstairs when something big and heavy collided with his back. His breath left him in a broken cough as he went down, hitting the gravely rooftop hard.

Damn. He'd been betting that he'd be able to outrun KID just this once, but the stiffness of his limbs from such a long wait must have slowed him down.

"I said wait!" The voice had regained its arrogant lilt, and was much, much closer. Shinichi struggled to rise, but the dead weight of KID, arms wrapped around his torso and entire body mass settling on Shinichi's back, did not yield. He only succeeded in scraping his own cheek against the grit. "That wasn't very nice. Sneaking around isn't good sportsmanship." KID huffed, tone turning teasing for a moment, as he shifted above Shinichi. Shinichi tried to pry his arms free from the other's tight grip, but the thief held fast, tutting.

"Says the thief." Shinichi grunted, struggling to lace his voice with the appropriate amount of sour irony while still fighting to regain his breath.
"I'm expected to. We all have our roles to play in this game, stringer." Shinichi rolled his eyes. "Now, hand over the camera, okay?"

The good thing about this position, being trapped on his stomach underneath the Kaitou KID? His camera, still clutched firmly in his right hand, was trapped underneath him too. The thief hadn't had a chance to slip it from his fingers as they went down.

The bad thing? He couldn't help but try to get a read on KID. But instead of the mocking amusement he expected to feel overwhelming all more productive, telling thoughts, Shinichi just felt cold. KID felt cold.

And that freaked Shinichi out. He forced down a flinch at the scrape of KID's chilled mind against his senses and continued the banter. "Now who's being the bad sport? Your role is to sneak around, my role is to take pictures of you sneaking around and publish them online or deliver them to the police."

"Oh? Sorry, but my role is to steal things. Like your camera."

"I noticed. But this seems more like a mugging than your usual heists. It's not very classy."

"You think my usual heists are classy?"

Oh, this was getting ridiculous. Shinichi usually, begrudgingly, liked their jokes. But not with this physical contact, not with KID's blizzard of an emotional state washing over him. "I think you're a showboating moron. Now get off!" Surprisingly, KID released him with a short laugh. In an instant, he was standing, tall and unwrinkled, like nothing had happened and Shinichi had hit the dusty ground by himself.

Which was going to smart in the morning, definitely. He had skinned his knee and elbow raw, based on the flaring pain that laced through his limbs as he levered himself up, camera safely tucked away in his inside pocket.

A white gloved hand appeared before him, outstretched. "Sorry, are you hurt?" KID asked, voice less mocking and more genuine, now. Shinichi ignored the offer, and stood up himself, not trusting the hand to not somehow end up relieving him of his tools. And maybe, just a little, he didn't want to experience whatever crazy shit was going on in the thief's head again.

KID measured him with half-hidden eyes and a cool smile. "This isn't your usual scene, stringer. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"It's been a slow news week." Shinichi drawled, and they both knew it had been anything but.

The thief laughed again, the sound carrying joyfully through the night air. Something about it was forced, or at least different from usual. Cold. "Really? And here I was hoping you were continuing your Irregular besmirchment streak."

"Well, I have room for that in my article about unmasking you too." Shinichi didn't like how relaxed KID was. KID was always at his most easygoing before he got serious. He didn't like the weird tension in the air either.

"Might want to make the Irregulars the headline." KID winked at him from behind the monocle, dark eyes glittering with the reflection of distant city lights. "After all, your story may be a little dry without photographic evidence."

Shinichi's eyes narrowed. "We both know I just got a picture of your face."
"Did you, though?" KID pointed at the camera with a flick of his wrist. Shinichi stiffened with the movement, wary of KID's every motion and mind hyper focused on every twitch. What trick was he going to pull? A smoke bomb? Another tranquilizer? Some stage magic?

Like hell that would work. "Don't think you can trick me so easily. You're going to pull something the moment I check. Even I've used that trick before." With a gun, but the comparison still stood. "But, I'll cut you a deal. Give me back the files, and I'll delete it."

KID stepped forward, a new smile dancing across his face: not the usual smirk, more genuinely entertained, but it still had that familiar arrogant twist. Shinichi watched him cautiously, taking slow steps back to maintain the distance between them.

Something was definitely off about KID.

KID must have seen the wariness in Shinichi's face, because he immediately backed off, acquiescing. There was still laughter on his lips and that was normal, but it felt wrong.

"Sorry, but no deal, stringer. I don't need that. The picture has already disappeared."

Reluctantly, and keeping a heavy eye on the thief, Shinichi withdrew the camera anew. He was familiar enough with it that he could turn it on and bring up his saved photos without even needing to look down.

For only a fraction of a second, he glanced away. And the picture was really gone. The last saved photo was the one he'd taken of the venue, hours before.

"What?" He hissed, and KID laughed. The bastard was always laughing.

"See? It's already gone."

It was impossible, he knew KID did not have a chance to relieve him of the camera, let alone delete a specific picture. For all his tricks and sleight of hand, logically, it couldn't be done. Others might chalk it up to KID's particularly skilled brand of deceit, but Shinichi trusted his own instincts.

Once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remained, no matter how improbable, was the truth. If KID hadn't manually deleted the photo, he had done so with other means.

Shinichi's eyes widened, the possibilities laid before him in startling clarity. "That's it. That's your power, isn't it?"

KID hummed carelessly. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"You can control electronics. It explains everything." How KID so successfully pulled of his heists. How he always managed to avoid revealing too much to the cameras. How none of the bugs and trackers the police had tried ever worked. The Irregulars jet failing them in Europe.

"That's an interesting theory. You should join one of those 'KID Theory' boards." KID totally would read online forums about himself. Shinichi would bet his camera the thief thought they were hilarious. In fact, the narcissistic idiot probably moderated half of them himself.

But Shinichi recognized a deflection when he saw one. "That's how you hack the latest technology so easily. That's how you fool all the security systems—all the tech involved in these stupid heists really works for you!"

"Like I said, very interesting concept there, stringer."
"Oh, I'm sure the police and the public will find it very interesting."

"Ah, please." KID leveled Shinichi a look, and Shinichi hid a shiver at the ghastly sensation of cold. "If you've realized that, stringer, you must realize that particular information will never see the light of day. Anything you publish, I'll delete. Make your website crash and disappear. Any footage, any proof? Gone in an instant. Even the cute little recording device hidden in your jacket right now is under my control." Well, that ruined plan B through F.

"I'll tell the Irregulars." The threat sounded firm. Shinichi was almost proud of the delivery.

KID's expression somehow turned more mocking than before. "Ha! Do you actually think they'll believe you?"

That—that hit a sore spot. It hurt. Shinichi gritted his teeth against the sudden rise of aggravation and insecurity. "I need those files back! They're important! Children's lives are at stake!"

KID blinked, looking genuinely bemused, and the mockery momentarily gave way. "What do these have to do with kids?" For the first time in the conversation, KID seemed serious. His eyes were dark and piercing under the gleaming white of his top-hat's brim, crisp as the night air. "I know you've been working on a case about disappearing street kids. But why would the research the Cats took have anything to do with that?"

Shinichi bit the inside of his lip, struggling to come up with a satisfactory answer—no, a deflection. "...It's just a hunch. I'm not telling you anything. But I need those files to figure out what the Cats are up to, too. Give them back."

KID gazed at Shinichi, grim consideration clear on his face. Finally, there was no more laughter or posturing, just the strange tension and the cold. With a twist of his gloved hand, suddenly a familiar drive was gripped between KID's fingers. "Well, I'm not completely opposed to giving this back to you. I already copied them, after all." Shinichi took a step forward, despite knowing KID had to be building up to some kind of catch. "But I'm a thief; I don't like just giving back the stuff I stole for free." And there it was. Shinichi met the thief's eyes challengingly, daring him to continue. "I think we can broker a deal."

Shinichi watched as the drive he needed disappeared again with a snap of KID's fingers, too wary to feel hopeful about those words. "What kind of deal?"

"A sort of 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' kind of thing. Two weeks from now, help me with a little game, and at the end, I'll return the files to you." That didn't sound good. And Shinichi didn't think he had two weeks, not if he wanted to find any of the missing children alive.

"One week." He'd definitely regret agreeing to this. "Don't waste my time."

"I would say this isn't a negotiation." KID was suddenly far, far too close, sweeping into Shinichi's space like a sheet blowing in the wind. A gloved hand seized his own, turning his palm up to press something hard and square into his skin. "But I like you, stringer. One week it is then." Insistent fingers forced his to close around the gift. The thief's eyes seemed to burn in the darkness, demanding Shinichi's unwavering attention.

Cold. Shinichi tore his gaze from KID's unfathomable eyes and glanced down. "What's this?"

In an instant, the thief was gone, slipping away into the night like a ghost. His voice echoed in Shinichi's ears, but the words couldn't have been louder than a whisper. "A sign of my goodwill. We'll be in touch."
The building's roof was left empty except for Shinichi and the wind. He peeled his fist open, staring down at the small object sitting innocuously in the center of his palm.

It was a memory card, the label marked with a little black bird sticker.

Shinichi took a shuddering breath and gripped the card tight.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the fantastic feedback, everyone. I love hearing what everyone thinks and all the theories and thoughts everyone has.

Kaito and Aoko are such dramatic characters in MK, I wanted to reflect that in their confrontation.

Also, it took me an absurd amount of time to decide on the chapter title. So many good options.

Hope y'all enjoyed! And Happy Pride Month!
Aoko came back to Headquarters more devastated than she left it.

He didn’t feel guilty, and he certainly didn’t regret telling her the truth. Even if it caused her pain, she needed to know.

Saguru just wished it hurt her less. He knew she and Kuroba had been toeing the line between friendship and romance for years, had watched their awkward fumblings around each other for long enough, but he had always doubted how much of the attraction was genuine. Kuroba was an enigma on all fronts, and somedays Saguru wondered if the criminal mastermind felt anything at all. And Aoko, pitifully, always seemed more attached to an rose-tinted past and idealized childhood dreams, anthropomorphized in her own mind as her childhood friend and roguish romeo Kuroba Kaito, rather than the person Kuroba actually was.

Now, those dreams were crumbling in her hands, and Aoko seemed to be crumbling with them. She returned pale and shaking so badly that it was a wonder she made it back at all. She had been shuddering on her feet when she had come through the hangar doors, and from the moment Saguru saw her, he knew he was out of his depth. He wished he hadn’t dismissed the others earlier. Either Ran or Kazuha would probably be better equipped to help. But Saguru and Yuusaku were the only one’s left in the base. And he sure as hell wasn’t going to let Aoko speak with their mentor like this.

He ended up trailing after her as she made her way to the break room. She collapsed on a couch there, desolate and red-eyed.

“Are you okay?” He asked as he settled in the seat across from her, even knowing that she was obviously not.

Aoko simply shook her head slowly.

“What happened?” He prompted, despite already assuming the worst of it. “The bugs went dead the moment you two got on the ferris wheel. KID—Kuroba must have planted jammers all over the
place beforehand.” Had they had the opportunity to better plan the meeting, that probably could have been prevented, but honestly they’d never had any luck out-planning KID before either.

“He—he all but admitted it. I guess. I don’t know, we both...said a lot of things.” That sounded somewhere between not good and disastrous.

He couldn’t think of anything comforting to say to that. “Anything we can use to—” Get him. “Help us stop KID?”

“I—No. Nothing. I’m sorry.”

He wasn’t surprised to hear that; in fact, he had hardly expected anything damning to come out of this meeting at all. Kuroba was too careful for that. Saguru himself probably wouldn’t have done any better in her situation. “It’s not your fault, Aoko-kun. I’ve been trying to get him to slip up for months now and—”

“Hawk.” A cold voice interrupted him, and they both glanced up to the doorway, where the dark silhouette of the Baron was illuminated by the hall lights.

“Yessir?” Saguru said immediately, tensing. Yuusaku wouldn’t disturb a conversation like this without good reason, but honestly another mission was the last thing they needed right now.

But the world never turned based on their needs.

Yuusaku’s expression was uncharacteristically serious, his lips settled in a thin line in contrast to his usual affable smile. Obviously, the situation didn’t bode well to him. “KID’s on the move.”

Saguru was on his feet in an instant. “What?” KID was a villain that operated, bizarrely, on a schedule. His heists were enormous feats of trickery and planning, and no doubt required days, if not weeks of reconnaissance, hence how he always announced his targets before time. That he was breaking pattern said much about Kuroba’s current state of mind.

“Suzuki Jirokichi has put out a challenge for Kaitou KID, for tonight. “

“That’s sudden.” Not to mention inconvenient. “Of all days.”

“Indeed. Gather your team, I’m sending you four to confront him.” Yuusaku’s words left no room for disagreement and paid no heed to Aoko, who wisely said nothing, but there was an undercurrent of genuine concern in his tone. “No doubt he’s unbalanced and unprepared, so right now is the best chance to gain an advantage over him.”

“Understood.” Saguru had no idea how KID might be feeling right now, actually. He could never be sure how much Kuroba actually cared about Aoko, if he really loved her or just saw her as something to use. However the confrontation between the two had went, Kuroba was at very least furious over his identity being revealed to someone so integral to his civilian life.

Yuusaku leveled him with a firm gaze. Saguru straightened instinctually, swallowing. “I will be clear: failure is not an option this time, Hawk. You must apprehend KID. To ensure this mission goes smoothly, I will accompany you as support.”

Saguru felt his mouth fall open in surprise. The Night Baron rarely ever chaperoned their missions in person, let alone joined them in the field. Saguru was the only one who ever worked alongside the Baron as his partner and former sidekick, and while he still accompanied his mentor on patrol regularly, this was different.
“You’re—you’re going to go after KID directly?” The Baron, and most Overseers, avoided KID, leaving him to smaller sanctioned hero teams and vigilantes. The idea was supposed to be that since KID was typically nonviolent and courteous, in his own absurd way, that he would serve as an experience for younger heroes and bait for vigilantes that needed to be rounded up. The Overseers were usually needed elsewhere, fighting dangerous super-villains and assisting with disasters.

Yuusaku shook his head, smiling slightly. Saguru was a little relieved to see it, but the following words cut that feeling right out of him. “No, I will merely be ensuring that nothing goes wrong by taking command. We cannot afford for this opportunity to be wasted by mistakes.”

At the final word, Saguru heard Aoko flinch. He felt the same way, honestly, being told to take the backseat and surrender field leadership of the team to their mentor. But recently, both their flaws and shortcomings had been placed in stark relief. He couldn’t complain when two out of three missions he led in the past month ended in failure. “Understood, sir.” He forced the words out around the developing lump in his throat. “I will inform the others.”

“What about me?” Aoko asked quietly. She was sitting up straight now, blue eyes focused piercingly on Yuusaku’s face without a single waver.

“You’re still on stand-by, Aoko-kun. You’re in no state to fight.” The words seemed cold, but the way Yuusaku said them was more gentle than Saguru expected. There was a rarely seen sensitivity buried in the rejection.

Aoko stared on, unwavering in her silence. They left her like that, sitting alone in the break-room, and something like unease twisted in Saguru’s gut.

Right from the start, they were playing catch up with KID. They arrived moments after the show room filled with odorous gas and smoke, just to watch the guardsmen and task force members crumble to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. The air filtration system that was supposed to prevent these exact occurrences had clearly failed, and the gas masks the task force had been assigned had been sabotaged ahead of time. Moreover, the exits that were supposed to immediately automatically be sealed in the case of the alarms being tripped hadn’t closed.

“KID’s already got the painting.” Saguru growled. If only they had arrived earlier, they could have already spread out and marked the exits.

“He’s probably heading up to the roof to make his escape.” Hattori said, carefully backing away from the encroaching smoke.

Saguru quickly pulled up the museum’s layout on the screen hidden in the sleeve of his glove, and transferred the information to display in the side of his mask’s vision. The building was set up in a hollow prism around a courtyard; each of the five floors connected by two sets of stairs and a main hall with escalators. The painting had been placed in the secure vault room in the basement of the building, and the dummy painting had been kept in the security room on the first floor. By the thin dispersal of the gas in the security room, Saguru figured KID was probably well on his way up, reaching around the third floor by now. Any opposing guards and obstacles were notably absent, but there was no telling if that was because KID had somehow removed them, or if it was simply due to the task force’s rushed attempt at security.

Either way, they were on their own.

“Angel, Heliopause, fly up to the roof through the courtyard entrances and then split up to block
off both stairwells. Banshee, you and I will split up and head up the stairs from here. The Baron is monitoring the main hall, so we should be able to catch KID in between us.”

“Got it!” Kazuha was immediately off, ricocheting against the walls instead of running, so as to build up as much kinetic energy as possible.

“A pincer attack, eh?” Hattori muttered as he and Ran shot off towards the windows. The Baron said nothing, so Saguru could only assume he had no issues with the plan.

The stairs, of course, were an obstacle all on their own. The two fliers had it easy, and Kazuha could literally bounce her way up, but Saguru felt each flight he rushed upwards. Sometimes, he hated being the least enhanced, and the thought made Aoko’s absence ache almost as much as his hamstrings. She would commiserate with him.

“Well, what do we have here?”

Saguru stumbled on the next step, his heart hammering in his chest as a mocking voice echoed in his ears.

KID. He would recognize that obnoxious lilt and smooth tenor anywhere. But the voice wasn’t being carried from above by the closed stairwell. It was speaking directly to him.

But that was impossible. There was no way KID managed to hack into the frequency of their comms.

“A flightless little birdie.” The voice laughed, and the sound of it seemed to worm insidiously inside Saguru’s head. He checked the comm number of the transmission as the volume of his own rose unbidden.

B-5. Aoko?

“You stole Tsuyu’s comm?” Saguru hissed, then flinched as harsh static burst over the link, painfully loud to his heightened senses. However KID had gotten ahold of one of their comm-links, he clearly intended to take full advantage of it.

“Sorry about that, Kiwi darlin’. Interference, ya kno’?” KID’s voice wavered into an Osakan accent as he spoke, and Saguru threw himself up the stairs with renewed fury.

“Helio, Angel, Banshee! Come in!” He snarled, tuning into the group frequency, but there was nothing but a mocking chuckle in response.

“Your friends are a little...indisposed.”

How? No—it couldn’t be true. Ran and Hattori were both not only extremely powerful, but they were masters of hand to hand combat. KID couldn’t possibly take them down in a direct confrontation; the only explanation was that trickery was afoot.

Not surprising, considering they were dealing with the world’s most notorious stage magician, but this wasn’t KID’s normal MO. He was completely breaking pattern.

“Hurry up and join us, won’t you?” KID purred over the line, and the sound of it was so unnerving it had his skin prickling. “Oh, and watch your step.”

“What—” He heard it before he saw it, the metallic and rhythmic clicking of something falling down the stairs. Small, light-weight, cylindrical—that was all he noticed in the fraction of a second
he glimpsed it before it exploded into light with a cruel, mechanical laugh. The automatic shutters of his mask, designed specifically to protect his sensitive eyes, didn’t snap shut quickly enough.

The blinding, magnesium bright blast burned his vision into whiteness.

“Shit!”

White turned to a darkness of swirling, mind-rending color. Even as he forced his eyes back open, the afterimage burned into his retinas made it nearly impossible to see in front of him, as if the world was a movie reel someone had burned a cigarette through. Still, Saguru forced himself onwards, relying on the regularity of the stair steps to compensate. When he burst out onto the landing of the fourth floor, he regretted his momentum immensely as the floor turned slick underneath his feet and he found himself careening down the hall. Arms pinwheeling, he struggled to stop without crashing to the ground, but nothing seemed to slow him.

And whatever he was hurtling at, it stank of something akin to rubber, or maybe tree sap. He snapped out a Birdclaw and shot it behind himself. The grappling hook caught the wall of the stairwell and the line pulled taunt, the tension dragging him to a painfully abrupt halt.

“Oh, nice reflexes!” KID laughed again, and this time it wasn’t over the comm link. Saguru snapped his head up, forcing aside his disorientation to find his opponent by scent. Further down the hall, past the odorous trap, was the familiar wafting fragrance of roses and bird feathers.

Saguru tested his footing—after the incident with the Cats the other day, he’d had his boots equipped with sturdier soles with better grip. Even so, the floor was alarmingly slippery—he’d be an idiot to try and run on. Not to mention the trap he was still struggling to see through the spots in his vision.

Plan B then. Saguru retracted the Birdclaw and carefully burst forward, floor already sliding under his feet, but he allowed himself to slide rapidly towards the wall of the hall. At precisely the right moment, he pushed off the floor and jumped, hoping desperately he judged the distance right despite his failing vision. His feet found purchase, and for a heart-stopping handful of moments, he dashed along the wall.

It wasn't for long, but that was all he needed to get past the obstacle and throw himself at KID.

But KID danced away, viper quick, and took off in a run down the hall, the white of his mantle just visible behind the darkened forms still marring Saguru’s sight. Saguru followed at a dead sprint, navigating around the corners KID sharply twisted around and judging distances more with hearing than anything else.

That proved to be a mistake.

“YOU BASTARD!” The furious shout rose into a horrible, deafening shriek that cut into Saguru’s head like a white hot, serrated blade. Banshee—somewhere in front—his noise cancelers, why weren’t they—

Sharp, piercing agony.

If he was screaming in pain, he couldn’t hear it.

Saguru collapsed, hands clamped over his ears in vain as the whole world seemed to spin. His vision was darkening again, tunneling in waves that rose and receded with the pounding in his head. Barely, he could make out the white form of his enemy before him, and behind that, some sort of gelatinous mass of color and struggling limbs.
His team.

KID was saying something, but Saguru couldn’t hear anything at all. There was only the ringing in his ears. Instead he read the bastard’s lips with difficulty, struggling to identify the words without their auditory cue and the world fading in and out.

*Something wrong, Tantei-san?*

Bastard.

Saguru forced himself back on his feet, struggling not to sway. Despite his disorientation, he could make out his team behind KID. The three of them were trapped in a mess of what must have been some sort of extremely sticky polymer. They were stuck together in a ball of sickeningly yellow goop that reeked of the same sappy, rubbery scent as the trap earlier. Ran was clearly struggling to break free, but she was so thoroughly buried in the gunk that it didn’t allow her enough movement to exert her immense strength. Kazuha was much the same, movements so constricted that she couldn’t absorb any kinetic energy. She was staring at Saguru with horror that was apparent despite her mask, and her mouth was carefully clamped shut.

Gradually, the ringing in his ears gave way to identifiable sounds, and his vision corrected itself. “I wouldn’t do that again if I were you, miss.” KID was mocking Kuzuha carelessly over his shoulder, just casually waiting for Saguru to pull himself back together, the condescending asshole. “We wouldn’t want poor Hawk to go completely deaf, do we?”

Kazuha flinched, and Saguru saw red.

He was sick and tired of this bastard hurting his friends, and the anger seemed to rush through his whole body, hot as Heliopause’s fire. He drew the segments of his bo-staff out of their thigh holster, letting the magnetic pull of the pieces snap together as he charged at KID. He took a running leap and swept at the bastard, only for KID to slip out of range like water.

Water. Aoko crying.

KID, laughing.

Saguru stopped thinking and let experience-honed instinct take control.

Shinichi returned to the heist with an elevated heartbeat and a nauseating sensation of dread. He had gotten what he wanted, in a way, but that just meant that the night was still ongoing for everyone else. KID would be going for the painting, and Shinichi had a responsibility to make this whole fiasco into a worthy news article.

Admittedly though, the journalistic integrity behind writing a report on an event he essentially organized himself was questionable at best.

Questionable media ethics aside, the venue had only gotten more chaotic in his absence. KID must have already made his move, because when Shinichi dashed into the hall leading to the display room of the target, he found thick pink smoke leaking out under the doors.

So the display room was out. Just to be safe, he pulled out his handkerchief and covered his mouth and nose as he rushed past, heading for the stairs to the next floor. If KID had already gassed the taskforce, there was a good chance the thief already had the painting or was in the process of
relieving it from the subdued security system. And that meant he’d be heading for an escape route next, of which the most likely option was either the roof (heavily guarded, where the Irregulars were likely to land) or the fourth floor balcony.

Except waiting at the top of the stairs was a figure cloaked in black, not white.

Shinichi paused on the last few steps, then jerked back. That towering silhouette, the cloak that seemed to absorb all light, the unmistakable shape of a top hat—it all struck him like a physical blow.

*He stared up, up, up through the hole in the roof. A dark figure was blocking the light, casting a horrible shadow down on them. The light spilled around the figure’s sharp edges, hiding nothing of the the Baron’s intimidating profile.*

*The white mask was grinning, grinning, grinning, and the star was dead.*

The steps seemed to disappear under his feet, and he was falling. He hit the stairs hard, scrambling to stop his fall and grateful for the coarse carpet under his hands.

The Night Baron. The Night Baron was right in front of him.

Holy shit.

What was an Overseer—no, the Overseer—doing here?

Shinichi had just fallen on his ass after slipping down half a flight of stairs and he still knew this was going to be one hell of an article. His descent had been far from graceful, or quiet, and the Baron was at the top of the stairs now, white mask grinning down on him.

Well, no point in going for a candid shot. Shinichi pulled out his camera, and without bothering to fuss with the settings, took several quick shots. The flashes illuminated the dim stairway, painfully bright, but the Baron didn’t flinch.

“You shouldn’t be here.” The Baron said, in a voice of gravel and anger.

Shinichi swallowed and switched from camera to camcorder. The Baron was one to talk. “The Night Baron. We meet again.” Stupid thing to say. Stupid.

The Baron didn’t reply, leaving nothing despite chilly silence between them. Shinichi zoomed in a little, adjusted his angle, and continued, hoping to catch the hero’s interest. “You probably don’t remember. I once harassed your sidekick?” Silence. Well, that was fair. He was mostly testing the waters now, but if the Baron didn’t remember him being there, it was probably safe to approach. Probably. “No, it doesn’t matter. Please answer a couple questions for me.” He took a couple steps up the stairs to reach the top. Even standing on the same landing, the Baron still towered over him in height and presence.

The world’s greatest detective, the leading authority on justice, the head advisor of the ISHA Board, turned away, his mask rotating in the darkness. “You need to leave.” He said, voice hard and commanding. It was infinitely more threatening in person than on TV.

Shinichi wished he had been able to prepare for this situation. He had long ago memorized the kinds of questions he wanted to ask in the case of being lucky enough to encounter an Overseer, but when actually faced with the elusive dark hero himself, he felt like his brain was shriveling up and crumbling into sand. Get a grip, Kudo, he chided himself. Ask a question. “The Overseers have been ignoring the matter of Kaitou KID for—”
“That wasn’t a request.” The Baron did not take so much as a step closer to him, but still Shinichi flinched slightly as he was interrupted harshly. The atmosphere in the room—no, the presence of the Baron was suffocating. He felt like his very thoughts were being consumed before he could properly think them. “Leave, or I will make you.” The Baron left no room for argument, but Shinichi had never let that stop him before.

He forced himself to breath easy, to stay loose and cocky. He was a civilian reporter, and a high profile one at that: the Baron couldn’t touch him. “...Are you threatening me?” He asked, voice smooth as ice. Even if his mind was worryingly blank, that only meant his head was startlingly clear.

“Hardly. Now leave.” Leave. He imagined standing up and just leaving the heist, news be damned. Wouldn’t it be nice to just go home?

No. Shinichi had never thought such a thing in his entire life. Which meant that that wasn’t his thought. Even realizing that, the compulsion was hard to shake. His whole body itched to walk back down the stairs and out the door; even keeping his camera aloft seemed to take momentous effort.

But Shinichi had spent years learning how to close his mind off, to block invading presences out, to divide his own thoughts off from the world. Even a direct, purposeful invasion like this was nothing more than an everyday inconvenience.

And two could play that game.

He let himself go limp, obediently lurching on his feet, as if to stumble back home like a good little teenager. The pressure rescinded, slightly, and in the brief lull, Shinichi lunged forward, seizing the Baron’s wrist with all the strength he could muster. Between the sleeve and the glove he had no access to direct skin, but it would have to do.

He forced his awareness forward with all the power he could muster. “Are the deaths of the four civilians eight years ago the reason the Overseers refuse to go after Kaitou KID?” The moment the question, moderately demanding, left his lips, he was hit with a memory so powerful is may as well have been a gust of wind.

He was standing high up, looking down through the wreckage of a roof. Through the crumbling insulation and concrete, he could see the floor below, and the crumpled form haloed by the moonlight. A man in white lay at the bottom, his limbs twisted unnaturally, and a pool of dark red slowly spilling around him like a spreading stain.

He was dead, that much anyone could see.

Someone made a hiccuping, gasping noise. At the edge of the light, mostly obscured by the darkness, was a little boy, covering his mouth in both horror and obvious terror. “No, no, no, Dad, no!”

He—his view shook, jolting. The child was crying now, breath ragged, eyes locked onto the broken corpse, before suddenly looking forward. He followed the child’s gaze only to clench his teeth around a gasp of his own. Directly on the other side of the corpse was another child, frozen still with wide blue eyes.

“No—no, why are you here?”

Violently, Shinichi was forced from the memory and the Baron’s mind as if being dragged
from underwater into the startling clarity of fresh air. An intensely powerful mental force crashed into his mind. All thoughts and emotions ceased, evaporating away until he was merely swaying dully on his feet, a puppet suspended on strings.

“Leave.” The Baron ordered, and Shinichi turned on his heel and left, memories crumbling like sand.

Saguru charged once again, staff in one hand and razor-sharp shuriken in the other. He released each with precision accuracy, but KID was nothing if not the essence of the artful dodger. But the bastard was no longer smiling, the clear ferocity in Saguru’s attacks keeping the thief on the defensive back foot. This time, it was Saguru acting, and KID reacting, and it showed.

Frustration was giving bay to cool determination as Saguru concentrated on his target, forgetting all indignities and slights.

*Personal feelings have no place on the battlefield of a hero,* his master had told him long ago, and Saguru had taken it to heart. Something about KID always tested his resolve, though.

“Heliopause, can’t you melt us out of here?” Ran was saying, her voice strained. But she sounded fine.

“Oh, burnin’ Banshee to a crisp!” Hattori hurriedly replied, and at that there was an impressive amount of muffled yelling from Kazuha, who kept her mouth carefully clamped shut. Clearly, Saguru was on his own.

Despite himself, despite the situation, Saguru couldn’t help but crack a smile. The anger finally bled away completely, the almost maddening haze easing to a more familiar aggravation that he easily pushed aside.

Everything was fine. He could manage; he was vastly superior to KID in single-hand combat and had just as many tricks and gadgets up his sleeves.

Even if most of them *didn’t seem to be working.* He’d think about how KID sabotaged his gear *later,* for now he swiped downwards with his staff, forcing the thief to dodge right into the path a Birdclaw. The hook skidded past KID’s foot, and with a jerk, Saguru had it swinging back around around KID’s legs. The tangled thief was swiftly dragged off balance by another jerk on the line, and KID toppled over with a undignified yelp.

Saguru didn’t hesitate to rush forward and bring his staff down on KID’s obnoxious hat. But the moment the steel touched the thief’s prone form, he erupted into white smoke. Instinctually, Saguru flinched back and held his breath, feeling the line going slack in his hand.

Damn escape artist.

The smoke set off the fire sprinklers, but the spray came down with unnatural pressure, each drop stinging like a pebble.

Saguru cursed, struggling to find the white-clothed thief in the rising mist. The water was washing away all the scents, and the hissing of the sprinklers drowned out KID’s already near silent footsteps.

He still sensed the strike seconds before it hit, just managing to duck in time for a dart and some other projectile to skirt past his face; there was no missing the hum of electricity. The dart-like electrodes were wireless, but he suspected if they buried into his skin, the charge they release...
would not be harmless.

Still, the spray was abating, and with a quick trajectory calculation, he knew where KID would be next.

Saguru threw himself around and released a barrage of shuriken.

KID stepped easily out of the way, circling Saguru with feline grace and nonchalance. Saguru had another volley in hand in an instant, but paused when he realized what KID had placed his back towards: the other Irregulars.

If Saguru shot and missed, he could end up injuring his own team.

“Coward.” Saguru hissed as KID swaggered backwards, but he stayed his hand, feeling the cool metal of his shuriken even through his gloves.

The thief merely hummed as he turned to admire his work. The others snarled up at him from the mess, but it was obvious they still hadn’t managed to pull free.

“Do you like it? I created it just for my critics.” KID said, as if they should be grateful. “It’s a special extra-sticky polymer that’s activated by contact with extreme heat.”

Well. That explained a lot. Hattori was hardly difficult to bait, after all.

“You know, if you used that brain of yours for good instead of personal profit, the world would be a better place.” Saguru said, though he really doubted Kuroba would ever care about benefitting others. He was too self-absorbed for that. Yet, he still couldn't help but lament the waste of such a brilliant mind at times. Not just lament, but resent as well. KID could use his talents for so much more than burglary and grand theft-larceny, but actively chose to be an menace to society instead.

It grinded on his nerves.

“Oh, but I would be so less rich.” KID pouted exaggeratedly, and Saguru shifted his weight as he waited for an opening. At some point, KID would move, and that would be his chance. “Even when you’re flattering me, you misunderstand, dodo.”

“What don’t I understand?”

“That I’m distracting you.”

Shit.

The other projectile. The taser. Extreme heat. The pieces fell together in his mind a moment too late.

KID hadn’t been aiming for Saguru at all.

Saguru heard something bubble, and turned just in time to see a mass of gelatinous gum erupt behind him, bursting forth faster than he could flinch backwards. In the blink of an eye, he was trapped, hands and legs stuck in a disgusting ball of god-knows-what.

“Gotcha.” KID celebrated, and Saguru tugged uselessly on his hands. He was stuck up to his elbows: not even pulling out of his gloves would help.

Saguru glowered over his shoulder at his opponent, frustrated with the thief and himself. How had he fallen for that? And where the hell was the Baron? Shouldn’t their mentor have interfered ages
ago, when KID commandeered their comms?

Unless KID had found a way to get the Baron out of the picture. Was that even possible? What was the purpose of this, of any of this? The painting wasn’t even that valuable, and from what Saguru could see, KID didn’t even have it on him.

“Why?” There was no way to say the word with nearly enough venom, but Saguru tried, as if spitting enough acid could melt his bonds.

KID smiled nastily back at him. That was certainly the way to describe KID’s behavior. Nasty.

“You know why.” KID sang back, and Saguru tried to jerk himself free again. Normally, KID would have made his escape by now, but he was clearly hanging around to gloat. And there was nothing Saguru could do about it.

“You haven’t won yet, Kaito.” A new voice said firmly. KID whirled around, and just for a moment Saguru caught a glimpse of his one unobscured eye, wide with shock.

Aoko stood in the hall, costumed and wild-haired, with a wall of water glistening behind her. The show of power was only matched by the ferocity in her expression.

KID went very, very still. The dangerous kind of still, like a poised viper or the suspended blade of a guillotine. “Well, well, look who decided to join the fun.” He purred, and once again, the sound had shivers running down Saguru’s spine. “Sure you’re making the right choice, mademoiselle?”

“Yes.” Aoko said, and Saguru wondered if she felt half as resolute as she looked. He couldn’t imagine how difficult this must be for her. “Are you?” For a moment, her expression softened, eyebrows turning up and mouth falling into a shape that was soft and pleading. “Last chance,” she said, in a voice quiet enough for a confessionary.

If KID saw the appeal of it, of her, he didn’t show it. Instead, he merely watched her coolly, with a condescending smile fluttering on his lips. “Oh, sweetheart.” KID reached into his jacket and pulled out a silver gun. Saguru tensed, testing his bonds, as he watched the weapon warily. KID had never drawn any sort of weapon, besides smoke bombs and flash bangs, on any of them before—the lone exception was the taser, and that hadn’t really been meant for him at all—but he recognized the sleek pistol as the card gun mentioned in the Baron’s reports. “I made my choice a long time ago.”

Aoko took a breath and shut her eyes. When she opened them, they shined with furious tears. The water burst forward without another word, parting around Aoko and rushing towards KID with all the force of a waterfall. KID’s free hand shot forward, pitching one of Saguru’s own liquid nitrogen capsules right into the wave, and Aoko made a choked noise of surprise. Saguru had no idea when in their scrimmage KID had lifted them off him, but he regretted bringing them then. In an instant, the water was frozen solid, trapping Aoko in between two walls of ice. KID didn’t hesitate before tightening his finger around the trigger of his card gun, and a flurry of sharpened cards cut through the air. Aoko threw herself down, but she wasn’t near fast enough to escape the steel sheets that sliced past her arms and legs, leaving behind thin, jagged wounds. The shallow cuts bled sluggishly as Aoko scrambled forward, and the whole hall groaned with the sound of pipes bursting. But the water that came through the walls and ceiling was only met with more freeze pellets, until sleet was flying through the hall in all directions.

“Tsuyu!” Saguru yelled, and for a brief second, her wide, almost panicked eyes met his. “You need more water than he can freeze!” He deliberately looked towards the ceiling, and hopefully, the water main labeled on the map of museum.
Aoko pursed her lips, eyes flashing left and right as she was forced to roll under another volley of cards. KID was shooting with precision that somehow managed to still come off as careless. The smile on his face was deviously sharp and he sniped at Aoko’s hands and legs with almost wild abandon.

She would need to get past him to reach the stairwell to the roof, but he kept her at bay easily. With every jet of water she sprayed at him, he shot half a deck’s worth of cards right back, but while Aoko was struggling to dodge the projectiles, he either slipped around her attacks or froze them midair.

And then Aoko suddenly just stopped, standing still in the center of the hall, an open target.

Saguru’s heart nearly stopped in his chest as KID pointed the gun directly at her head and laughed. “Giving up so soon?”

“Like hell.” Aoko snarled, and she threw her hands up just as KID took the shot. The water gathered around the room suddenly burst into mist that flooded the whole hall, obscuring everything from view—almost the same tactic KID himself had used earlier. Even Saguru struggled to see through the sudden fog, but he could hear Aoko rushing forward and sliding right past the disorientated KID. She sprinted to the stairs, fog condensing back into tendrils of water behind her that whipped at her opponent as he threw himself around to pursue.

The tendrils didn’t last long, frozen solid instantaneously, but Aoko had already made it to the roof. KID was hot on her heels.

Saguru and the others stared after them, helpless as both combatants were already gone.

Shinichi came back to himself in his own bedroom. He knew he traveled home on his own, but the memories were almost nonexistent, more than if he was simply in a daze.

He didn’t even know why he’d left. He couldn’t remember much of anything after his conversation with KID, except the compulsion to return to the manor. He’d never abandoned a story before.

The footage he’d obtained from the heist was concerning: the memory card and what he recorded earlier that night both.

The most concerning part, though, was that he didn’t remember the encounter showed in the video at all. The video and pictures he had taken clearly showed him encountering the Night Baron and approaching him for an interview, but his memories of the event were hazy and scattered. Had he left just because the Baron told him to?

Something had happened when he grabbed the Baron’s hand. He just couldn’t recall what, and the footage of it was frustratingly unhelpful. Why had he even done such a thing?

Shinichi spent the vast majority of his life trying to avoid unnecessary physical contact with others. Even soccer sometimes pushed the edges of his tolerance, and there had been a time when he’d only ever reach out to Ran willingly. He didn’t want the burden of other people’s shameful secrets and petty thoughts—he could barely manage his own.

But he, possibly, attempted to purposely insert himself into the Baron’s mind.

That was not something he would do lightly. What had prompted him to do so? And why would he forget afterwards? The only conclusion he could come to was that the Baron tampered with his mind, but that introduced a new slew of questions. Did the Baron do it on purpose, or was Shinichi
simply more susceptible to any mind bending affects the Baron’s hypothetical powers had because of his own?

Tiredly, he pushed the thoughts aside. He was thinking himself into circles that brought him no closer to a satisfactory answer.

So he focused on the other cause of his distress and inserted the received memory card into his camcorder with no small amount of trepidation. But when the files loaded, he couldn’t ignore the swell of hope within his chest. All the videos that had been lost when Tequila busted his previous camcorder had been salvaged somehow, undamaged. KID had, for some reason, taken the card he swiped from the police and transferred the memory from one storage disk to another.

Why? How had he known Shinichi had been carrying it? Did he watch the videos? Did he know something about the crows?

Shinichi’s unanswered questions only increased, exponentially, when he noticed that there was an extra file.

He knew, logically, that it was a bad idea. But he wanted at least some resolution, so swallowing his nerves, he carefully hit play.

She woke up to sunlight filtering cheerfully through her blinds. Morning had come, but the world wasn’t suddenly a brighter place. The problems of yesterday hadn’t gone away.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat and rubbed the grit from her eyes as she forced herself to get up, trying not to think about how long she’d spent crying into her pillow last night. She needed to look presentable; there was no point getting in trouble with her school too for being sloppily prepared for class.

But hell, Aoko had never wanted to go back to school less.

She had half the mind to call in sick, crawl back into bed, and pretend that everything was okay.

But at the same time, she didn’t think she could run away from this. She would have to face it, eventually.

But the cuts from the day before were aching. They had scabbed over quickly, shallow as they were, but they certainly didn’t look good. At least they hadn’t switched to summer uniforms yet, because she’d never be able to hide them all in short sleeves. She wasn’t particularly eager to show the marks of her second failure, especially if she too had to look at them.

The usual routine of preparing for school took longer than usual. She kept dropping things: her toothbrush, the frying pan, the bread. But lethargically, she couldn’t even begin to care, just continuing on autopilot. Toast, butter, chew.

She didn’t watch the news. She knew what it would say: Kaitou KID escaped again.

The walk to school was so mundane that she barely registered any of it, even the energetic conversations of the other students. She felt like she was traveling in a fish tank, sounds and sights filtered through several liters of water.

But at the school, a rush of cold fear stopped her in her tracks. Last night hadn’t ended well for
anyone, and now she was going to have to face it all over again.

“Fear is the heart of sin, you know.” A smooth voice told her, an unusual shade of red creeping into the peripheral of her vision. She turned to find a girl smiling coolly at her with striking red eyes.

“Sorry?” The word slipped out before she could stop it. If she was remembering right, the girl was the transfer student who joined their class around a month before, who had been rising in notoriety ever since. Koizumi, known for her red hair and absurdly alien attempts at conversation.

“There’s no running from truth.” Koizumi said, and Aoko watched her red lips glisten in the light. “It tends to catch up with you.”

Aoko opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Koizumi strode into the school as if they’d never spoken at all, her red hair blazing like a beacon guiding Aoko inside.

Entranced, she followed after, but with each step her nerves flared. Too soon, she reached her homeroom, and she froze all over again at the sight of it.

No running, Koizumi had said. Aoko didn’t quite get it, but she knew the words weren’t random bullshit. The strange girl had been trying to tell her something.

Aoko stepped into the classroom, and the world didn’t end. Nothing horrible happened. The planet spun on.

As if nothing was wrong, Kaito tossed her a mischievous smile and waggled his eyebrows. She very purposely looked away. Still running.

One week felt too short a period of time, and yet nowhere near long enough. Despite the retrieval of the footage of his attempted kidnapping and the trap in the warehouse, he couldn’t deliver any of the videos to the police. KID had been clear about that in the message he had left, but Shinichi knew it wasn’t an option in the first place. The police would know that he’d stolen evidence from the station, and was fraternizing with a wanted criminal. At best he’d be placed under police surveillance, and further investigation would be impossible. And while the footage proved the crows existed, the police already knew that. Whatever was going on, they were trying to sweep it under the rug, or at the very least, out of public’s line of sight.

Releasing the videos to the web wasn’t exactly a good idea either, even if it would make quite a splash. He couldn’t make any sort of report so long as the kids were still in danger, with the likelihood of the crows continuing their method of burning the evidence left behind. Inciting the culprits wasn’t going to help.

Which left Shinichi with very little to go on, and two deadlines hanging over his head. Not only was the shadowy time limit of the children’s lives looming on the horizon, but KID’s deal was wracking his nerves as well.

Any further leads were refusing to come to light, despite the fact that he had carefully perused the videos multiple times, combing for hints.

An organized criminal group kidnapping homeless children, including Satoshi, from warehouses across the city and burning the evidence to the ground; an all together unsustainable plan. A spontaneously emerging giant of fire that, for some reason or another, tried to go to the the warehouse from which Satoshi was taken, only to destroy all the evidence before the crows did. An anti-meta group stealing technology and research relating to the the genetics and biochemistry of
metahumans, including the work by an obviously brilliant but unknown and unpublicized scientist. Miyano Shiho was researching the science behind the development of superpowers. Something or someone triggered the emergence of the flaming Goliath that decimated downtown Tokyo. Miyano, if she was alive, was clearly working privately and discreetly, possibly only sending her work to a few select individuals for peer review. In all likelihood, she was unaffiliated with the Red Siamese Cats, otherwise they would have no need to steal her research, but somehow, the Cats had known exactly where to retrieve the files from. Moreover, there was a chance she wasn’t unaffiliated with the other incident of the week.

It was a stretch. And yet, the idea wouldn’t be shaken from his head, as if it was a certainty.

He had to find Miyano Shiho, and that led him right back to Nanyo University.

He had emailed the professor, Hirota Masami, from Nanyo, who had reported the robbery of his files to the police, under the pretense of writing an article on the Cat’s crime. The professor had agreed to an interview, and so here he was, armed with his best equipment.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me.”

Professor Hirota was an older man, edging his way towards being elderly and with a haphazard look in his eye. The kind of man that was becoming flighty in his age and becoming more careless; just like Professor Agasa.

“Not at all!” Oblivious to Shinichi’s amusement, Professor Hirota replied jovially. He looked tired and worn from recent events, but still maintained a kindly, cheerful air. “In fact, I’m a little starstruck. My granddaughter loves your website, and I must say, it’s nice to see young people so involved in current events.”

Well, at least someone thought so. Everybody else seemed to think he’d be better off less involved. “Events like these are hard to ignore.” An understatement, and yet so many people in Tokyo managed with nothing more than willful pigheadedness. “Are you doing alright in the wake of the robbery?”

Professor Hirota smiled, tired but earnest. He didn’t seem too put-out. “Fine, fine. I wasn’t even here. It’s a pity about what was taken, though. I haven’t any copies of the files they stole.”

“You don’t have digital versions?” Shinichi put on his best innocent face, pretending that that wasn’t totally his fault. Professor Hirota, thankfully, didn’t seem to think anything off.

“I did, but one of the thieves somehow cracked my computer and deleted all of them.” Now, how had that happened? Hopefully, no one would ever find out. Good thing Shinichi had been wearing gloves the night of the robbery, or he’d be the one answering some pretty uncomfortable questions.

“What about the sources of the files?” He carefully controlled his expression, maintaining the facade of someone curious and concerned.

“I obtained them privately from a colleague, unfortunately.”

“Can’t you ask the colleague to send them to you again?”

“No, sadly. I did try but she seems to have changed all her contact information. I haven’t been able to reach her at all.” Damn it.

“Why do you think the culprits would target these particular files? What were they about?”
“I’m not sure I should say. I am concerned, though. No one steals scientific research with good intentions in mind, and this is too large to be someone simply trying to steal credit for the work. The papers were all written by the same woman, on the molecular biochemistry of manifestation of meta-organism abilities.”

“Meta-organism?”

“The manifestation of ‘superpowers’,” the professor made air-quotes with a wry eyebrow quirk, “is not restricted to human beings. Strange and extreme mutations are appearing in all sorts of living organisms, from microbes to amphibians to mammals. The resulting abilities can be very dangerous, even devastating. We might be looking as a new generation of super-superbugs in the next few years; my colleague was searching for a way to prevent and control these manifestations.”

“That’s amazing.” He could easily guess why the Cats were interested in her work, then. “But couldn’t that kind of research also go the other way?”

“I suppose theoretically it would be possible for meta abilities to be forcibly amplified rather than suppressed, but these ‘powers’ don’t come from nowhere. What we are seeing is the extreme expression of genes in a form so incomprehensible to our current scientific knowledge that they seem supernatural.” Professor Hirota explained, obviously shifting slightly into lecture mode. “There is no current basis for the creation of superpowers in an organism not genetically coded to manifest a specific set of abilities.”

“Have you told this to the police?”

“I certainly mentioned it, but I’m not too concerned. My colleague’s work was very preliminary and almost rudimentary; it’s all just pathways and biochemistry. It would take years, maybe even decades of experimentation to even fully understand the true depths of these biological functions, let alone tamper with them.” Shinichi wondered if that was really true. He was woefully undereducated in the matters of anything beginning with the word meta, but truthfully, so was vast majority of the population. The study of meta-human abilities was still more theory than an united discipline, despite the immense progress humanity had made in the recent years.

But a simple reporter couldn’t show too much interest in that. “Can you tell me about what else was taken?”

Professor Hirota shook his head. “Not much, from what I can tell. Some machinery in one of the labs got taken; expensive stuff, but not anything you can’t replace with insurance money.”

Insurance. The Cat’s knowing where to find the research. The ability and training to make use of Miyano’s work.

An inside job.

A sick, dreadful feeling crawling up his spine.

“I would love the opportunity to speak with your colleagues about the incident. Is it possible you could introduce me to some of the others you work with?”

In the end, speaking with the professor’s colleagues had been fruitless. The staff of just the targeted building alone was too numerous a group for him to question on his own. It was frustrating, but Shinichi knew he’d have to come back to the issue of the Red Siamese Cats with a better game plan. He’d eventually called it a day and left the campus, stopping over in a small park to gather his thoughts before returning to the manor.
Going home left a back taste in his mouth these past few days, after what happened at the heist. The article he’d written had been less than stellar, but at least Jirokichi was more easily satisfied than Shinichi’s own inner demons.

But for once, he wasn’t facing a dead end. He could work with the opportunities the university presented to him; maybe if he got into the staff rooms and offices again, he could discern something. It would be tedious and taxing, but if he could figure out who the leak was, he might be able to tail them back to the elusive Miyano.

And on the topic of tails …

“Are you following me?” He said aloud, not particularly looking anywhere. The sun was setting over the city, painting the towering skyscrapers of glass and steel viciously orange. The shadows of trees were lengthening across the park, creeping over the walkways and fountains.

Somebody behind him laughed. The voice was entirely unfamiliar, but the tone wasn’t. “Depends on how you define the word following.”

So he had guessed right. Considering what had happened the other day, Shinichi hadn’t dared to think that the magician wasn’t keeping him under observation. KID had been monitoring him through security feeds and a traffic cams, but once he stepped into the camera-free park, the thief had been forced to take his spying on foot. Shinichi didn’t have the energy to be aggravated over it, not when he had plenty of other reasons to be angry with KID. “Worried that I’ll go to the cops? Or maybe ISHA?” A tall, broad shouldered man with a plain face and murky brown eyes sat down besides him, wearing an easy smile and a blue-collar uniform. The man said nothing; just lounged on the bench and watched the water in the fountain. Shinichi wondered if if they were thinking about the same thing. “I hear your last encounter with the Irregulars got messy.”

“Messy is a good word for it.” KID replied, huffing with amusement. Shinichi didn’t think it was particularly funny, but he and KID didn’t always have the same sense of humor.

“Get too obvious and they might figure out what your powers are.” He was relatively sure they didn’t know already, because they hadn’t reworked their strategies to better counter KID’s hidden strengths. Not like Shinichi had. He’d discovered a few days ago that KID somehow had full access to his computer, possibly through some hidden bug in the returned files, and ever since he’d taken to working with paper and pen.

“Worried about me? You’re surprisingly into this partner-in-crime thing.”

“Hardly.” Just that one word carried a fair amount of scorn, just in case KID was feeling particularly thick and hadn’t noticed that Shinichi was not enjoying their usual games. “But it’ll take the breath out of my article unmasking you and your tricks if everyone is already in on it.” Before this stupid case began, he had never once spared a thought to KID’s identity and the possibility of unveiling it. Now, he found the usual empty threat wasn’t so empty.

He was probably not being fair, hell, KID was probably not even the one he was really angry with. Just a convenient and uncomplaining target he could vent his frustrations on.

“Keep dreaming, stringer. I hear it’s good for kids your age to have imagination.” The thief snapped right back, a surprisingly honest undercurrent of bitterness in his tone. Shinichi took a breath and released it as he tried to not remember the rough, frost-bitten edge of KID’s mind. Neither of them were in a healthy enough mindset for their usual banter to come off as anything but sour.

But clawing at each other didn’t solve anything.
Maybe KID was thinking the same thing, because he notably, deliberately eased, shoulders falling back and body folding forward slightly. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter. “You said hear. So you really ditched the heist before it even ended?”

“I ran into the Night Baron.”

KID didn’t look surprised. There was something akin to empathy gleaming in his eyes behind those awful contact lenses. “That guy’s the worst.”

“...Agreed.”

“Well, then you might like my plan more than expected.” KID rose from the bench with none of his usual fluidity, perfectly mimicking the tired slouch of a weary middle-aged worker. Shinichi was almost too fascinated by the change to pay the next words their proper attention. Almost. “Come with me, it’s about time we went over the game plan.”

Uh oh.

Shinichi turned his eyes to the pastel sky as he lifted himself off the bench, ignoring the rising chill in the air. “Why me?” He asked.

The grin KID struck him with should have been positively terrifying. But Shinichi didn’t feel scared in the slightest. “Hmm, well, I made a promise. And let’s just say, I’m a man of my word.”

Curiosity burned in his brain like a brand, and Shinichi couldn’t help but willingly fall into step behind one of the greatest criminal minds of the century.

If nothing else, this could turn into one hell of an article.

Chapter End Notes

don't run off with sketchy thieves kids.
Well, it's been a while. I'm really sorry I take so long to update. But hey, I graduated from university! Got my degree in Immunology and now, I'm heading off to grad school come September! I'm so nervous, haha. Things in this story are picking up. Just about three more chapters until we're done with the first part~! After that, chapters will hopefully come more often, because part two is my favorite to write. I'll probably come back later to fix type-os and grammar mistakes, but I wanted to get this to you guys ASAP!

Shout out to Tuol, Sarah, narue_nara-chan, and all everybody whose continued support of this story always inspires me to get off my ass and write! You guys are the best! I wish I could list all of you but that would take a really long time! Just know I love you!

Chapter 7: Alone in a Daydream

KID led him to a downtown karaoke bar, of all places, called the Mocking Parrot. Arguably the worst place in the city to bring him, as any one of his friends and family could attest. At least no one would expect to see him there, in the dark, pulsating room filled with faceless people and too much noise. The thief swept inside with a smile, flashing a membership card Shinichi didn't recognize at the sleepy-eyed hostess. She didn't protest as KID made a beeline for stairs on the side, leading up to an even darker hallway only illuminated by harsh blue LEDs. They passed room after room, each labeled with their relevant levels of vacancy, until they reached the end of the hall, where KID inserted his card into the final door's lock. The door unlocked with a flash of green, and KID held it open with a smarmy smile.

"After you, stringer."

Shinichi tried to touch as little as possible as they entered the booth, avoiding the edges of the table and the microphones to settle on the edge of the waxy couch. In the dim light, KID's disguise was even more convincing, and Shinichi had to take a moment to remind himself why he was there, alone and unprepared, with a criminal wanted in most nations.

KID was much more relaxed, reclining across from Shinichi with a fathomless grin. The dark and seedy atmosphere suited him; he wasn't just confident, he was in his element.

There was no doubt KID has been to the Mocking Parrot many times before, probably for information exchanges or fencing goods. Even knowing that, Shinichi figured there was little he could do with that information. KID wouldn't have led Shinichi there if he thought for even a moment that it could be traced back to him. Considering KID's apparently immense abilities with technomancy, Shinichi could hazard a guess why.

But that didn't matter, because he wasn't here for KID. His only interest was retrieving the files.
"What now?" Shinichi asked as KID plucked the tablet off the table in-between them. It should have been a simple song-selection device, but Shinichi figured in the thief's hands it could do a great deal more.

"Hold on." KID said, his focused face illuminated by the screen, "I wanna put some music on."

Holding back a groan of frustration, Shinichi leaned back in his seat and let the atmosphere of the room wash over him. He could feel the excitement and nervousness of past patrons, as well as some much more questionable emotions. There was a stain on the carpet, and just looking at it triggered a recollection, not his own, of horrible nausea and discomfort.

Disgusting. Shinichi shifted his focus elsewhere, as music began to fill the room. It was a harsh mix of rock and EDM, combined with the deep tones of a man's voice. It was in English, he recognized, some foreign band with too much creativity than they knew what to do with, and it grated on his nerves, the steep beats and fierce tempo perfectly emulating the burn of anxiety in his gut. It was probably purposeful, on KID's part.

Subtly, he checked his phone, but it was off, sitting dead in his hand with a black screen. Across from him, KID shrugged and pressed a finger against the tablet. Immediately, the screens surrounding them shifted from lyrics to black text-boxes filled with little green characters and numbers.

"What is all this?" Shinichi asked, skimming the information laid out all around him. There was a date and four locations mentioned frequently, and as Shinichi read on, he grew more unnerved.

"This is..." His voice trailed off as he read more and more, and he felt a chill spreading across his skin completely unrelated to the room's enthusiastic air-conditioning. Three robberies were laid out before his eyes: not heists, but carefully planned operations for a large team of highly trained individuals. And the targets were all cutting edge research labs and technological powerhouses.

"Yup." The thief chirped, his mouth curled into something—Shinichi hesitated to still call it a smile—dark and self-satisfied. The sight of it and the idea that was forming in his head incited a pulse of fury inside him.

"You're working with the Red Siamese Cats after all." The words came out plainer, calmer, than they might have if he was less accustomed to hiding his anger. KID taking the files had been one thing: frustrating, but Shinichi could admit to himself it was as much his own fault for letting his guard down. But this was another matter entirely.

"It's not a mutual thing." KID waved a hand, and it was suddenly gloved. The blue-collar worker was gone, replaced by the dashing young man in a pressed white suit. The monocle gleamed in the lights of the screens, reflecting back tiny lime letters. "It's just a matter of convenience."

Shinichi didn't think they would associate with the infamous Phantom Thief 1412 willingly. He could only assume that meant the Cats didn't know they had a collaborator, or that one of their number had been replaced and weren't who they said they were. Either way, the question was why.

"I didn't agree to help terrorists."

"You're surprisingly naïve." KID laughed, and Shinichi bristled, offended. "If you think I'm giving you a choice at this point, you're not nearly as clever as people give you credit for." Shinichi bit his tongue on a nasty response, plans for escape already forming in his head. If KID thought he was going to go along passively, he was the one that was naïve. Measuring his silence, KID raised his hands and continued. "Let's put it this way: either you come along willingly and get this," KID snapped his fingers, the sound not at all dulled by his gloves, and the stolen flash drive was
suddenly spinning on every screen. "Or you can make me force you and you get nothing. This plan
doesn't exactly necessitate a willing participant." Shinichi stared at the thief, fully away that his
displeasure was written across his face. KID did not quail. "Don't give me that look. There will be,
like, zero terrorism, I promise." Shinichi didn't trust that for a moment, but a blossoming strategy
was quickly outpacing his frustration. What he needed was to reclaim some control over the
situation, and if he did so, he could ensure nothing of the sort occurred. Oblivious, KID was still
talking. "I don't want to make you do anything, stringer. But I will if I have to."

Shinichi took another look at the plans laid before him, including data and stats on some very
familiar masked faces. In particular, a grinning white opera mask caught his eye, and his stomach
twisted. The drive wasn't the only thing stolen from him recently. Since there was no getting out,
he may as well use the situation to his advantage.

Having made his decision, he pointed to the screens. "It's not going to work."

"What?"

"This plan of yours. It's not going to work." KID was caught off-guard. Shinichi tapped on the
white mask they both loathed. "This isn't enough to beat the Night Baron." The thief stared at him
with curious eyes and a frown forming on his lips. Clearly, KID wasn't used to people finding flaws
in his plans. But what was laid before Shinichi wasn't sufficient to guarantee success, and
something told Shinichi that anything less than victory would mean he didn't get his evidence
back.

KID was outright scowling now, and the expression was surprisingly childish. "Well then," he
muttered sulkily, with a note of challenge in his voice, "what do you recommend?"

Making mistakes was easy. They happened fast, thoughtlessly, and the window of opportunity for
correcting them closed in an instant. People could work every day for their whole lives to make
something great, and a single moment's carelessness could reduce it all to nothing.

Thinking about mistakes was hard. Saguru had always struggled with being wrong, because he had
his pride, which made personal failures difficult to swallow.

His mentor had never allowed him to do anything but. Kudo Yuusaku expected him to confront his
mistakes head on, and it was a task that required immense mental fortitude. It was exhausting, and
somehow, it never got easier, no matter how many times he failed.

That was what post-mission debriefs were for, but the previous night, the Baron sent them all home
with barely a word. Saguru had stewed over everything that occurred over the course of the heist
with near obsessive attention, trying to ignore the near nauseating swell of guilt, misery, and
anxiety swirling in his gut.

And then he returned to the manor after school, his heart shamefully in his throat and his limbs
heavy as lead. He let himself in and found the manor empty except for a single lonely heartbeat.

Shinichi must have been out. No surprise there.

He found his mentor in the study, surrounded by computer screens and reports. One was showing
the ISHA spokesperson chattering away to an enraptured audience, no doubt assuring the populace
that as always, the Overseers had everything under control.

Sometimes Saguru wondered how much he really wanted that to be true.
Yuusaku looked up at him when he entered, unsurprised. Saguru met his cold blue eyes and said as clearly as he could, "KID escaped again."

"Yes," Yuusaku confirmed with a sigh. He looked tired, solemnity deepening the lines in his face. Moments like this, Saguru couldn't help but mourn the fading of his mentor's youth. Once upon a time, Kudo Yuusaku had been a fresh-faced hero with a plan for a better, more promising world. But years had become decades and the world only seemed to descend further into discord, even on the genetic level. How much longer would the Night Baron be able to go on? Saguru feared the answer, some days. As if thinking the same thing, Yuusaku leaned back in his chair with another weary sigh. "What occurred last night was not your fault or your responsibility, Saguru-kun."

Saguru bit his lip at that. He may not have been in charge of the operation, but he hadn't exactly done well either. "I am just grateful no one was seriously injured."

"Sir?" Saguru pinched his eyebrows together, his sense of unease growing. It was not like his mentor to settle for so little.

But Yuusaku's face was heavy with an old guilt. "I assumed command and failed to follow through." Saguru bit the inside of his lip. He didn't want to hear this, and he didn't know how to respond to it. "I was responsible for the mission's failure."

Shamefully, Saguru was glad to be relieved of the responsibility. He forced himself to stand tall and face Yuusaku, as Yuusaku always did to him. "Sir, if you don't mind me asking, what happened? Where were you?"

"There was unexpected interference." Yuusaku's voice carried a familiar, wretched gravity. "Shinichi was there." "What?" Saguru's whole body stiffened, like a bristling cat. Even his hair seemed to stand on end. Shinichi wasn't supposed to be there. Shinichi wasn't supposed to be anywhere near Kaitou KID, or an active conflict.

"In order to remove him from the premises as quickly as possible, I placed a compulsion on him. He...resisted. I was forced to push harder than I intended to."

All words Saguru had to say evaporated on his tongue. He knew, of course, what his mentor's abilities were capable of, and how Yuusaku tended to use them. Saguru had no choice but to make his peace with the indignity and invasive nature of mind control years before; a necessary evil on the path to a world where such things were no longer necessary.

He knew, even better, how and why Yuusaku felt compelled to leash his own son's mind, and how each time seemed to chip away at Yuusaku's very soul.

He knew, even better, how and why Yuusaku felt compelled to leash his own son's mind, and how each time seemed to chip away at Yuusaku's very soul.

It was past the time for judgement, for shame. All that was left for them was the cold calculation of necessity. So Saguru swallowed his horror and steeled himself. "Does he suspect anything?"

"Most certainly. He may even have our entire encounter on tape."

Saguru nearly jolted again, shocked. It wasn't like Yuusaku to be so careless, to make such a dangerous mistake. It reflected just how shaken Yuusaku must have been at the time, and Saguru could understand why. Seeing his son once again at the site of a heist, while the previous disaster still weighed so heavily on Yuusaku's shoulders, must have put him in a state of near panic.

Not for the first time, Saguru wondered if Yuusaku had PTSD, and if it haunted him every time he saw his son. But it was not his place. So, when all other words failed him, he was left with nothing
"What's worse is that KID is still on the loose, and we've revealed his identity to Aoko-kun."
Yuusaku reached up and adjusted his glasses wearily. "I do not think him and Shinichi being in the same place last night was a coincidence. One way or another, he is certain to follow through on his threat."

That was worse. "Will Shinichi-kun believe him?"

Yuusaku gave Saguru a dry look. "It doesn't matter, does it? It will be dangerous either way."

Saguru straightened and tried his best to look competent. He could only hope his voice carried enough confidence to be reassuring. "We can apprehend KID before he has the opportunity to, if you join us, sir." The statement was firmer than his own belief in it. What was becoming abundantly clear was that KID wasn't to be underestimated. While the Overseers often treated him as a child's play, KID was proving to be more adaptive, ingenious, and formidable than they gave him credit for. In truth, Saguru was beginning to suspect the true reason that so many Overseer agents did not step forward to face KID was not lack of urgency, but the uncertainty of victory against him. Especially considering the high media-profile he maintained. If a single professional hero failed to apprehend him, it would international news.

But the Night Baron wasn't just any pro hero. He was the best, the bastion of justice. He had beat the original and that counted for something, no matter how tragically the battle had ended. Unless, the current KID possessed abilities and resources the original did not. They had no evidence to the contrary.

"I will not. Last night certainly proved that I—"
Yuusaku paused for a moment, his eyes dark and incomprehensible, "am emotionally compromised."

Saguru wilted a little, then forced his shoulders back up. "You and Aoko-kun both."

Yuusaku pinched his lips together. "Not taking the news well, is she?"

"Not at all." Aoko had been a sorry sight last he'd seen her, with pallid skin and bags under her eyes. She was not handling Kuroba's persisting presence in their classes well or gracefully, and even their other classmates were starting to take notice. Kuroba's ongoing insistence on pretending nothing had changed was not making it easier for her.

"Can hardly blame the poor girl. It may be a good idea to call my wife." Yuusaku said, reaching for his phone. Saguru blinked, caught by surprise. While her presence was hardly a solution, but it would ease tensions temporarily. But...

"Isn't Yukiko-san acting as the media liaison in America right now?" Yukiko had returned with them to Japan after the police conference but was called back to the ISHA headquarters almost immediately afterwards, after a meta-human incident in the USA. She hadn't even gotten a chance to see her son.

"She'll be finished there by this Saturday." Yuusaku said, smiling at his phone. On the screen, Yukiko's profile picture smiled back. "Surely, we can make it through a week."

Surely. What was the worst that could happen? Murphy's Law had to have mercy on them sometime. In the meantime, Saguru could do whatever he could to make sure the situation didn't deteriorate.

A sharp sound cut through the air, and a communication channel opened on one of the screens. In
bright green letters it identified the caller: the Tokyo MPD Liaison. Yuusaku's eyes watched it warily, but he fixed on a casual smile and accepted the call.

"Good evening, Officer Date."

"Is that what we're calling it now?" A gruff voice replied, and while it was only a voice call and there was no chance of being seen, Saguru stood taller. Instinct, mostly: that, and the memory of more than a couple past interactions with the rough-and-tumble police officer. "I ain't got much time, so I'm gonna make this quick." Saguru and Yuusaku exchanged sharp-eyed glances. Date kept most of his reports short, but his voice carried an unusual note of urgency. "Some evidence disappeared from our locker. We don't know when, or how, but it was from Kudo Shinichi's little encounter with them." Saguru sucked in a breath through his teeth. Maybe Murphy's Law wasn't done with them yet. Did they somehow have someone on the inside of the Tokyo police after all? His mentor had always suggested so, but Saguru had never quite believed that one of his father's officers could be a turn-coat. Or rather, never wanted to believe it. Maybe he and Aoko had more in common than he wanted to admit. "I did as you said and convinced the department that the investigation should be left to you guys, but missing evidence isn't something they're gonna ignore too easily." Missing kids, missing evidence. It was disheartening to hear which one rose more eyebrows in the police station.

"Thank you, Date. You're right. If I assigned a public ISHA operative to the station and the case, would that ease tensions?" An operative had already been selected, based on her impressive credentials and her long-standing connections to the MPD's First Division, but she was not scheduled to arrive for another three weeks. They would have to arrange for her to arrive sooner. Saguru stepped over to one of the monitors and brought up her schedule, noting that she was currently neck-deep in Korean terrorist cell. Once that was resolved, she and her partner were expected to guard the international peace talks.

He would have to find someone to replace her on the security detail, preferably someone from the Japanese Branch, so the whole thing could be written off as an exchange of personnel.

"Yeah, sure." Date grumbled over the line, and Yuusaku pointed to a name in the Japanese register. Rebound. Saguru scowled back at him. "But the Kudo kid—"

"Is not a priority or a problem." Yuusaku lied so smoothly, not so much as a hitch in his breath or a stutter in his heart. Not even Saguru would have been able to tell the difference. He frowned at the name on the screen and brought up Rebound's profile. It was a long list of accomplishments and high recommendations boasting his exemplary skills and immense strengths. Not to mention his rock-hard moral center and dedication to the work. At just eighteen: an Overseer. A full-fledged Overseer.

Saguru didn't like him. But he forced those feelings aside and focused on the matter at hand, putting together all the necessary paperwork.

Yuusaku was still reassuring Date of his son's supposed unimportance in the grand scheme of the universe. "Kudo Shinichi will move on to the next story."

Date snorted. Saguru wanted to, too. "You don't really believe that. That punk's too deep, Baron."

Yuusaku was still smiling cheerfully, but his eyes were very cold. Saguru carefully kept his gaze on the request he was filing with the ISHA Japan management office, and tried to ignore how cold the room suddenly felt. "Thank you for your hard work, Officer Date. Your advice is indispensable as always."
Date took a long, troubled breath. He sounded as stressed as Saguru felt. "Just—just find a way to fix this. Find those kids."

"Of course." Yuusaku agreed and ended the call. Saguru tried to remember what he was supposed to be typing, desperately trying to keep his mind blank. To not think too loudly about how he couldn't tell if the last words were a lie or not. He finished the request for Rebound's assistance with a few clicks and forcibly turned his mind to more productive matters. The sound of the keyboard was loud in the suddenly quiet room.

Such as, the current threat to their security: Kaitou KID. It was difficult to find his voice, but he eventually ended the fresh silence. "I will monitor Kuroba Kaito for now." There had to be evidence, somewhere. A scent, a stutter, a trail. Saguru just had to find it.

Yuusaku gave him a long, contemplative look. "Good luck." The statement sounded so doubtful.

And doubtful was right: keeping track of Kuroba proved fruitless; by all appearances, he led a normal high school life that not even Saguru's heightened senses could find fault in. Kuroba went to class like any other student, wandered around town after school completing miscellaneous tasks and goofing off, then returned home in the evening to seemingly do his homework, practice magic tricks, and sleep. Rinse, repeat.

In all likelihood, the Kuroba he was following was probably not Kuroba at all, most of the time. But there was no telling a supposed imposter from the original: not even by scent, because Kuroba's scent varied by the day, depending on whatever particular trick he had hidden on his person and what he'd been experimenting with.

The facade was flawless, so good Saguru almost began to doubt what he knew was absolute truth. But if evidence was easy to come by, KID would be behind bars already.

A whole week passed, and Saguru learnt nothing.

In the meantime, Ran was supposed to be keeping an eye on Shinichi. The goal was to keep KID away from Shinichi at all costs, but Shinichi spent so much time going to different locations in the city and speaking with so many different people, especially considering all the incidents he just happened to walk right into. Any one of the people around him could be KID at any given time, which made the passive observation practically useless. The second problem was that they hadn't even told Ran about the confrontation between the Baron and KID. Unable to explain the truth of the situation, Saguru could only instruct Ran to monitor Shinichi's behavior for anything unusual, and hope.

It was, admittedly, not their best plan.

Even so, when Thursday night finally rolled around, and she met him in the headquarters for debrief and training, Saguru was hoping to hear no news.

Instead, as they sparred and traded blows, Ran stared him right in the eyes and bit her lip, worry clear across her expression.

"I'm worried about Shinichi." Ran admitted, catching his fist with barely any effort. The force of his blow barely even pushed her hand back, and that was only because she let it. "He's been acting weird all week."

"How so?" Saguru asked cautiously, pulling from her grip as the spar came to a standstill. It was
not often Shinichi acted out of character, but it was also very difficult to tell what he was thinking at times. It had been easier when they were younger, when Shinichi was cockier and more expressive: all arrogant smiles and bravado. But as they got older, and the world seemed harsher by the day, Shinichi withdrew inside himself.

"He's skipping practice even more than usual, even though the tournament's so close, and running off right after class. I think something's worrying him." Like gaps in his memory after an encounter with the Night Baron, or possible interference by the Kaitou KID? Both were concerning, but Saguru carefully kept his mouth shut. Ran didn't seem to notice, continuing with a furrowed brow. "Hakuba-kun, do you think it's possible he's still investigating?"

"I hope not, but knowing him..." Truthfully, Saguru found it highly unlikely that Shinichi wasn't still investigating. Shinichi wasn't exactly the type to let things lie. "Have you tried talking to him?" Not even Ran could dissuade Shinichi from something he'd set his mind on, but she fared better than most.

Ran shook her head, a miserable frown twisting her face. "I think he's avoiding me. I've been trying to follow him around, like you asked, but he tries to get out of it every chance he gets." That was discouraging to hear, and Saguru winced. Back when they first formed the Irregulars, just the two of them and Hattori, none of them had imagined the toll it would take on their personal lives. But as time went on, the costs of their lifestyle mounted, and the very people they were trying to protect got hurt.

At least Hattori's relationship with Kazuha had been saved by Kazuha's own developing abilities and his inability to keep a secret. They had brought Kazuha into the fold, but the same couldn't be done for Shinichi. It would be too dangerous for everyone involved.

Maybe Saguru should put Hattori on the surveillance instead. Hattori was clever and overbearing, a combination only useful in situations like this, but Hattori's relations with Shinichi seemed to be suffering too.

And Saguru wasn't entirely sure Hattori would agree to spy on Shinichi for them again. And Saguru himself certainly couldn't do it, not with...well, everything.

Reading his expression, Ran frowned. Her eyes were too wet, and she seemed to be struggling to find words. "How do you handle it?" She asked, finally, gaze on the mat under their feet. "He's been avoiding you for ages now."

Jesus. This wasn't a conversation Saguru wanted to be having. But, apparently, it was happening anyway. His stomach twisted unpleasantly. "It was hard, at first. Really hard." He didn't elaborate. The memory of throwing out his Teitan High application came back again, choking him like it always did. It was a stupid thing to still be upset over, because it had led him to Aoko, and to KID's true identity. But still it burned. That hadn't even been the start. It was just another stupid little thing in a long line, all starting from that one awful day.

Just more things he didn't want to talk about. "You have to realize that to him, we're the ones that started it. We're the ones avoiding him." That was right; Saguru couldn't make this all about his feelings, or even just about Ran's. Shinichi's mattered too. And Shinichi was probably hurting the most.

Ran deflated further, curling into herself. "I know we can't tell him. I know that. But it's just so hard." She lowered her head, and Saguru could see the gleam of tears on her cheeks.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I know."
"I miss him."

"I know. I do too."

Saguru wondered how long they could keep this up.

Shinichi wondered, briefly, what the hell he was doing. The clothes had fit after all, so he changed back out them and carefully put them back on the hanger, where they would hopefully remain until it was time to set the plan in motion. Had KID got them specifically tailored to his measurements somehow, or were the two of them actually similar in body-type?

In their brief, sudden meetings, he had always assumed KID was taller than him. He couldn't remember why or when he came to that conclusion.

Or rather, he felt like that conclusion was based on a faulty premise. Because sometimes he wondered if their supposed first meeting, as Kaitou KID and intrepid reporter Kudo Shinichi, was really their first meeting at all.

He gently grabbed the sleeve of the jacket and ran his fingers over it, searching. The only memories that arose were his own, faded over time and almost surreal in nature. But when he closed his eyes, he could envision it perfectly.

The moon shone through the office window, illuminating the sharp edges of his father's desk with pale light. He gripped the edges with skinny, short fingers and struggled to see over, wobbling on his toes. The surface was littered with papers and books and a desktop computer, but in the dim light, Shinichi couldn't read any of them. Frustrated, he turned to the shelves that lined the room, searching for something he could read.

The darkness of the study felt off. Uncomfortable, somehow. Shinichi's heart was beating fast, fluttering in his chest nervously, and he once again searched the shadowy crevices of the room. He looked for a camera, or a blinking light, anything that would explain the crawling of his skin. But there was nothing.

The room seemed to get darker.

No, the room was getting darker.

Shinichi swung around, staring at the window with wide eyes. A man was standing before it, blocking the light with his dark silhouette. Shinichi tensed, but the figure remained still, leaning against the suddenly open window pane with his hands in his pockets.

"Are you alone? Where's that friend of yours?" A familiar voice spoke, smooth, elegant, and deep. Shinichi had only heard it a handful of times before, in moments like this, but it was distinct. He didn't answer, glad that Ran had not come over for dinner, but the figure continued, unbothered. "Are you bored again?"

It was definitely the same man that had visited a couple of weeks before, sneaking into his father's library so late. The same man from the school, that time with Ran. Shinichi bristled, mind racing. In the case of a home invasion, he was supposed to — "I'll call the police!"

The figure tilted his head, or at least, that was what it looked like he was doing. "Why?"

"You —you're not supposed to be in here! It's breaking and entering!"
"How would you know? You're not supposed to be in here either, are you?" Shinichi winced at that. The logic was flawed, but the argument was solid. "Snooping in your dad's files again?" Shinichi ducked his head and scowled at the ground, knowing he was about to be admonished. But instead, the stranger just laughed. He was slouching against the bookshelf, and it looked like he was smiling. "Relax, I won't tell if you don't." Peeking up, Shinichi carefully crept closer. Not once in their many encounters did the man make any move to harm him, so it felt safe to approach as long as he maintained due caution. "The more interesting stuff is downstairs, anyway." What did that mean? Shinichi bit the inside of his cheek mutinously, and the stranger motioned him closer, to the other side of the desk, where there was a chair he could use to climb up. "Come on, don't be shy. You went to all the trouble to get in here, right?"

Shinichi didn't know how he knew that he had to get through the office's lock. "I shouldn't." The rebellious frustration that had driven him in here was fading, and guilt was settling in. What would his father think if he found Shinichi in here, with some trespasser?

"Why not?" The man sounded almost disappointed.

There was a childish urge to stomp his feet. Shinichi ignored it. If he wanted adults to take him seriously, he couldn't sulk. And his father always made that face when he was sulky, looking like Shinichi was something worrisome and pathetic but also kind of funny. "Dad says I can't be a detective."

"Does he now?" The stranger sounded like Shinichi felt, annoyed and kind of baffled. Then, the man's voice perked up. "Well, he also told you to never come in here, right? But here you are." He made it sound like that fixed everything.

Shinichi glared at him the best he could in the darkness. "Correction: Dad will never let me be a detective." That was the real problem, and the real reason Shinichi was here in his father's office in the dark. "Even if I try, I'll never be able to live up to him either."

The man was quiet for a moment. In the meantime, Shinichi tried to discern his height and weight. It was too dark to guess with any sort accuracy, but he felt like the man was about the same height as his father. "Well, why do you want to be a detective anyway? Detective work is so uncouth."

That was rude. Detectives were awesome.

"Everybody is always lying. Dad, and Mom, and Kogoro-ojisan, and Eri-obasan, and my teachers. It's awful." Familiar frustration brewed at the mere thought of how his brain itched when he listened to them all, when he touched the same objects they did. When he got glimpses of feelings and thoughts and memories he didn't understand. "I want to reveal the truth." It sounded childish out loud.

The man made a considering sound, seeming to think it over. Shinichi watched him curiously, and the longer the pause went on, the more anxious for a response he felt. Finally, the man put up his hands with a sigh. "Nope, I don't get it!"

"Oh, come on!"

Just as Shinichi was considering storming off and leaving the stranger to whatever business he had in the office, a gloved hand caught his collar. The floor disappeared from under his feet as he was heaved up and plopped down on the office chair, with all of his father's files and notes spread out before him. "Those things aren't mutually exclusive." The man said, "that's the problem with deductive thinking, extrapolating one thing from another." The man turned away then, back to the window he had entered through. It was locked and closed again. He raised a hand to the glass and
pressed against it. It held firm under his fingers. "Your thinking can get too constrained. There are plenty of investigators in this world that don't have the title of Detective." Shinichi watched him curiously as the man glanced over his shoulder. The moonlight caught his jaw and illuminated a wide, beautiful smile. "Quit thinking like a sheep and start thinking like a fox. If you want something on the other side of an impassable door," he knocked on the glass, and suddenly, the window swung open, "all you have to do is find a way around."

The man stepped up on the sill and stood there, his silhouette outlined in soft white light. "And come investigate one of my shows sometime, okay?"

"What are you thinking about?" A similar voice called: similar, but more immature. More fae, less stable. Like a tooth someone had knocked loose, once sturdy but now sore and wobbly and going to fall right out.

Shinichi stared at the white cloth in his hands, then looked up at the disguised man before him. KID stared back inquisitively with blue eyes.

There was no knowing if the height and weight was the same. No knowing if he remembered the voice accurately. So, Shinichi had always ignored the similarities and let the subject lie. It didn't feel like something that could be easily broached.

It had never really mattered to him if the stranger was KID or not. He preferred to keep them separate in his mind, to let the man that inspired his career remain an innocent, benign shadow. Not a criminal, not someone Shinichi felt kinship with. Just a faceless dream that came at just the right time.

But now, it felt important. Because whether this was once the man from then or not, this thief was not the same. Whether the mantle had shifted hands or the differences were the simple result of the unaltering progression of time, something fundamental had changed.

He could just ask, but for some reason he held his tongue. They were running out of time as the days and hours passed, their collaborative scheme lurching forward towards its inevitable climax.

Are you the same man? Shinichi wanted to ask, but he was scared of the answer. Do I even want you to be?

Instead, he released the sleeve and let it fall back into place, gravity righting the wrongs. "It's nothing. Let's start the rehearsal."

"This is Kudo Shinichi, freelance reporter. If this is a business call, leave a message with your name, email, and pitch. If this is a personal call, sorry I missed it. Text me and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Voicemail, again. It wasn't unusual for Shinichi to not be answering his phone, but this was the seventh time. Usually, he would have at least called her back to tell her to quit harassing him by now.

Ran pursed her lips and closed the phone app, worried. Had he gotten in trouble again, or was he just snooping around somewhere and turned his phone to silent? Or did he just not want to talk to her so badly that he wasn't even willing to tell her to knock it off?

Shinichi had been acting oddly all week, more so than usual. He was always intense and driven, had been so since the day they met, but for the past few days he had been growing increasingly tense. He had even snapped at Sonoko earlier that day, which hadn't happened since they graduated
middle school. His growing distemper had been bothering Ran for days, but there was always something else that needed her attention after school. In school. At night. In the morning. Always.

After all, of the Irregulars, Angel was by far the most active. People all over the city, the prefecture, the country needed her help at all times. She was stronger, faster, and more mobile and durable than most professional heroes, and had fortune of being able to rely on the sun to replenish her energy. Ran tried to use her every available hour to the utmost every day, but she couldn't be everywhere at once.

There was a time when they were younger when she would tag along with his every step as he rushed head first into mess after mess, always so eager to get to the heart of things. She always had to be there to protect him in case he got in over his head.

Then her powers had grown, until she could lift cars over head with just her fingers, and she began to realize that he wasn't the only one she could protect. And she didn't just have the ability, she had the responsibility to do what she could for as many as she could. There were people in mortal peril at any given time; people that needed her help more than Shinichi did, usually.

Ran had forced herself to come to terms with that.

But now he wasn't answering his phone.

She pulled up his site, hoping he'd left some kind of clue, but found it relatively barren. With the India report, and attack on the city, the RSC break-ins, and the tumultuous KID heist, all of Shinichi's recent stories had been huge. The average reader probably thought he was just taking a breather after such an assortment of disasters, but Ran knew better.

Shinichi didn't take breaks. It went against his nature. So why? Why such a measly number of posts for an entire week? If all of Shinichi's energy was not going into his work as a reporter, where was it all going? He was rushing around as much as ever, too, but the number of scoops he released didn't match the level of his activity at all.

Ran frowned at her phone screen, but no answers appeared. But, his site did have a live feed that sourced from news all over the country, and the most recent urgent report caught her eye.

*Akita Shinkansen Derails in southern Senboku*

Shinichi would have to wait.

Ran hid her phone. Angel brought out her comm and checked the interface built into her gloves, searching the incident with a few quick taps. Immediately, Professor Sun's advanced search systems had retrieved the exact location of the accident, as well as all other relevant information that could be pulled from local news sources.

In an instant, Angel was in the air, rushing north-west at her highest speeds. The world underneath her turned into a blur of greens and greys as she shot through the sky faster than a bullet. Air rushed against her face, flattening her hair into a wild brown trail, and it roared in her ears until she could hear nothing else. In less than twenty minutes she was coming down in Akita. The accident was easy to evaluate from the air: part of the high-speed trail had derailed from its elevated tracks and now precariously hung over a highway. Terrified passengers were struggling their way up the fallen cars, trying to get into those that remained on the tracks. Though relatively still, the train was swinging dangerously. At a safe distance below, rescue workers and police were already scrambling into position. In all likelihood, helicopters were already on the way to try and hoist the train back up.
But there was no time to waste: with each moment, the train teetered closer to disaster. Ran dropped into the scene with all the confidence and calm she could muster, trying to not let the fear she felt for the passengers show. Immediately, everyone was shouting at her, but she ignored it as she measured her options. Some of the passengers were staring at her with terrified eyes, others shifting back down to chance a look at her, causing the train to shift precariously once more.

"Move away from the windows!" She yelled, her heart racing in her chest. If they heard her, they gave no indication, and Ran forced herself not to panic.

Taking a deep breath, Ran once again rose into the air and situated herself underneath the fallen portion of the train. It was an awkward angle, but with a great heave, she took the full weight upon herself. For a moment, it shifted on top of her terrifyingly, like any second it would fall apart or slip entirely off. But nothing happened, and with another steadying breath, Ran pushed up and flew, forcing the derailed train diagonally through the air, back towards its elevated platform. It groaned as it moved, and shook, and Ran prayed to the heavens for good luck.

The heavens answered, and it all held. She managed to push the derailed portion back on to the platform, and for the first time, heard joyous cheering over her pounding heart. Everyone below was waving their arms, and those in the train she could see were alright, scrambling their way towards the exits that could hopefully still be opened safely.

Everyone would be okay.

"Wow," a voice in her ear said. "That was pretty awesome, Angel-san."

Kaitou KID. There was no way she wouldn't recognize it, considering how it had mocked her and her team at the last heist. KID's voice had been torture during the time she was trapped in that weird sludge, unable to assist her friends.

But Aoko's comm had been retrieved. He shouldn't have been able to get back on their frequency.

"Surprised? Don't worry about it too much, miss." His tone was pleasant and laced with good cheer. Ran could feel her skin prickling with unease. "I'm just calling to ask if you happen to be missing something." The emphasis KID placed on the last two words were unmistakably mocking, as if he knew something she didn't. Ran felt her fists clench, distantly.

What was she missing? With no small amount of trepidation, she checked her phone again. Shinichi still hadn't called back. That was normal. But.

Ran's heart froze with almost irrational fear, and she shot once more into the air with dangerous speeds, streaking back towards Tokyo. In almost no time at all she was shooting over the Tokyo skyline, hurtling towards Beika and practically breathless with panic. The comm was silent, but she didn't know what that meant: if KID was still on the line, or if he'd hung-up. Ran didn't have time to worry about it.

And while the Kudo Manor stood alight and welcoming, Shinichi's bedroom was empty. His school bag rested on the ground next to his bed, alongside a little white card that read 'Call me!' in flourishing black letters.

Hesitantly, she called him again. On the second ring, there was an answer.

"Bingo!" KID chirped, on both lines: her comm, and the phone. The duality was had her biting her lip in fury. "You guessed it!"

"What have you done with Shinichi?" She snarled into her phone, realizing too late that Angel
wasn't supposed to call him so familiarly. Or that undoubtedly, Shinichi's caller ID had identified her as Ran. But if KID already knew enough to know to use Shinichi against her, that was probably already a hopeless cause. Her mind raced with possibilities of what all this could mean.

"Angel, what's goin' on?" Another voice came over the comm: Kazuha. Ran carefully forced her fingers to ease their grip on her phone, realizing in time that she'd been close to breaking it. Part of her wanted to.

"Banshee, wonderful that you could join us." KID drawled over the line.

Kazuha's voice rose to dangerous levels, and Ran adjusted the comm volume with a frustrated wince. They were wasting time. She had to find Shinichi. "You again! Why I oughta—"

"Riveting, Banshee, riveting." Ran checked her interface and saw that Hattori had checked in as well, probably clued in by Kazuha. Hakuba and Aoko weren't far behind, but still her heart pounded and she struggled to remain grounded on the floor of Shinichi's empty bedroom. "Well," KID's voice was jovial, and Ran wanted to scream into her phone, "since we're all here, why don't we all get together?"

Sequestered away in a dimly lit control room, he stared down at the phone in his hand. He had answered on cue, on the second ring after the name Ran had popped up on screen.

He set the phone down next to the monocle on the desk, watching them gleam in the light of the computers and security feeds. On screen, the hostage was already in position, and nondescript trucks were already on the move throughout the city. He tracked them through traffic cams, looking for any changes in the pre-planned routes. The timer was already ticking down; they just needed to make sure everyone was in the right positions before they commenced.

The Irregulars were on the move already, heading towards the selected location. As expected, Heliopause and Banshee would detour to pick up their less-flighty comrades. Angel was already touching down on the roof of the tallest office building in the city, her head turning wildly from side to side as she searched for her target.

"KID?" She shouted, her voice an awkward blend of anger and concern. It was a familiar combination. "Show yourself!"

He activated the program with a few quick taps on the keyboard, setting it on its first dialogue path, then leaned back and watched the plan unfold.

He didn't know how to feel about any of this.

Ran was freaking out, just a little. Her boyfriend had seemingly been kidnapped, an unpredictable super-villain had his phone, their main mode of communication had been compromised for who knew how long, and she had been called to meet the supposed perpetrator in a location of his choosing.

And she was there anyway, knowing full well it was probably a trap. Her dad would be furious if he knew. Her mom too, probably. Even Shinichi would be. He'd probably shout at her until his voice broke. But that was part of why she had to be there. If Shinichi was danger, there had to be something she could do.

Yet, the rooftop was empty when she arrived, and night was quickly swallowing up the sky. The others would be slower to arrive, undoubtedly. She had broken her own record speeds,
compromising her own safety rules.

It wasn't fast enough.

"KID!" She yelled again, her voice carrying in the open air.

"Behind you, miss." Ran spun around when she heard his smooth voice. He stood behind her, suddenly, white suit gleaming in the rising moonlight. She was sure he hadn't been there when she arrived, but that hardly mattered right now.

"Where's Shinichi? What have you done with him?" There was no sign of her boyfriend, and though KID was an astounding magician, she doubted even he could hide an entire teenager under a cape. She stormed towards him anyway, pulling herself up to her full height and feeling the power building under her skin. The air started to hum with it, as her skin began to shine.

KID didn't seem intimidated in the slightest. She stopped just steps away, fists clenched and trembling by her sides. It took all of her self-control to keep them there.

"What a silly question. Haven't you heard? I have something of a reputation of stealing away precious things." The thief purred, voice dark and sensuous, as this time he prowled around her. He sauntered in circles, eyes sweeping her up and down, his voice layered in implication. The flirtation was a downright mockery, and Ran scowled back, barely restraining herself. She wanted to dash forward and punch him in the jaw, but the thought of Shinichi kept her still. Glancing down at her clenched fists, KID's easy smile twisted maliciously, two perfect rows of white teeth glinting in the faint moonlight. "And you have misplaced something very, very valuable." He was suddenly two steps closer, and Ran jerked back. A chill crept up her spine as his smirk only grew more pronounced, cutting through the night like a razor-blade. Beneath the brim of his hat a single dark eye was visible, carrying a predator's dangerous gaze. The thief's expression would not be out of place if there was a priceless, legendary jewel before him, with those ravenous, possessive eyes and greed pumping in his veins. Anxiety coursed through her, as if her greatest treasures were on display without defense: vulnerable and ripe for the taking.

Ran's mind raced in confused circles. Why had he taken Shinichi? Why was he targeting her?

"Is this about Tsuyu?" She asked, suddenly. Ran didn't quite understand what was going on between KID and Aoko, just that they apparently had a not-relationship in their civilian identities.

KID suddenly turned away, his cape fluttering oddly in the still air. For the first time, Ran realized the wind was unusually light.

"We're not here to talk about that, miss. Is that really what you want to focus on right now?" His voice seemed to come from everywhere around her, even though he was right before her eyes, facing away and looking out over the city. "How irresponsible. You really must learn to cherish what you have." He glanced back at her and tutted, teasingly, but the seriousness of the words hit as hard as pelted stones. And Ran remembered when she was just a little girl, a dark figure leaning over her and Shinichi in the library. How irresponsible, that stranger had said, your parents must learn to keep better track of you little terrors.

The memory was suddenly so vivid, but Ran hadn't thought about that bizarre encounter in years. "Shall I teach you?" She realized belatedly that it was the same voice currently snaking out of the thief's mouth, slithering through the air and sinking its fangs in her flesh, spewing nothing but poison for the mind and soul.

She didn't understand. Nothing was making sense.
But she had to focus. Shinichi was in danger.

KID was usually recognized as a nonviolent criminal, but Ran knew that meant nothing. While he may never lay a hand on his adversaries, KID did not need a weapon beyond his tongue to slaughter.

She forced her mouth to open, to speak, gathering her aggravation and turning it into courage. She couldn't lose herself to his riddles. "What can you possibly have to teach me?"

He chuckled when she snapped at him, condescendingly. That damn visible eye danced with amusement, and her hands twitched to strike him, to show the phantom who exactly he is messing with. She remained still, waiting for her chance to strike. "Hmm, I wonder." He hummed, and his tone was melodious, and the rage building in her dwindled.

The man in the library had hummed like that. The man in the library had sent them home safely.

This was just another game. It had to be. There was a riddle here, some message clenched in the beak of the dove. She needed to decode his actions, not let the act fool her, and especially not get lost in his masks and mischief. Shinichi was always reminding her to consider all the evidence before she came to a conclusion, and to never dismiss what she knew just because she stumbled across contradictory evidence.

If there was only one truth then, when it came to KID, the truth was that he was nothing particularly dangerous in comparison to most of the opponents she faced. She could handle him, and she could save Shinichi too.

"I have a proposition. A contest!" He suddenly clapped, gloved hands coming together, and Ran flinched instinctually. But then she forced herself to relax.

Things were becoming a little clearer.

KID was delivering a challenge. KID loved challenges.

But Ran could more than handle a bit of competition.

KID spun his hands with flourish. "Right now, a certain person is in great peril, but many are capable of rescuing him." Him. In peril. The churning dread settled in her stomach. "I propose a race, of sorts. First to rescue him wins. Nice and simple."

Shinichi was in danger. And KID absolutely knew the where, how, why, and who.

It was not like KID to put a life at stake for a game, though. Should be comforted, then, that Shinichi was probably alright? But, maybe, just maybe, the trickster was showing his true colors. Maybe doves could be crows after all.

"KID!" Hakuba's voice cut through the air, and the rest of her team appeared over the edge of the rooftop. Hattori let Hakuba down on the roof as he hovered in the air, and Ran was pleasantly surprised to see Kazuha dump Aoko down on the tiles with little grace as she tumbled down. Kazuha's mode of "flight", more of an elaborate game of sling-shot and ricochet than anything else, wasn't exactly easy on passengers. Aoko was looking a little pale and green, but her presence meant the Baron had temporarily reinstated her field permit.

Her team gathered behind her, Ran turned back to the thief and raised her head confidently. Hakuba stepped up to stand by her side, and Ran could tell from his expression that he had heard everything, either through the comms or on the way.
"Why would we play your game?" Hakuba hissed. He looked more serious and deadly than Ran had ever seen him, but that wasn't surprising. Hakuba took the safety of the people he cared about very seriously.

"Well, what do you think will happen if you don't, Dodo-san?" The thief asked, facetiously. "But don't worry, there's a bit more incentive than that too. The prize tonight?" The thief spread his arms wide, his voice rising theatrically. "The unmasking of the world famous Kaitou KID!"

They all froze, staring with wide eyes. Aoko especially had gone very still, staring at the thief with a sad expression of disbelief mingled with hope. Ran felt her stomach twist at the sight of it. "But, KID drew out the vowel, "it would be too easy if you guys got to work together. Five against one isn't fair." Ran swallowed down the protests that arose on her lips. What did that even mean? "And if I catch any of you cheating," he pointed to the comms he knew very well were sitting in their ears. "Well, game over." He dragged a finger over his neck. "Everybody loses."

Ran's blood went cold, feeling as if KID has emptied a bucket of ice over her head. She had an idea of who the biggest loser would be. "Well, if everyone understands the rules, we'll begin."

"Like hell we do!" Hattori snarled, but Hakuba threw up a hand and silenced him.

"KID, we don't even have the slightest idea of where the hostage is. That doesn't exactly make for a fair game." Hakuba's voice was calm and carefully measured. It was the kind of voice that promised a long, permanent sentence.

KID shrugged. "Now, now, don't get your panties in a bunch. You'll get a hint in, uh, maybe, five seconds?"

A deep rumble echoed over the city, and briefly the darkening sky was illuminated. A brilliant light flashed across the skyline, and in its wake, an immense blaze.

Something in the distance had exploded, and exploded spectacularly.

"And that's game start!" KID laughed, as Hattori rushed him, nothing more than a black blur. KID didn't move, didn't even twitch, and for a moment Ran's heart soared. They could end this, right now.

Hattori went right through the thief, easily as air, only catching light on his skin. KID—KID's image flickered and reconstructed, the hologram restored as he laughed and waved towards the fire rising in the distance.

Of course. KID would never risk meeting them in person, not when he was at such a physical disadvantage. KID grinned at them, smug as anything. "And remember, I'm listening!" The image flickered once, then vanished. Nothing had even been there.

Hakuba's eyes were locked on the smoldering sky, watching the fresh tower of black smoke billow into the atmosphere. He had probably known the whole time that the KID they were addressing was nothing more than an illusion.

Ran turned back to the developing disaster. Shinichi was somewhere in that mess.

"We have to split up." Hakuba said, gravely. Ran bit her lip and tried to ignore how cold those words made her feel.

Hattori spun towards him with an expression of abject disbelief. "Seriously?"
Hakuba glared right back, through the sharp eyes of his beaked domino mask. "You all heard KID's rules. I'd rather not test them." Ran knew they couldn't risk it: not when they had no idea what sort of situation Shinichi was in. "We'll all have to get there on our own. Don't wait up, go as fast as you each can." That meant, most certainly, that Ran would be the first on the scene. Hattori would be second. Hakuba could very well be the last. All eyes turned to the city, plotting routes, options, transportation. That that couldn't fly would have to call upon the Baron's resources. Hakuba carried on, his voice steady and unwavering. If he was frustrated, he did not show it. "When you arrive, these are your orders: Tsuyu, work on putting out these fires. Banshee, incapacitate any perpetrators you find, as many as you can. Heliopause, try to find and detain KID. Angel, find Shinichi." Ran's heart seemed to beat out of rhythm. There weren't words in existence capable of conveying how grateful she was to hear that. "I'll search for any civilians. Understood?"

Aoko was biting her lip, a protest clearly brewing. "Hawk, KID—"

"No, Tsuyu." Hakuba cut her off, clearly anticipating her objection. Ran understood how she felt, but for once she had no sympathy to spare. They had to get moving. "You're the only one we can count on to get the fires under control. Now, go!"

Ran couldn't have shot off the roof quickly enough.
Bet none of you expected this! Two updates, in one month? (In one year???) Blasphemy! But well, this chapter and last chapter were originally one chapter. Things just got a little too long.

“Why can’t I come with you?” Shinichi’s voice echoed out of the office and into the hall. Saguru froze in his tracks, and quickly stopped shuffling the papers in his hands. This didn’t sound like something he should interrupt. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

“I said no, Shinichi.” His mentor’s voice was softer, exasperated in the face of Shinichi’s wrath. Saguru felt for Yuusaku, whose patient nature sometimes had difficulty keeping up with his high-strung son.

“But Saguru gets to go with you.” At the mention of his name, Saguru crept closer to the door, carefully keeping his footsteps soft and light. He could hear this conversation from the other side of the manor if he wanted to, but part of him wanted to see it too.

Was that nosy? That was probably nosy. He reined himself back in and firmly planted himself to the side of the door to wait for the argument to fizzle out.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Saguru-kun is my apprentice. He needs this kind of experience for his future as a detective.” Yuusaku made it sound like a fine argument, but Saguru was taken aback by the blatant disregard of the statement. Something like that would definitely not ease Shinichi’s temper. “You don’t.” Saguru winced. Yuusaku said the words with great levity, and he just knew they were accompanied by a shrug. He acted like it was obvious.

Shinichi made a very frustrated sound, flummoxed. It wasn’t often something could strike Shinichi speechless, by Yuusaku somehow always found a way. “How could you say that? You know I want to be a detective too!”

“I thought I said, ‘don’t be ridiculous’.” Yuusaku said, sardonically. “Look, you don’t have time for this right now. You have school and soccer, and you already spend so much time on that news blog of yours. Not to mention, you’ve already been neglecting the violin.” Shinichi hadn’t picked up the violin in over a year, as far as Saguru knew. It was a pity; he hadn’t been half-bad. “If you have so much free time, you should focus on your grades a little more.” Saguru nodded along with Yuusaku’s words. Shinichi’s grades were always teetering on the verge of average. He could be top of their middle-school class if he wanted to be, but instead of doing homework or projects, he went chasing after sirens. Saguru’s grades, in comparison, were absolutely stellar.

“Grades and extracurriculars, Shinichi. Have I made myself clear?” Though, quiet and casual as anything, Yuusaku’s voice carried a certain undeniable finality. Saguru couldn’t imagine being faced with it, let alone going against it. He was glad it wasn’t aimed at him right now. He could imagine Yuusaku raising an eyebrow and quirking his lips, looking at Shinichi like he was an
obnoxious character from a children’s book.

“Crystal.” Shinichi said, icily. The power of his voice was a far cry from his father’s, but still he managed to make the single word sharp as knife. Unable to help himself, Saguru peered around the corner to catch sight of the scene. Yuusaku was standing at his desk, towering over his son, who glared harshly over the wood from the other side. Everything about Shinichi’s body language spoke of carefully restrained frustration, but Yuusaku was as unreadable as ever, firm and relaxed. No more words were said, Shinichi’s razor-like reply hanging in the air like a guillotine, and they stood opposing each other at an unrelenting impasse. Then, Shinichi turned on his heel and swept out of the room.

Saguru quickly retreated to his spot back at the wall, away from the door. He couldn’t pretend to have not heard, and was a little lost at what to do. The air was heavy with Shinichi’s fury, but as his friend, Saguru had to say something.

“Shinichi—” Saguru called as the other boy stormed right past him, his shoulders tight and face turned away. “Hey, Shinichi—“

Shinichi rounded upon him with cheeks that were burning red and wet eyes. Saguru flinched in surprise; he had never seen, in all their years together, Shinichi ever close to tears. Not even once.

But more than that, there was a nasty turn to Shinichi’s mouth, and hellfire raging in his furious gaze.

“Kudo.” Shinichi snarled at him, voice hard.

Saguru, still taken aback, didn’t understand. “What?”

“Call me Kudo.”

“But—“ Saguru tried to say something, but Shinichi swiftly cut him off.

“Don’t call me by my given name. It’s Kudo.” His voice carried a level of authority as well, reflective of his father even when he was at odds of the man himself. Some part of Saguru couldn’t help muse that it was so typical of Shinichi to emulate the man he claimed he never wanted to be like. The rest of him recoiled a little, hurt, before he forced down the emotion. Shinichi was emotional enough for the both of them right now, which always spelled doom for relations. By forcing himself to face the scene objectively, it was easy to recognize that Shinichi was simply lashing out.

That said, Shinichi turned away and stormed past.

“Alright.” Saguru muttered after him, contemplative as he watched Shinichi disappear up the stairs. He would, for a bit; well, at least to Shinichi’s face. Shinichi was just upset, and would surely cool his head later; Shinichi did not have the kind of disposition that lent itself to something as petty as grudge-keeping.

Or so Saguru told himself. It was probably for the best, anyway. A little distance would do them both good.

“Saguru-kun.” Yuusaku called, and Saguru turned back to the office and entered with a polite smile.

“Yes, sir?”
Yuusaku was sitting now, leaning back in his chair with an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that. I’ve put you in an awkward position.”

“Not at all.” Saguru was quick to shake his head. “I understand, sir. I’m sure Shinichi will someday too.”

Yuusaku’s smile turned wane and tired. “I hope not. I’m trying to avoid that.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.” Saguru wished he could rewind and correct himself. He hadn’t meant to say something so insensitive. “Maybe Yukiko-san could help? Can’t she just…make Shinichi happy?”

Saguru knew that wasn’t quite how it worked, but it seemed like the easiest solution. Besides Yuusaku just making Shinichi forget he was angry, but there were, of course, ethical issues with that. According to a recent article in the Meta Monthly, forced emotional repression wasn’t healthy.

Yuusaku laughed, but it rang hollow. “If only it was still so simple.” He reached into his desk and pulled out a pile of papers and dropped them on the desk. “Come check out these figures.”

It was a collection of charts and tables, all measuring a variety of figures and factors over time. Parsing through them, Saguru found his eyebrows raising. “You’re monitoring reports of people with erratic behavior and extreme mood swings?”

His mentor nodded and selected a chart from the pile, presenting it to Saguru. He pointed to a long fluctuating line, and then the corresponding numbers. “During these time frames, there’s an unprecedented increase in the number of people reporting erratic mood changes to their therapists, or people being brought into psychiatrists for symptoms akin to borderline personality disorder or bipolar personality disorder. A couple weeks later, most of them are released, emotionally stable once more and with negative diagnoses. And with seemingly no universal factors besides living in Beika. The data just dips right back to the average, before the next fluctuation.”

It was bizarre collection of data. Saguru hesitated to admit it, but he didn’t understand what the important part was. “I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

“This should make it a little clearer.” Yuusaku pulled out a different piece of paper from the pile with a grin so tight it crinkled his eyes and brow. It was nothing like the others.

“This is…Yuukiko-san’s schedule for the past couple of months?” It was a detailed itinerary noting when Yuusaku’s wife was where over the course of the year. Saguru looked between the dates when Yuukiko was in Tokyo with her family with the time frames the unusual fluctuations emerged. “They match…”

“Now I know they say correlation isn’t causation,” Yuusaku clasped his hands together, resting his elbows on the desk, and leveled Saguru a hard look, “but, I think you get what I’m getting at here.”

“Yes,” Saguru said, feeling numb. “I do.” This was a simple matter of compatibility. “You’re saying Shinichi and Yuukiko-san shouldn’t be in the same place at the same time.”
“Miss Edogawa! Miss Edogawa!” The press all looked at her with bright, excited eyes. They vied for her attention all throughout the room, and she sought out a familiar face among them. She recognized a young man from the Washington Post, and pointed him out. He stood up with a grateful smile and a determined gleam in his eyes.

“Has the perpetrator of the attack been identified?”

She let her smile fade and instead adopted a serious expression. “At this time, the culprit’s identity is not something we can release to the public.” The key to managing press, and the populace as a whole, the audience, was to give them something to draw conclusions about, as often the conclusions they came to were harmless compared to the truth.

People liked fantasies, especially ones of their own creation.

The room chattered, and many shoulders eased as they assumed that meant that while it remained classified, the culprit had been identified. They were wrong, but they didn't need to know that.

Another reporter piped up, on cue, “Then it’s true it was a minor?”

She smiled, and all around the room, people smiled back. Everyone was genuinely excited to be there. “Minors are afforded additional protections in regard to their rights as private citizens.” She explained easily, glancing down at her notes through her glasses for effect. “As such, we will be restricting information regarding the identities of all involved in the incident, particularly juveniles.”

“The culprit was an unregistered metahuman, weren’t they? Does ISHA have any plans to rollback protections for such individuals in the interest of public order?”

That hit too close to home, but she did not balk or even blink. Her expression did not falter, even for a moment. Part of her wanted to show how the implications of that question itched at her, but she wasn’t there to express personal beliefs on international issues. She was there to ease tensions, reassure the afraid, and smile on camera. The fact that her own son was an unregistered metahuman was neither here nor there.

Without missing a beat, she evaded the question. “We at ISHA would like to assure everyone that our investigation into the matter will be impartial and thorough. We will look over all available information, witness reports, and security footage and as always, do whatever we can to retain the peace and order in the community.”

With that, the press conference began to wrap up, and she was grateful for it. It was getting too warm, but still she remained to ensure everyone left with a smile on their face. As the lobby began to empty, she finally allowed herself to relax a little, waving off her assistant and pointing to the door. Outside, the car waited for them in the harsh California sunlight, and she slid into its air-conditioned interior with a grateful sigh.

The trip back to the hotel was quick, thankfully, and before long she was sitting in front of the mirror of her dresser, finally alone.

She reached up and felt for the slight change of texture at the base of her neck. Digging her finger through and under, she closed her eyes and ripped, feeling artificial skin stretching under her fingers before finally coming free. The mask was more permanent than most she created, since she needed to wear it so often, so she liked to be careful with it. Still, it never stopped being so stifling.

Kudo Yuukiko winked at herself in the mirror. She was flushed and her own make-up had blurred
with sweat, but she always liked seeing her own face after hours of being someone else. She removed the itchy voice changer and set it aside on her wardrobe, rubbing her throat.

All in all, things had gone well. When Yuukiko had arrived, the city had been in near panic over the disruption caused by the young rogue metahuman, protestors taking to the streets and the police force in disarray as they struggled to keep up with their populace. Now, days later, the atmosphere had shifted, and things were looking up. That was the part that made it all worth it: why she couldn’t give up acting on the stage or on the camera. There was nothing quite like knowing her presence could relieve people of their troubles, could bring a smile in the most miserable of times.

The next day would be her last on assignment, and then she could return to Tokyo for a little while, a little time to review her script for her next role. She was looking forward to spending some time with her own face, and not her alias's frumpy glasses.

Oh, and her family, of course.

Jii wasn’t as young as he used to be. But he wasn’t all old—most of his parts were actually quite new. He felt it was indispensable to keep himself up to date with the newest technological advancements, and to include them in his make-up. There was never any knowing just what would be useful to the young master next.

And it was very important that he didn’t age out of his job, because of situations such as this.

“Who the fuck is this kid?” Fujioka snarled, glancing quickly between Jii and the young man he had apprehended in the southern corridor. The young man jerked in his hold, but Jii merely gripped his forearm tighter.

“I found him sneaking around with a camera, sir.” At least, so their story went.

“And you didn’t just shoot him why?”

“You said to find us a hostage, sir.” Jii glanced at the ceiling and eyed it warily. Immediately, his cybernetic eye scanned the entire expanse of ceiling and rafters, searching for any signs of the structural integrity being compromised. Various areas were mere minutes from collapsing inward, no longer able to support the weight above them. Time left to escape into the next area: 4 minutes, 23 seconds.

Plenty.

“I meant somebody useful. An egghead or something.” Above them echoed another groan, punctuated by the wail of the facility’s sirens. Alarm system: fully activated. The authorities had already been contacted and were en route. Time until arrival of first responders: 8 minutes, 47 seconds. Most of the facility would still be standing.

Fujioka followed his gaze up and didn’t look pleased by whatever his organic eyes saw. Even regular humans could recognize that the whole building would not last long. “But whatever, there’s no time for this shit.” Fujioka turned to the rest of the crew and barked out his orders. “We’re getting out of here!”

Jii checked the position of the DOVEs on the display built into his eye. The young master’s affectionately named Electronic Versatile Observatory Droids were placed strategically throughout
the building, feeding him footage from both inside and out and monitoring for the arrival of their guests. Jii had been surprised when the young master selected bigger, more humanoid models for this mission than he usually did: the models they usually reserved for impersonations and the replacement of dangerous elements, or fire-fights with the occasional belligerent criminal organization.

But this was not a heist; the young master finally intended to fight. The past two weeks had taken a toll on him emotionally, even while their long-standing plans were finally bearing fruit. Instead of processing his frustration and sorrow properly, the young master was funneled it into his work as KID. Countless hours over the past few days had been spent bent over plans and blueprints, to the point when even the notoriously hard-working Jii was worried.

He wanted to avenge the master Toichi as much as Kaito did, enough to exchange his craftsman prosthetics with ones with significantly more firepower, but it would not do to rush. Patience, Jii felt, was the most important virtue for young men to learn, but the young master was the type to live quickly and brilliantly and shortly. Not unlike his father, or his mother, and not nearly enough like Jii himself.

Without meaning too, Jii squeezed the hostage’s arm, and he shifted to catch Jii’s gaze, briefly. There was a grim look in the young man’s blue eyes.

Fukioka turned back to them with a look of plain disdain on his broad face. “Takahashi, keep an eye on him.” Jii nodded obediently. That was his assigned duty, after all. “If we run into any trouble during extraction, you know what to do.”

“Yes sir.”

The first of the Irregulars would arrive soon.

The complex was huge and in complete chaos. Smoke was filling the air, despite the best efforts of the sprinkler system. Some sort of explosion had torn open a gaping hole in the buildings east-facing side, leaving behind piles of rubble and scattered concrete and red-hot flames.

Ran flew as fast as could while still maintaining a clear view of her surroundings and eyed the mess warily. Already, cracks were spreading throughout the rest of the building’s roof in patterns like spider-web, and she knew it would not be long before the damage spread.

It was not easy to tell what the building was before the explosion: some sort of private research facility was her best guess. Whatever it was, this was nothing like the subtle and precise robberies she had seen over the course of the week. This was flashy, enough to attract the attention of the entire city, civilians and all.

And Shinichi was in there. Somewhere.

*Why was Shinichi in there?*

Ran flew through the smoke and entered through the destroyed side, slipping underneath the jagged concrete ceiling and peering inside. Whatever the room had once been was impossible to tell, but there was an empty space—what was probably a doorway—in the remaining intact wall, leading further in. She flew through ruined halls and corridors, her heart pounding in her chest as she struggled to breathe through the smoke and dust in the air. The place was ransacked, and flooding as water pelted down.
At least Aoko would have plenty to work with, once she arrived.

Most importantly, the facility seemed to be mostly empty. Whatever civilians usually populated the place must have gone home for the day hours ago. That probably left a few security guards and the janitorial staff.

It was a relief, but it also just confused her more. Why would Shinichi be in a practically empty building, after hours? Had he been trespassing again, or had he somehow known some kind of incident was going to occur here? Or had KID brought Shinichi here himself?

She searched the top two levels fruitlessly. The ground-floor was next, and the least affected by the destruction upstairs. More importantly, she could hear voices: clipped, firm, authoritative: someone giving orders, coming from around the corner.

Ran didn’t even hesitate. She didn’t even think.

Ran went through the wall that stood between her and them. She burst into the next corridor in a hail of concrete and dust and found it full of men in full body-armor. Marking their arms was the logo Hakuba had showed her the other day: the red cat.

**Another attack so soon?**

The terrorists wielded a variety of weapons in their hands, but Ran was not intimidated. Those kinds of tricks might work on other heroes, but Ran was nigh-invulnerable.

“Incoming!” Somebody yelled, but Ran paid him no mind. More importantly, Shinichi stood among them, wide-eyed and pale. His hands were bound behind his back, and one of the men had a hold of his arm. He looked scared.

The moment Ran registered that, she was punching a man in the jaw. With the self-discipline of years of karate, keeping the force to a non-lethal level was entirely habitual, but she allowed a little more strength to go in than entirely necessary. He was knocked off his feet before he even registered she moved, and hit the wall behind him with a satisfactory *thud*. He did not get back up.

She was already charging at the next: the man holding Shinichi hostage. Ran had no intentions of letting them use Shinichi as leverage.

But she wasn’t expecting the man’s arm to change into a **gun** either. His flesh twisted and disappeared, revealing metallic dark gray lined with ominous blue, forming the shape of a ridged barrel in an instant. He leveled it at her as she shot straight for him, and fired. From the barrel erupted an immense blast of energy that hit her with shocking strength, force, and pain, knocking her right back.

Ran recovered quickly, hovering in the air and blinking to clear her vision. The Cats seemed as confused as she by the blast, but none of them seemed to realize the source was one of their own. Things were happening too fast for the average human to process.

Ran hovered warily, glancing between rest of the terrorists and the strange Cat. Before she could decide which to target, something strange emerged in the side of her vision.

Metallic figures were approaching rapidly from the next corridor, looking like men dipped in silver paint. The artificial lights gleamed off their bizarre figures, which were too warped and disproportionate to be quite human.

“What the fuck?” A Cat muttered, swinging around to turn his weapon on the incoming
irregularities, but in flash they were past him. One with sharp arms like blades came at Ran with the speed of a car, barely slicing past her head as she ducked down and shot to the side. It rushed past her and took another chunk out of the wall, before turning on its heel and leering right back at her.

Another came at her from the side: it skittered around on four tube-like limbs matched by the flexible arms on its back, all of which were armed with what looked like tasers. Reacting out of sheer instinct, Ran kicked it into the wall, and into a Cat that didn’t move out of the way fast enough, and both went sliding back to the ground as the room filled with the sound of ringing metal.

“We’re getting the hell out of here!” A Cat yelled—the leader most likely—and all the remaining terrorists were quick to comply. Spotting the weird one dragging Shinichi away, Ran swiped the next robot aside only to be jerked sharply back by a steely grip around her ankle.

“Shinichi!” She yelled as the Cats made their escape down the hall, only briefly catching Shinichi’s blue eyes before the whole world suddenly blurred. The robot gripping her spun her in circles so fast she lost all sense of direction, and then abruptly dragged her down.

Ran hit the floor and went right through it, tile and concrete shattering underneath her. The world spun in dizzy circles as she hit the floor of the basement, hard enough to break the tile down there too.

Ran groaned as she forced herself back up. It hadn’t hurt so much as it had been disorientating, and the world still swam as she glared upwards.

The freaky robots were following her down, some skittering along the walls while others extended their limbs and lowered themselves down.

Ran pushed herself to her feet and fixed her stance. She couldn’t just rush around, clearly, and hope to barrel her way through; she had to fight properly. Whatever kind of robotic monstrosities her opponents were, they were highly versatile and operated as a well-organized group. If she wanted to go after Shinichi, she would have to find a way to disable them first, or just turn them all into scrap metal.

Option two sounded viable.

A tall one with what looked like chainsaws for hands fell from above, aiming right for her temple. Ran didn’t so much as shift, bracing herself as the spinning metal crashed into her head. She was sent stumbling, but the robot’s hand bent around her forehead, the steel plating warping and crumpling like paper. Ran seized the arm with her left hand and brought her right palm into its elbow, feeling a satisfactory snap under her hands as the arm was torn right from the main body. A kick sent the rest of the robot into the next assailant.

Up above her, someone whistled. Ran dared a glance up and found a white figure perched on the edge of the hole she created.

“KID!” She snarled as she ducked a long, sweeping strike by the freaky spider one, only to find herself dropping right into the path of a blazing blow-torch.

The heat rippled across her skin, all blue and red, as Ran threw herself backwards. Her face tingled unpleasantly, and there was a strange sensation against her back. Hazarding a glance, Ran’s eyes went wide when she saw yellow flames dancing across her back—no, her hair.
Her hair was on fire.

In a blink of an eye, she had it out, but the damage was done. A foot of hair gone in an instant, leaving behind a slightly scorched bob. Her dad was going to have a heart attack. Sonoko too.

“Ohay,” Ran puffed out a breath. It was just hair. It didn’t matter; more was at stake right now. “That was mean.” But still she felt a fathomless, burning frustration. Shinichi was still in danger, and she was stuck in the basement with rejected Terminators. She clenched her fists and took another breath, trying to will the anger away.

She wasn’t an angry fighter. That just wasn’t who Ran was.

But still, something horrible and dark bubbled within her. She wanted to tear the metal freaks to shreds and dump their husks at KID’s feet, she wanted to fly right up there and seize him by the neck and see how he liked a blow-torch to the face.

Taking another breath, Ran tried to focus on the rise and fall of her chest and her pounding heart. Those were very, very bad thoughts, and she clenched her eyes shut in the face of them, trying to will them away.

Then she shot off the ground and put her foot through the head of the next robot, feeling the give of metal and circuitry under her heel. She hit the wall behind them in a crouch and leapt off it towards the next, sweeping at it with hook kick. This time, though, its head simply fell backwards before snapping right back into place. Its mouth opened, and Ran found her vision filled with mist.

Coughing around the sudden moisture in the air, and fully aware of the possibility of sleeping gas, Ran struggled to hold her breath as she caught the robot’s arm and spun it around. When she released it, it went flying into the ceiling, just meters away from where KID stood, watching. He flinched.

Good, Ran thought, vindictively, even as the other robots seemed to adopt the spraying tactic. They started billowing smoke out of their mouths or spewing liquids that had Ran backing up warily.

Bad choice, she realized, as her back met cold steel. There was an alarming noise, akin to a spring shrieking as it was pulled, and metal arms were suddenly encircling her, trying to trap her arms to her sides. It caught her left, but Ran managed to bring her right arm up in time.

“What the hell are these things?” She snarled, swiping at the offending robot with her free hand. It ducked and sprayed her in the face with some kind of colorful foam. It made her head woozy, and briefly, she saw triplicate. It was getting difficult to keep track of all of the enemies—she couldn’t even tell if there were five or six of the robots in total. And that wasn’t even counting the bizarre android Cat that had shot pure energy at her and was still making an escape with her boyfriend.

“The stage crew.” KID blithely replied, from where he sat on the floor above, watching the fight progress.

“They’re yours?” She sputtered, kicking off the ground and dragging her hitchhiker with her as she careened into the wall. They hit it hard: hard enough to jar the robot’s grip. Ran forced her way free and put a fist through its torso. Her hand enclosed around a bunch of wires and gears, and she jerked them free with a grunt. The robot spasmed without its insides, and then went still.

Good.

But she seriously had to finish this up. Shinichi was waiting for her, and these tin cans were getting
Moving faster than a bullet, Ran seized a big one, and with as much strength as she dared, threw it into the far wall.

“Bad choice! Bad, bad choice!” KID yelled, his voice surprisingly tight with panic. The robot went right through the upper portion of what Ran only then identified as a pillar and left nothing but a gap behind.

There was a long, horrifying groan from above her as the ceiling buckled. A lattice-work of cracks spread in an instant, all away from the site of impact, as Ran’s eyes went wide with terror. The column—it had been the last of the facility’s center foundation.

The whole building was going to collapse inwards.

Ran was on the broken column in an instant, thrusting her hands upwards to catch the buckling ceiling and force it back into place. It shook on her palms, pieces grinding together, but as she pushed things settled into a precarious balance. The portions of the ceiling, and the rest of the building, were barely holding together.

The weight on her hands was immense, but Ran did not buckle. “Don’t move.” KID shouted down at her, on his feet and eying the floor under him warily. It wasn’t a threat, it was advice, but it was unnecessary. She scarcely dared to breathe, let alone move. “Just stay there!”

The robots were regrouping, some twisting their limbs back into place, as their hands turned into tools. With shocked fascination, Ran watched as they turned towards each other and set to work, fixing wiring, dents, and torn plating with simple, mindless efficiency. In less than a minute they were all in working order.

The ceiling above her whined, and Ran felt something somewhere shift. Her heart pounded in her chest.

The whole fight had been pointless, just wasted time—no, worse than that, because Ran had done more damage to the facility than she did to any of them. The robots had just been stalling as the Cats got away, while Ran pointlessly tore up more of the building and endangered the lives of everyone still within.

Including Shinichi.

Especially Shinichi. And maybe if he wasn’t involved, she would have been able to keep it together. But he was, and she couldn’t save him.

Ran felt her eyes burn, hands shaking against the broken ceiling.

“Why,” Ran hissed, swallowing down frustrated tears.

KID was quiet, looking down at her from under the brim of his hat. The shadows it created completely obscured his face, but Ran knew him well enough to know he was probably smiling. Laughing.

“Why did you have to bring him into this?” She yelled, screaming the words out as if she could hit him with them—as if she could make her voice into a weapon like Kazuha could. Unable to move, to struggle, to fight, all she could do was scream at the unmoving figure above. “Why couldn’t you just leave Shinichi out of this?”
Shinichi, who was a little abrasive around the edges but fundamentally good. Shinichi who liked to help and protect people, even though all he had to work with was a too-fragile body and a too-cluttered mind. Shinichi who used to smile like a kid while talking about his favorite books and bounced a soccer ball when he was over-thinking.

Why would anyone want to put him in a situation like this?

In the wake of her outburst, everything was quiet. The robots crawling up the walls back to the first floor, and the roof was holding. KID was very, very still, but eventually, his mouth cracked open.

“Why could you?” He asked, and Ran stared at him, confused. The question wasn’t processing in her head—she didn’t understand what he was asking. He cleared his throat. She had never seen him do that before. “Why could you leave him out?”

That was a loaded question. But the answer was so obvious, Ran furrowed her brow and scowled at him. Why couldn’t he understand something so simple?

“Because I have to.” She knew it hurt him, and she knew it was driving a wedge between them. But it was necessary. If Shinichi found out the truth, there was no way he would simply stay out of it. He would throw himself in headfirst like he always did, and he would get hurt.

The world was filled with dangerous people; villains strong enough that they could break even her bones or destroy minds or reduce people to dust with a glance. And Shinichi was normal, delicate, weak, and Ran was even weaker, because she couldn’t bear the thought of losing him. He didn’t need to be always happy, so long as he was okay.

And if their relationship paid the price for his life, then she would accept it. “I just want him to be safe.”

The robots were gathering around KID on the next floor, but he was still staring down at her. His face looked twisted, somehow.

He turned to one of them—the creepy, four-legged one with the elongated limbs—and carefully reached out to it. It allowed him to step up on to its back, and when he pointed down towards her, it complied. Before long he was standing before her, suspended on its back, as its arms stretched to each side to support them.

Ran watched him warily, but she dared not move and risk shifting her weight, and consequently, disturb the delicate balance above her head. But it was difficult to not jerk away as he reached up to her face, gloved hands stilling just centimeters away. “Hold still.”

He peeled the mask from her face slowly, delicately. It shouldn’t have come off at all, because of the special adhesive Professor Sun had synthesized it with. Only a special spray could remove it. But, Ran supposed, the robots had caught her in the face with plenty of strange concoctions. It wasn’t impossible that one of them had been the correct formula, or that KID had planned everything from the moment she entered the building.

Ran felt the cold air on her flushed cheeks. KID peered at her, a soft noise leaving his lips and dying in the air between them. The moment felt strangely intimate, vulnerable.

“Please.” Ran said, not sure what she was pleading for. For Shinichi’s safety, probably. So many words were bubbling up her throat, some angry, some miserable. But what came out was: “I love him.”

His hands shook, dropping the mask like it burned his fingers. It fell all the way to the dusty floor
as the robot’s distended arms began to retract, taking KID with them.

Saguru mostly used the jet, nowadays. He liked piloting, and he liked the spacious cockpit, but most of all he liked flying among the clouds, watching the horizon spread out before him.

The jet was, regretfully, all the way back at Headquarters. The only transportation Saguru had on him was the notoriously difficult hoverboard Professor Sun made, neatly condensed into a belt buckle. And he had no intentions of using it, since it could only get around a foot off a surface without spiraling out of control.

Instead, Saguru made his way to the nearest Overseer storage locker, only pausing long enough for the computer to scan his override ID before he was heaving the cover out of the designated manhole. Normally, these kinds of resources were reserved for official Overseers, and he was technically under-qualified. Thankfully, Yuusaku had issued him a key for emergency situations. This probably counted.

He didn’t bother with the ladder, dropping down into the hidden room under the alley. There awaited a variety of emergency supplies and tech: Saguru made a beeline for an advanced motorcycle, disregarding everything else.

“There you are!” A familiar voice called from the ceiling, and Saguru froze, already half on the vehicle. He felt like he’d been caught with a hand in the cookie jar, and at the same time, frustrated. There wasn’t time to waste, even on explaining everything to his mentor. Especially since he was used to Yuusaku just plucking information from his head during emergencies, but that wasn’t possible over a communication line. “Why is your communicator off?”

“It’s been compromised.” He said quickly, fumbling through the cycle’s start-up protocol. “KID.”

“I’ve been trying to contact you all night.” Yuusaku was rambling. “Four attacks have occurred, all across the city—”

Saguru cut him off. “He has your—Kudo Shinichi.” No mention of familial relationships. Rule number two.

Silence. That was probably the last thing Yuusaku wanted to hear.

“That is…unfortunate.” Saguru revved the engine, checking everything was in order, and pulled on a helmet. Hearing that there was trouble elsewhere in the city wasn’t a surprise; even if that huge explosion hadn’t been a decoy in the first place, which it likely was, someone was going to use it as cover. But his priorities were with Shinichi and KID; if he had to, Yuusaku could call in reinforcements from local cities or the Overseers’ emergency response unit.

The communication line switched over to the cycle’s main interface as Saguru gunned the engine, peeling out of the room and onto the ramp on the far-side in an instant. The ramp brought him up into a long corridor that opened on time as he sped through, sliding shut behind him like it never existed as he skidded onto the street.

“Where is the rest of the team?”

“Had to split up. KID’s rules.”

“Can you save Shinichi?”
“I do not know yet, sir. I’m not even on site.” Obviously. Frustration was making Saguru too sharp-tongued. “Your orders?”

Silence.

“Sir, I’m sure you realize how dangerous the current situation is. I need to know what you think is the best course of action.”

The best course of action was Yuusaku putting an end to this himself, as much as Saguru hated to admit he couldn’t handle this on his own. But that was also asking a lot of his mentor.

Saguru slid between traffic as he waited for a response, measuring the distance between cars and ignoring how loud the traffic was, down on the ground and without a barrier to dampen the roar of engines.

The silence on the line was jarring in comparison.

Saguru swallowed, and gathered his courage. It was hard to get out the words, and each weighed on his tongue like he was sucking rocks. “I believe you have a decision to make, sir.”

“I’m aware. But.” “Last time I…” Yusaku trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid. They couldn’t afford revealing any details over a communication line, even one as secure as this. Not even their allies could know the truth of what happened that night. “I killed a man.” Saguru wondered what kind of face Yuusaku was making, just then. Probably not one he could bear to see in person. “A friend.”

“I know, sir.” Saguru heard himself say. He tried to imagine it, sometimes: what it must have been like back then, with the original Kaitou KID. The magician Yuusaku and Yuukiko spoke of was a kind, chivalrous man with a noble heart, not at all like the rest of the villains they faced: he was someone they could trust to never go too far and to never betray a friend.

Not at all like the Kaitou KID he knew either.

But, for all the differences, what if the ending was to be the same?

“I can’t allow something like that to happen again.”

Saguru wouldn’t allow it either. He didn’t want to be a murderer. “Then I think you know what you need to do, sir.”

“Yes.” Yuusaku agreed quietly. “I suppose I do. Head to the facility. I’ll catch up to you.”

Saguru tightened his grip on the handlebars and swept around an eighteen-wheeler, leaving nothing but a streak of light behind him.

True to his word, a sleek black car slipped into the space beside him as he approached the location of the explosion. Here the traffic had slowed to a near stand-still as officers struggled to redirect it away from the police line they were setting up around the targeted facility. Fire trucks had already arrived, circling the building with flashing sirens as they took measure of the intensity of the flames and the damage to the building’s integrity. A good deal of the fire had already been put out, likely a combination of sprinklers and Aoko’s efforts. But wherever she was, Saguru couldn’t see or hear her. He could, however, hear a shrill sound echoing out of the building. Banshee.

The officials immediately stepped aside and let them on the premises at the first glimpse of the
Night Baron’s famous mask, watching with hopeful eyes as they approached the building.

“Stick together.” The Baron warned, and Saguru nodded. It was less a question of safety as it was one of stability and trust built over the span of years. “I can’t get a read on Tsuyu’s mind, but Heliopause and Banshee seem to be engaging with some kind of cybernetic army.” Saguru tensed with worry. If Yuusaku couldn’t find Aoko’s mind, she was either out of range or unconscious or—

No. He couldn’t think like that.

“The Red Siamese Cats are responsible for the explosion.” Saguru had suspected as much. KID’s explosives tended to be less straightforward. “And Angel is…” The Baron glanced down at the feet with a grave note to his voice. With the mask, Saguru couldn’t see, but he was sure Yuusaku was frowning. “She seems to be trapped underground, holding the building together.” Saguru gave the floor a wary glance. They would have to move quickly and efficiently, lest the building crumble down on their heads. “KID has another group of…robots with him, according to Angel.” “I imagine they are going after the Cats.” “Banshee is struggling. It seems their opponents do not have eardrums.”

“We should go help—”

“No. Heliopause and Banshee are being held back in the eastern corridor. The Cats are already making their escape out the southern loading bay, and it seems they have the hostage.” Hattori and Kazuha would have to get through on their own, somehow, and would hopefully stumble across Aoko along the way. At the very least, robots (robots! Honestly!) would be a poor match-up against Hattori. He was probably already melting them all down.

But Yuusaku was not finished, and his voice was grim. “I can’t find KID’s mind.” That was not unusual: they hadn’t been able to figure out the method, but they knew KID somehow had ways to block long-distance psychic attacks. The only way for Yuusaku to gain access to KID’s mind would be to reduce the range of his psychic scan and concentrate on a close-range area. The original KID had had a similar innate ability; according to Yuusaku, the thief had been completely immune to all abilities and powers that tried to affect him. Whether that power had been inherited had yet to be seen. “And I can’t see into Shinichi’s either.” It was possible KID had afforded the same protection to Shinichi, to keep his game from being too easy.

Saguru checked over his equipment as they rushed towards the loading bay. If Shinichi was being held hostage, they couldn’t afford to waste any time and they certainly couldn’t make any mistakes. Biting the inside of his lip, he found himself looking to Yuusaku for reassurance. “Is he okay?”

“He is uninjured.” The Baron’s mask grinned at him, and while Yuusaku’s voice was still grave, something lighter slipped in. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Saguru couldn’t help but smile tightly back. It was nostalgic to be rushing into danger together like this; though the two of them still patrolled together often enough, this was a rare occasion. It made him feel like a kid again.

When they reached the loading bay’s doors, they split up. Saguru dashed up a wall and took to the rafters, far off the ground in a wide garage like this. From his vantage point, he could see three military-style vehicles loading up with terrorists, all heavily-armed. Some were still loading in what looked like stolen equipment, while others lingered and set up charges around the edges of the bay. They intended to blow the rest of the facility to dust behind them.

More importantly, a familiar young man was being held to the side, watching the scene with wary
eyes. No one besides the single guard holding him still seemed to be paying him any mind.

That would make extraction easier. If they could get Shinichi away first, taking care of the rest would be significantly more simple. Saguru glanced towards where Yuusaku was hidden in the shadows to the bay, catching the eyes of the Baron mask.

“H-Alpha.” The Baron whispered, too softly for anyone else’s hearing. Saguru nodded and took off down the rafters, running silently along the concrete beams until he was directly above the hostage and his guard. Unclipping his grappling hook, Saguru set his stance and waited for the signal as the Baron skulked closer to the Cats.

Something down below clicked and whirred: metallic sounds strangely out of place. Saguru glanced down once more, only to jolt as he found the guard staring right back, one arm extended into the air. Except his arm wasn’t an arm at all—it was some kind of gun.

Saguru threw himself from the rafters and extended the grappling hook to catch a beam above, swinging down and right into a different Cat. Just in time, as the rafter he’d perched on disappeared in a magnesium-bright blast tore through exactly where he’d stood.

“What the fuck?” The Cat groaned, and Saguru quickly kicked him in the temple and rushed at the next, swiping his bō staff free of his belt. To the side, the Baron was also descending upon the Cats, and they dropped like flies around him, drooling and foaming from the mouths. Saguru turned back to the guard and took out his frozen nitrogen pellets.

The guard stared back, his weapon firmly pointed at Shinichi’s chest. Fair enough.

More strange, metallic sounds were descending upon them, and Saguru hazarded a guess about the whereabouts of the missing robot army as many silver forms came raining down from the same rafters as he. They only creaked when they moved, and were otherwise completely silent; no wonder he’d completely missed their presence.

More were rushing in through the bay, accompanied by a figure with a rippling white mantle. KID strode into the room like the chaos within had nothing to do with him, a curious gleam in his eyes and an impassive look on his face.

The Cats hadn’t stood a chance against the Baron’s mind-wiping abilities, but robots were another matter entirely. They weren’t exactly susceptible to physic attacks.

But it would take more than a couple of high-tech toys to take down the Night Baron, so Saguru left them to it and focused on the enemy before him.

Saguru flicked the pellets at the ground between them, and the exploded into white and ice the moment they impacted, turning the ground slick beneath their feet. Both hostage and captor stumbled on the suddenly frictionless floor, and Saguru skidded forward, spinning his bō staff in his hands. The guard had barely gotten back his footing when Saguru caught him in the side with the staff, the momentum sending him spinning across the ice. But his opponent recovered quickly, his legs twisting and rotating into four-pronged claws that sunk into the ice and brought him to an abrupt stop, weapon already ready and charged. Saguru threw himself across the ice to escape the shot, feeling a rush of heat and electricity passing him by, and used the chance to throw a second volley of freezing pellets directly into the barrel of the gun.

Swearing, the guard fell back, struggling with his frozen arm, and a bizarre robot skittered into his place. It seized Shinichi with its extended arms and shot wires up towards the rafters. In an instant, it was raising itself in the air with its passenger.
“I don’t think so!” Saguru snapped two exploding kunai from his belt and threw them at the wires, smiling with grim satisfaction as both hit true. The wires snapped and sent the robot plummeting back to the ground, and Shinichi was thrown wide with an indignant shout. “I got you!” Saguru slid in and caught Shinichi fireman style, Shinichi’s weight hitting him fully in the chest and making him wheeze. Behind them, the robot crashed to the ground with an unhappy robotic whine, and what sounded suspiciously like a shut-down jingle.

The guard was back with the other Cats, loading his unconscious comrades into the trucks. The Baron was taking down robots with surgical accuracy, but he didn’t have enough leeway to move to stop them. The trucks started with an immense roar and burst out of the bay, charging into the night.

“They’re getting away!” Saguru called, readjusting his grip on Shinichi.

And then Shinichi reached up and tore the mask right from his face.

“Eh?” Saguru said, dumbly, as the familiar interface built into the lenses of his mask disappeared from his vision. He was left blinking at the other teen, who held the mask up, pinched between his fingers. “Shinichi-kun?”

Something…was wrong. Shinichi smelled wrong. His heart was beating wrong. That, and he’d just swiped the mask from Saguru’s nose.

Shinichi—Shinichi?—pushed against his chest and got back on his feet, leaving Saguru on the ground trying to make sense of the world again. Everything else had gone still: the robots paused and retreated backwards as a group towards the thief in white, leaving the Night Baron standing alone in the center of the room staring at the person that was supposed to be Shinichi.

It was quiet. The three people in the center of the room were staring each other down with charged intensity, and he watched on in fascination. Even knowing he was supposed to keep out of the way and stay in the relatively safe encirclement of DOVEs, he couldn’t help but move closer.

Hakuba was there; and it was Hakuba. Hawk was Hakuba. It was not, in all honesty, a surprise. And yet, it still didn’t feel quite real.

The Night Baron turned towards the former-hostage, pulling up to his full and impressive height as he prowled closer. He didn’t like the way the Night Baron was walking: like he was moments away from unleashing hell upon them, and anxiously, he moved closer, close enough to interfere if something happened.

When the Night Baron spoke to the hostage, his voice was full of something completely incomprehensible. “You’re not my son.”

The words felt like a rush of icy water, like someone had emptied a bucket over his head.

*The Baron is not my father. The Baron is not my father.* For years, those words had been echoing inside his head, with certainty he didn’t understand. Every time he doubted it, they came back full-force like a well-known fact engrained in his mind, even if their source was a hazy memory of a dark building with grey floors stained red.

But the Baron was his father. His father murdered—
The Baron turned towards him, descended upon him, and he stumbled back, struggling to remember how this part was supposed to go. He was breathing too fast, and every time he tried to remember the carefully laid-out steps of the plan, all the rehearsals they performed, his vision was overlaid with a different dim building, just as grey and just as torn up. As the Baron towered over him, the Baron towered over a hole in the ceiling, looking down on a shattered man in white, bleeding into the concrete. The Baron loomed over KID like death itself, and he was KID now, he was the dead man on the floor —

The Baron’s hand seized his arm, and for a single moment, passing like a lightning strike, the world disappeared as an immense presence crashed into his mind, consuming everything. The memories devouring him vanished, burned away like mist in the noon sun.

And then it was gone, leaving him shaking but clear-headed, and the Baron’s grip slackened.

In a weak, questioning voice, so familiar, the Baron said, “Shinichi?”

“Hello, Father.” Shinichi replied. Nothing felt real, like Shinichi was standing alone and untouched in another world, watching the scene unfold before him. Without a thought, he plucked the monocle from his face. “Funny seeing you here.”

Chapter End Notes

Welp.

This chapter probably isn't up to my usual standards of quality, and Hakuba's final scene is a little rushed, but I really want to finish part 1 before summer is over. That means we've got, like, 30,000 more words to go until we reach the interlude. I'll probably come back and fix this chapter up in a couple days.

How many of y'all figured out Shinichi and Kaito switched places before the final scenes? I'd love to know!

EDIT: I know I said I would try to update again before summer ended, but I don't think that's going to be possible. There's a lot of stuff in my life right now that's making me miserable, and it's very hard to find the will and concentration to write at a level I feel this work deserves. I'm really sorry, but please be patient with me.
Old As Your Omens

Chapter Notes

Edit: I forgot to mention! This fic now has its own TvTropes page!!! I was floored when I accidentally found it. Thanks so much!!!!
Also I rearranged some chapter titles.

I so did not proof-read this yet...that's tomorrow's problem. This chapter was so incredibly challenging to write... A lot happens here. Don't kill me.

Warnings: This chapter has several mentions of suicide and suicidal thoughts. If that’s tough on you, skip the first section!

There were days she woke up and wondered why she was still alive. Days that she stared up at her ceiling and asked herself why she was even bothering to keep living, when the world would be better off if she was dead.

Days she looked at pills, knives, scalpels, guns, and water a little differently, until it wasn’t different at all. Until the promise of escape encased in each was all she saw. But every day she put the pills down and the knives away, pulled on her tights and slipped on her shoes, and went back to work.

Not, of course, before checking the message machine.

No new messages. Never any new messages.

Her favorite lip stick was out, and all the others she had were too bright. Too red. They felt childish —too young, somehow, even on her eighteen-year-old face. The sound they made when she threw them at the mirror each morning sounded like little fingers tapping on glass.

She drove to work in a disconnected daze, each turn perfect and each press on the brake timed seamlessly. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wanted press on the gas and go way too fast, wanted to run right off the road and bend her car around a telephone pole. Wanted to drive into the middle of oncoming traffic and just wait for freedom to take her somewhere far away.

But she never did. A single ticket, and they would take this little allowance away from her. Back to sitting in the back of a black car, brought from place to place with words put in her mouth and guns put at her back.

Instead she pulled into the parking garage, settled neatly into the center of her reserved spot, and forced herself to breathe. Inhale, exhale.

If she was going to die, she should make it count. There had to be a way, and she was clever, she was practical, she was resourceful: she could find the route out of the labyrinth her life had become.
That day, sitting in her car and head spinning, her cellphone rang, buzzing against her thigh from where it sat in her coat pocket.

“Ma’am.” A voice on the other end said, voice cold and urgent. “Test subject 18’s spatial disruptions are becoming increasingly unstable.” She clenched her eyes shut and tried to remember how her lungs worked. “The gravitational fields in her isolation cell are reaching critical levels.”

“I understand. I’ll be right there.” Hanging up, she threw the phone at the dashboard and swallowed down a frustrated scream.

Breathe. Breathe.

She’s going supernova.

Breathe. Breathe.

We’ll have to move her from the facility.

Breathe. Breathe.

I’m sorry.

Some days she stared at the ceiling of her car in a parking garage and wished the world would stop spinning. Wished she could just make everything move a little slower, just so she could catch her breath and think of a way to bring this to an end.

The phone clattered against the plastic, sounding just little fists beating against the walls of a containment chamber.

Wearing the KID costume was the easy part. Well-tailored and pristine, it wasn’t uncomfortable in the slightest for a suit, even if the brilliant white was not to Shinichi’s taste. When he settled on top hat on his head and turned to face the mirror, he almost didn’t even recognize his own reflection. Though the young man in the mirror moved alongside him, stepping forward and shifting in perfect tandem, there was a fundamental uncanniness to the sight of the person his mind could only consider Kaitou KID.

“You look the part.” The thief told him, slinking forward from where he was relaxed against the far wall. Even in civilian attire, he moved almost too silently to be real, and there was not so much of a whisper of fabric shifting as he slid into Shinichi’s space. “Just missing one little thing.”

Agile hands clad in white reached out and adjusted the fit of the suit, tugging his sleeve straight and forcing him to stand taller, before bringing up an eyepiece to his face. Shinichi did not appreciate the manhandling, however brief and polite. But nevertheless, he held still as KID fitted the monocle to his face, the cool metal frame settling against his skin alongside the thief’s chilled mind.

The suit carried nothing of KID, but the monocle did. Nothing more than the echoes of impressions, the barest hint of memories carefully repressed.

KID’s smile in the mirror was like a shard of glass, sharp enough to draw blood but too brittle to touch. “Of course, playing dress up is the easy part.”
Shinichi took a deliberate but subtle breath. He rolled his shoulders, and found words to ease the tight atmosphere. “You’re right, I don’t know how to be as insufferable as you.”

KID laughed, completely lacking in any sort of gentlemanly grace.

“No, I think that’ll be easy for you.” The thief spun away, back towards the far wall. He knocked on it, once, twice. The second knock seemed to reverberate through the whole, dimly lit room, and with it the wall started to peel away from KID’s outstretched hand. There was the fluttering of wings, and something swept out of the darkness beyond the wall.

It was a dove, pure white with shiny little eyes, and it landed on KID’s knuckle with a soft coo. He rubbed its head with his other hand, the winked at Shinichi. “I was actually talking about my assistants.” As he spoke, more birds emerged, one by one settling on the various props scattered throughout the room. “As you can probably imagine, being ‘Kaitou KID’ isn’t the safest role to play. But don’t worry, I’m not sending you in undefended.”

One particularly bold little dove landed at Shinichi’s feet and pecked curiously at his shoes. Intrigued, he knelt down to take a better look at it, reaching out slowly so as to not startle it.

Animals tended to be safer for him to touch than people; their brains less complicated and cluttered. But at the first brush of the dove’s supposed feathers, Shinichi knew something was wrong.

His mouth fell open, and KID laughed again.

“These are…” The birds weren’t birds at all—they weren’t even alive.

“Electronic Versatile Observatory Droids.” The little robot perfectly emulated the appearance of a real dove, and the mannerisms were almost as perfect.

That was actually rather menacing. Depending on how many of these KID had, and how good the cameras apparently hidden within them were, the thief’s spy technology was beyond anything Shinichi had ever even imagined him having.

Either ignorant of, or deliberately ignoring, Shinichi’s growing discomfort, KID elaborated. “These are the surveillance models.” He waved back towards the dark storage room beyond the wall, and Shinichi watched the shadows with some trepidations. Obscured figures started shifting in the darkness, before lurching forward and catching in the light. “The ones you’ll be working with, however, are these handsome fellows.”

*Handsome* was a generous descriptor. Unlike the doves, all pretense of being organic beings had been abandoned, and the droids that came forward were completely unlike any living creature, just elongated and armed figures dipped in mercury.

“You’re looking at the most technologically advanced robots in the world.” KID boasted, as if Shinichi wasn’t staring into the face of science-fiction’s worst nightmare. Said abominations crept into the room and seemed peer at him with eyeless faces. KID swept up to one and slung a careless arm around its shoulders. He grinned at his own twisted reflection caught on its argent skin. “Best of all, they’re virtually autonomous. For the most part, they’ll handle everything, and all you’ll have to do is stand aside and look pretty.”

As if to prove KID’s point, a droid skittered forward on all fours around Shinichi’s feet, before suddenly pitching forward onto just two, its torso rising up backwards until it was looming over him. Its head twisted around, and he found himself meeting his own eyes—no, *KID’s eyes,*
monocle and all—reflected on its face. “Easy enough, since you’ll be disguised as me and all.”

Shinichi’s mouth was a little dry, but he stepped around the invasive robot to glance back at its master, who smirked back at him with a glint in his gaze. “But just in case anything happens, you should be comfortable giving them directions. You’ll be working together, so it’s best to get familiar with them all now.”

Before Shinichi could protest, KID disappeared into the storeroom with a jaunty wave. The half dozen droids remained, and with no other choice, he took their measure. Some were more obviously armed than others, and some more visibly misshapen. The least uncanny among them could almost pass for humanoid, if not for the razor-sharp blades that replaced its arms.

He didn’t have any idea how he was supposed to command them. None of them had ears, though he supposed that didn’t mean they lacked auditory receptors.

Without any better ideas, he pointed to a corner, not entirely sure what he was asking them to do. For a moment, they seemingly didn’t know either, but after a long moment of consideration, a droid with too many arms hunkered over and stood obediently.

Alright. Shinichi could work with that.

He turned to another, pointed at it, and then pointed to one the birds that remained in the room. It got the message more quickly, its arms elongating to pluck up the bird.

Directing them, Shinichi found, was a lot like directing humans. They were intuitive, for robots, and for the most part had a decent understanding of gestures and facial expressions. Verbal commands were processed even more quickly, and soon Shinichi found the nerve to let one of the less pointy droids lift him off the ground.

He could work with this, he was sure.

And then someone clapped, and his heart jumped in his chest.

Instantly, all the droids were charging the origin of the sound, brimming with brandished weapons.

KID, slightly wide-eyed in the shadows, froze them still without even so much as a twitch.

He scowled facetiously in Shinichi’s direction. “Careful, they’re monitoring your heart-rate.” All the droids stood down in the face of their real master. If Shinichi didn’t know better, he would think some of them almost seemed embarrassed. KID reentered the room, tracing the edge of a deadly blade with his fingers as he walked by. “If something gives you a fright, they won’t be too kind to it.”

“Good to know.” Shinichi said. The droids’ aggressive reaction had honestly been far more alarming than the clapping, which had simply caught him by surprise.

For deadly robots, the “DOVE”s were remarkably sensitive.

And the sound itself hadn’t been the surprise either. It was just that, noticing movement, when Shinichi had first glanced up, it had been to the sight of himself clapping leisurely in the darkness. His face, his clothes, his mannerisms.

KID wore his face so easily, almost more easily than he himself did. Even though Shinichi was the one that suggested that KID use his face to unmask the Irregulars, seeing the result with his own eyes was another matter entirely.
There was something fundamentally ominous about doppelgängers. Maybe it was the seeming lack of control over what should be simply a reflection, maybe it was the disconcerting knowledge that he was an only child and most certainly had no evil twins.

With his face and his voice, KID went over the particulars once more.

“The Baron’s powers rely on proximity. Not even he can hear the thoughts of someone on the other side of a city, or even a neighborhood. For the most part, I can keep him out of my head with enough range.” KID was staring at his own hand, something dark and anticipatory in his smile. “So, he won’t see me coming.” He especially wouldn’t be expecting an attack from Shinichi. The moment he caught on tape, when he apparently tried to access the Baron’s mind, had proven ‘Kudo Shinichi’ could catch the man off-guard. “One touch is all I need. I just need to catch him for a couple of seconds, and we win.”

“What do you mean?” Shinichi didn’t know what that entailed, and KID’s expression gave him a bad feeling. “What do you intend to do with the Baron?”

Glancing back up, KID rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Shinichi narrowed his own eyes. “I don’t care what sort of grudge you have against him, if you intend to murder—”

“Nobody is going to get murdered.” KID waved carelessly. “I won’t make you an accessory to murder, stringer. Relax. Trust me.” Trust. It wasn’t exactly a commodity Shinichi had in excess. Despite his dubious gaze, KID continued. “I’m a thief, not a murderer.”

“Then, what do you intend to steal?”

“That’s not for you to worry about.”

The rebuttal had Shinichi feeling sour. “It’s not going to work anyway.” He didn’t bother to soften his point. “Won’t it be when he has physical contact with his target that the Baron will be at his most powerful? The moment you touch him, it’ll be game over for you too.”

In all likelihood, that was what happened when he touched the Baron; he’d simply been overpowered.

KID grinned confidently, mischief clear in his borrowed blue eyes. “Then I just need to catch him off-guard, give him no chance to retaliate.”

“And how exactly do you intend to catch a mind-reader off guard?”

“Psychological shock, of course.” KID said it like it was simple. “Overwhelm him with such a brilliant trick that he can think of nothing else.” Well, that was KID’s modus operandi, but Shinichi was still doubtful. The next words only made him more so. “And that, stringer, is where you really come in.”

“I don’t understand. What do I have to do with giving the Baron such a shock?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” KID laughed, and the sound of it followed Shinichi all the way back home from the rehearsal.
He did figure it out, in the end.

All parents lie to their children. It was a fact as old as time. Some societies even make a cultural phenomenon out of it. That cherished, revered naivety of infancy, placed upon a pedestal of hindsight and gold-soaked memories, embossed with a phrase painstakingly carved into the benchmark human experience: ignorance is bliss.

The truth was nothing more than a lamb gutted on the altar to the innocence of youth, a small sacrifice in the name of preserving that glorified naivety.

Because to be naïve was to be gullible, and the gullible looked up when they were told and would never see their own cruel reality coming—a reality shaped by human hands into the sickle their predecessors could call an orderly society. The gullible could be controlled, the naïve could be fooled, and the ignorant could be ignored.

But even the sweet innocence of one’s childhood eventually gave way to the bitter frustrations of adolescence: that lack of control over one’s schedule, environment, and even one’s own self.

The eternal tragedy of growing up.

What a sick joke.

That was all it was. A sick joke from start to finish.

His father was the Night Baron. His girlfriend could bench-press cars. His almost brother ran around the city chasing terrorists.

It wasn’t like Shinichi never suspected, or that he walked through life with his eyes and ears covered, oblivious to all the little things that just didn’t match up. But sometimes reality was too cruel, even for his tastes.

How was he to think of himself as nothing more than a puppet on stage, too dumb to even notice he was hanging on strings?

The butt of the joke, the village idiot. Did they laugh about it, behind his back? Or did they pity him? Poor Shinichi, so left out and ignorant. No wonder they all thought he was incompetent. Seemingly unable to even detect such a matter, right under his nose, for years upon years.

What a joke of an investigator.

Of course he had no credibility. Who was he to call conspiracy, to think he’d caught on to what no one else had noticed, when a masquerade was unfolding before his eyes in his own home, and he couldn’t even see the painted smiles and laughing eyes. He was no different than a dog chasing a nonexistent stick, simply because someone pretended to throw it.

He spent his whole life telling others to face the truth, no matter how painful it was to swallow. How pathetically hypocritical of him, to accuse the rest of the world of closing their eyes and playing pretend when he was the blindest, stupidest among them.

And maybe it was better that way, because what could the truth possibly bring him, besides a broken heart and wounded pride?

He was an idiot.
But there and then, he still had a role to play. The Baron’s—his father’s eyes were locked on him, somewhere behind that mask, and directly behind the back of that black mantle was KID, still wearing Shinichi’s face.

It was their chance, the moment the whole scheme has been building towards. The Baron was pinned between them, his hand still all but grasping Shinichi’s arm, frozen still in the air.

Swallowing around the tightness in his throat, he seized that outstretched hand in his own. His father tensed under his fingers, and Shinichi could feel his mind processing, processing, processing, the usual brilliance lagging and skipping in the face of secrets laid bare.

KID was already lurching over the ground, fast as a striking viper, his hand outstretched.

Just one touch was all he needed.

Just a hairsbreadth from victory, and whatever it entailed.

Shinichi’s heart raced in his chest.

And that was when the ceiling caved in.

First came a horrible whine, somewhere in the distance. Immediately afterwards, the sound of rocks crashing heavily down. Above their heads the cracks that had been spreading through the bay’s ceiling instantly multiplied in size and number, and then in the blink of an eye, gave in.

The reason why was almost instantly apparent, as Angel—Ran. Ran crashed through the far wall, her hair singed short and her face streaked with dust. Debris rained down upon them, forcing all three of them apart.

Right before fingers could make contact.

Already alarmed by Shinichi’s racing pulse, one droid sliced through the air between him and the Baron, driving them even further away from one another, as another DOVE dragged Shinichi under itself. The frame of cold steel tightened around and above him as chunks of concrete and support beams crashed down upon them, the other droids rushing to cut through incoming debris.

Between the dust and stone and chaos, Shinichi caught a glimpse of KID being swept away by another droid, right as the one above him picked him up.

The escape from the collapsing building was a blur of brilliant silver metal and clouds of dust. The world spun before his eyes as the DOVEs finally escaped the danger zone, and before he knew it, he was being placed down on a neighboring rooftop.

Suddenly back on his unsteady feet, Shinichi found himself looking at KID’s back. At some point in the chaos, possibly to lighten its load, the droid had stripped Shinichi of the heavy mantle and jacket. He took off the top hat and monocle himself, placing them in the robot’s open arms before turning back to the now pacing thief.

Things had been going so well, but someone must have given Ran the order to abandon the structural supports. Hawk—Hakuba, and didn’t that sting?—probably.

He clenched his eyes shut, feeling the roar of his own chaotic mind, the pounding of his heart, and then opened them anew.

“All three of those facilities has been stripped of everything they had, the Cats got away, you
unmasked all the Irregulars and the Night Baron, and you escaped. It went off without a hitch, until
the last moment.” He told KID’s back, watching as the disguise of himself disappeared and was
replaced by the true Kaitou KID. “But what was the point of all this?”

Why?

“You could have stolen all that stuff yourself and given it to the Cats if you wanted to, and it’s not
like you’ve done any real damage to the Baron. There was more to this.”

“Yes.” KID’s voice held none of its usual lilt or energy. But it was solid and steady. “It’s not over
yet. You still have one last role to play.”

“I know. I’ll deliver the package.” That wasn’t the answer he was looking for, but it was apparent
KID had no further intentions of elaborating. The failure at the last moment must have stung his
pride. Shinichi just felt jagged, like someone had shattered him, and he’d lost some of his pieces
along the way, without even noticing.

There seemed to be a lot of things he didn’t notice anymore. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t still
ask questions and fight to understand. “But why? Where is this coming from?”

KID made his way over to the rooftop’s edge and sat down without a sound, his feet dangling in
the open-air stories above the ground. Shinichi followed after him cautiously, a little warier of the
possible plummet. He had no doubt that KID was equipped with his glider, but he had no such
protection now. Still, he took a seat and looked at the world far underneath the soles of his shoes:
milling crowds on faceless people and flashing lights. They watched Tokyo move for a few quiet
moments.

The wind blew into his face, carrying the dark scents of the city, but so much cleaner and fresher
than the hot, dusty air of the facility. He had avoided most of the smoke, but the destruction Angel
—Ran, shit, Ran—and the DOVEs had caused had filled the air with all sorts of materials that were
probably dangerous to inhale. Carcinogens and lung-shredding particles, probably. Maybe even
asbestos. Had any of the local buildings been constructed during the period of time asbestos was
unrestricted? Considering the timeframe, it was certainly a possibility, if a concerning one.

It was easier to think about those things. He could write his next article about the dangerous
contaminants released into the air by metahuman activities. That sounded good. A little classic
fear-mongering with a side of environmentalism. Shinichi choked on a chuckle that sounded
suspiciously like a sob.

Maybe the journalism thing was a bust, actually. He’d thought he was good at it, and he thought it
was important. That with just his words he could make a difference in the world, if nothing else.

But he was wrong, just like he’d been wrong about everything else.

Shinichi didn’t know what he was supposed to do next. He didn’t even want to go home.

Could—could he even go home?

Logically, he knew he could. Everyone was probably already waiting for him there. Waiting for
what, exactly, he didn’t bother trying to guess. He’d sided with their enemies, after all, and
effectively made himself a criminal. He had betrayed everyone: his family, his friends, his
girlfriend. The heroes of the city, and the world, and for what?

Because they betrayed his trust first?
What of it? What did that matter? Of course, they kept it secret from him. Were they supposed to tell him and inconvenience themselves, just to spare his feelings?

Would he have told them, had he been in their shoes?

He knew the answer to that question, and still resentment seemed to burn within him, an uncontrollable blaze of hurt and frustration.

It was his companion that broke the silence first. KID sighed. The sound of it was so startlingly distraught Shinichi jolted in his seat and turned to stare. KID had never made any sort of noise like that before: so frustrated and raw, a single breath packed with thousands of miserable nights and desolate days. A sound Shinichi usually heard from himself, when he sat in front of his computer in the dark, staring at a website that never seemed to amount to anything worthwhile.

It was not a sound that could be faked. But it was not one befitting the infamously confident Phantom Thief 1412 either. Shinichi turned his eyes away, knowing there were some things that were just not meant to be seen.

But he wasn’t nice enough person to let it go. And some distant part of him figured KID might not want him to. “KID?”

The thief’s mouth cracked open, and Shinichi only then realized how tightly KID had been clenching his teeth.

“I wanted them to get it.” KID admitted, his voice cracked with a wretched anguish that Shinichi knew all too well. There was a tired frustration embedded into every word—too old and weary to have anything to do with this, them, him. An emotion so ancient and raw that KID seemed to have no control over it, and that was terrifying. Like a crack in the Trojan Wall, it was something that was not supposed to exist. An impossibility turned into reality.

“Get what?” Shinichi prompted, watching every minute shift in the thief’s expression.

KID heaved another sigh, one hand plucking the hat from his head and setting it in his lap. The other dragged through the messy hair underneath, tousling the already scattered locks. “What it’s like to be lied to.” Without his hat, KID looked significantly younger: more like a kid in a costume than a super-villain. “To find out someone you care about isn’t who you thought they were at all.”

Shinichi considered that. That was one way to interpret their little ploy, but coming from a master of disguise and trickery, it seemed duplicitous. “You lie to people every day.”

“I know. But I get it. I know how it feels to be on the other side, and I know how it ends.” KID was staring at the hat in his hands, as if he was pulling words from it and not his mouth. His expression was starting to twist out of shape, a dark grief lingering it the cracks. Suddenly, KID was on his feet, pacing back and forth on the ledge carelessly. His voice hiked up, furious words echoing into the wind. “They don’t have the slightest idea! They think that if they leave you behind, it can’t hurt you. But it does! And it always will!”

“KID.” Shinichi reached up and seized KID’s gloved hand, coaxing him back down. KID had impressive balance and unwavering nerves, but watching the thief teeter on the edge of a skyscraper was too much for Shinichi’s own. KID let him, tensing under his touch like a coiled spring but settling back down anyway. His breath was too quick to be called calm, but it was nothing compared to the tumultuous mess Shinichi could feel under his fingertips. Yet, KID’s swirling emotions seemed easier to face than his own, still spinning in circles in his head and in his blood.
Weighing his words carefully, Shinichi asked, “What is it that they don’t understand?”

KID went right back to staring at the hat, his brow furrowed and his mouth twitching, as if he could barely keep all the words he wanted to say trapped behind his lips. Eventually, he muttered an answer. “How much it hurts the people who love them.”

“When they keep secrets?” Shinichi guessed, but KID shook his head.

“That’s…part of it. Some of them understand that. I mean, when heroes go out into the world and risk their lives to save it, without telling the people they love. They never think about the feelings of those left behind if they don’t come back. How heartbroken their precious friends and family will be when they learn that they were someone else only once they’re nothing but a body in a casket. Learn that they were untrusted and doubted until the very end. That the person they all thought they loved may have been nothing but a trick of the light.”

"Did you..." Shinichi trailed off. In the dark, KID jerked his head up and down.

"Yes. My father."

Shinichi’s eyes slid shut. He took that in for a moment, and understood. "Was he the original?"

He didn’t need to ask that question. In truth, he knew he had guessed correctly. The original Kaitou KID, the last wizard of the century, the man that had visited the manor library.

All dead and gone, only kept alive by a son.

"And come investigate one of my shows sometime, okay?"

He never did get the chance to go after all.

No. That—that wasn’t right. He had—he went—

"Yes.” KID answered. “Left one day to dazzle the world, but I just thought he was heading off to work. Next thing I know is that there's a villain dead in the streets, but it's my father's face behind the mask when I peel it off." A thief in white, flat on the ground, splat, like the cartoons. And on the television the next day: Kaitou KID, a murderer. The horror of it dripped over KID’s every word. “A villain. They called him a villain, and maybe he was. But to me, he was just my dad.” Shinichi couldn’t even imagine it. “And then he was gone. He had this whole other life and he never breathed a word of it to me.” But that part, that hit far too close to home. His eyes stung in the night air, aching in vain for the duplicity he’d only just come to know. Each of KID’s words rang more and more true. “Did I mean that little to him? Did he think I couldn’t keep a secret? Was I that useless? That much of a burden?”

A useless burden. Was that how his father, Hakuba, and Ran saw him?

Was that what he really was?

Just another stupid problem.

"When I look at you,” KID muttered, his shoulders falling, “I see myself eight years ago. I guess I let my own issues fuck this all up.” He sighed again, but this time, it didn’t surprise Shinichi in the least. He felt they were both ridiculous, suddenly, reacting in desperation and only pretending they were in control. “Dragging you into this… was a bad idea.” With slumped shoulders, KID suddenly extended a hand towards him, a familiar thumb drive settled in the palm of his hand. “Here. I shouldn’t have taken this in the first place.”
Shinichi took back the drive. His throat was tight. He didn’t think of anything left to say.

KID gazed at his face with eyes that had no twinkle, no playful spark. “What are you going to do now?”

“‘I don’t know.” He really, *really* didn’t.

“If it means anything, this is a pretty shitty way to find out.”

It was an understatement. But Shinichi’s own decisions had brought him there, nothing else.

“I think I already knew. A little.” He admitted, and it hurt to acknowledge it, that vague suspicions were always lingering in the back of his mind, gathering dust because he was too scared to look at them. “I think I just didn’t want to face it.”

“Can you? Face it now?”

He’d always thought he wasn’t one to run away from his problems. Apparently, he was wrong about that too. He just didn’t know anymore.

“I guess I’m about to find out. It’s just… I just have this distinct memory from when I was a child, of knowing the Baron isn’t my father. Complete certainty.”

KID hummed, oddly understanding. “They say meta-abilities are inherited.” Yes, they supposedly were. In hindsight, that made things remarkably obvious, didn’t it? Shinichi winced, and turned to find KID staring at his face seriously. For a moment he said nothing, his eyes dark and measuring.

“So, are you sure that it’s your memory?”

Ah.

That was certainly a possibility. Maybe his head was even more of a mess than he wanted to believe; just an amalgamation of stolen memories and snatched feelings.

Moreover, he was starting to have a good guess at why KID was able to come to that conclusion, to make the intuitive leap to what Shinichi was really capable of. Something about what Shinichi had said.

There was one way to find out, but he needed skin-to-skin contact.

He glanced at KID’s hands, still gloved. KID was careful not to show skin, clothed from his feet to his collar, probably to dissuade any collection of DNA evidence. Even his face was probably a mask of some sort, more likely to be a coating of latex than skin.

Shinichi could only think of one place he was guaranteed direct, unhindered contact.

But, that had complications of its own.

He bit his lip, eyes caught on the thief’s face. Desperately, he needed to know, to finally be able to accept what he’d been denying for what may well have been eight years. And what the hell, what was another dumb decision?

“Thanks for today.” He heard himself say, in a soft, vulnerable voice. KID shifted to catch his eyes once more, surprised but at ease. Shinichi inched closer, his hand sliding over the rough concrete to brush KID’s. KID’s eyes were dark and sparkling in the night-time lights, reflecting the busy world neither of them saw now. The world narrowed around them, as Shinichi leaned closer, tracing up
KID’s arm to his shoulder. “I think I understand now.”

KID watched him, enraptured, with the moonlight on his parted lips and bemusement in his gaze.

Shinichi cupped KID’s cheek and brought their lips together. The kiss was soft, light, nothing more than the press of skin on skin, at first. KID was rigid under his fingers, stiff and unmoving with his eyes open wide. But Shinichi let his fall closed as he pressed closer, coaxing the thief’s mouth open.

One swipe of his tongue on the inside of KID’s bottom lip was enough, the taste of cocoa and teeth against his tongue. He searched.

And he found it.

The memory unfurled around him like a storybook, and Shinichi fell right into it.

_He had a secret. A really special secret._

_His dad was a superhero._

_He was sure of it._

_It explained everything, all the things his dad could do, the weird hours he vanished, how the periods of his absence always lined up with crimes._

_He was a clever kid. It wasn’t that hard to figure out. And with a little more thought, he had a good idea of exactly which superhero his dad was._

_The Night Baron. The Night Baron. One of the most famous and revered Overseers, the man that had saved the world countless times. The greatest fear of bad guys and crooks all over the world._

_The absolute coolest of the cool, and he was his dad._

_He was so sure, one night, he snuck out to go see his dad in action. He solved the riddle and got to the right place and he was so, so excited._

_He wasn’t the only one._

_There was another boy, on the other side of the room. A lot like him—dark hair and intelligent blue eyes. They stared at each other, but the other boy seemed very, very nervous._

_He opened his mouth, but—_

_Above them, the skylight shattered, and something white plummeted into the room. His heart leapt in his chest, excitement and delight pulling his lips all the way up. He’d gotten it right after all!_

Except there was person amidst all the rippling white cloth, and the smile slid off his face the exact moment the man crashed into the concrete. It shattered underneath him, the crack just loud enough to match the crunch of something breaking into little pieces.

_White slowly dyed red._

_He stared at the figure crumpled and shattered on the floor, and thought, oh._
A shadow fell over the smashed body, someone blocking the moonlight above them. A dark figure, all black, except for the white mask that blended in with the moon, leaving only an empty, jaunty grin smiling down upon them.

Oh, he thought again, a scream rising in his throat.

The Night Baron wasn’t his father.

No, his father was over there, on the ground, not even twitching.

He screamed. It didn’t sound like the movies, the tv shows. It was raw and high-pitch and broke around his attempts to breath.

The shadow slid down, a drop of ink slipping down from the sky, and he scrambled away, still screaming even as his voice turned hoarse.

But the shadow shot right towards the other boy—the other boy he forgot about the other boy—and then they were both gone but there was his father his dad smashed into the ground like a bug someone stepped on.

He stumbled over on shaking legs, his voice tapering into wet, ragged sobs, the sound as loud as his screams in the empty room.

His father was there, in disguise but that couldn’t fool him—he knew deep in his heart that this was his dad, was, was, was.

And he’s dead.

His heart pounded in his chest, hot tears dripping down his face, and he heard the wail of sirens in the distance.

Barely able to move through the force of the sobs wracking his body, he stripped the white from his father with quivering hands that he could barely see past the tears filling his vision. He had to turn him over, pushing uselessly until he had to dig his hands in underneath and heave upwards, forcing the limp deadweight to slump over. The moisture gathered in his eyes softened the world into blurred colors as he jerked the jacket free roughly. His father hit the concrete again, a dull, sickening noise. He bunched the jacket and the mantle up into a ball, but there was the heavy rig underneath them too. Years of mimicking his father had left him with clever hands, and he dismantled it quickly, piece by piece disappearing into the bundle of white and red he knew he’d have to drag away.

His lungs were burning, aching in his fluttering chest. Suddenly he was aware of only his panting voice filling the room with sound, wet and pitiful.

He couldn’t bear to look at the cold, pale face now crushed against the ground—the eyes were still open, blank and glassy, and there was something grey and gooey mixed in the gathering puddle of red. Brain matter.

He swallowed down bitter bile, desperately resisting the liquid that rushed up his throat. He was sobbing loudly, then, as he snatched the monocle and hat from the shattered head as quickly as he could.

They, at least, fit in his jacket.

The sirens were getting closer. He still had to get the latex and the fake fingerprints, the hidden
gadgets and strip the white covers from the shoes.

He didn’t know how he managed it, hyperventilating and his ears filled with wailing sirens and the sound of his own pounding heart, just that he stumbled out of the building dragging a bundle of white cloth behind him.

Leaving his father there, alone and cold, was the hardest thing he ever had to do in his short life.

Except, he had no father, not anymore.

The memory was agonizing, horrible and visceral, and Shinichi’s hands trembled on KID’s shoulders as he let it go. KID was staring at him, his mouth opening and closing with abject disbelief, as Shinichi pulled away.

But the pieces were falling together in his head. He was there, his father was there, the Night Baron was there—he remembered.

“What—I—you—”

Back in the present, he didn’t want to think about what he just saw. He took the distraction KID’s indignant bafflement gladly, and grounded himself by the heat he felt rushing into his face.

“Consider it a thank you gift.”

The contact had been more a matter of necessity than anything else, but still the touch of lips on his own had his skin tingling. It had been some time since he kissed anyone—not since the time in the pool with Ran at the height of summer. But in this moment he was colluding with a criminal hundreds of meters in the air. His neglectful, sharp-tongued father was an internationally lauded bastion of righteousness. The girlfriend he gave his heart to had been lying to him for ages, and his almost-brother for even longer.

When his father inevitably read his mind when he went home, Shinichi decided, this would be the memory at the forefront of his mind—kissing a phantom thief under the moonlight.

Teenage rebellion tasted sweet, just like KID’s mouth.

“Thank you. Really.” He said, savoring it. He meant the words this time. “See you around.”

And then Shinichi reached out and shoved KID off the roof, watching white slip into the open air as he plummeted with an indignant squawk.

It wasn't funny.

Back at the manor, they waited for him. He took the long way home, but still the foyer of the house was filled with what he now recognized to be the Irregulars out of costume, both familiar and completely alien.

Taller than all of them, his father led him deeper and deeper into the manor with barely a word. The others fell into step around him, none of them meeting his eyes, and it was far too quiet.

He found himself outside the study on the first floor, his father waving him inside.
For the first time since Shinichi took off the monocle, his father spoke. “Let’s talk in private.”

The words were merely a match on the trail of a gunpowder keg, and before he could restrain himself, Shinichi was snarling. “Oh, so now you care about privacy?”

His father stared at him, then motioned everyone inside the study and shut the door behind them. He descended upon Shinichi the next moment, not so much as a pause. “What exactly were you thinking?”

Shinichi burned, both indignant and incensed. “Why don’t you tell me!” His stomach twisted, something hot and intangible rushing up his throat and burning behind his eyes. He didn’t know he could feel so angry. “Look into my head right now and tell me why I did this!” But the thought of his father peering inside his head was almost nauseating. He spent his whole life trying to avoid touching too much; whether it was just the brush of skin against a sentimental object or his hand on someone else’s, it seemed invasive to feel what other’s felt. Stealing glances and glimpses of memories even more so, voyeuristic in its consuming totality.

Even earlier, looking so at something so deeply private, something he had no rights to see but desperately had to anyway…

It was wrong.

To think his father, his distant and inscrutable father, had been peering into his very mind for as long as he was alive was another sensation entirely.

But there were the holes too, the empty spaces in his head he always tried not to think about. The places where his supposedly eidetic memory failed entirely. Recollections snatched from his very mind and reduced to what? Nothing?

He was there when Kaitou KID died, and he knew it, he was sure he knew it, so why was that knowledge, that memory, so impossibly distant inside his own head? Something he couldn’t possibly forget, but it was buried so deeply in his consciousness it barely registered as more than a faded dream.

That was something his father took from him, to conceal his crime.

Shinichi realized his fists were clenched tight, bones all but grinding together as his fingernails bit into the meat of his palm. He forced them to loosen, one by one, and struggled against all the words that wanted to escape his mouth. He forced them into something calm and measured, an accusation he could lay at his father’s feet. “Or better yet, just make me forget everything that happened tonight. Wouldn’t be the first time, right?”

He wondered how many times once more would make it. If one more was too many. If his father had the guts to steal this from him too.

It would be pointless. He’d left himself evidence, evidence not even his father could make disappear. Just a meter away, his father was watching him with an impassive face, but he was pale too, blue eyes stark and wavering. They widened, and Shinichi was once more hit with the visceral realization that his father could hear his every thought. He didn’t even need to say anything aloud.

But he did anyway. He needed to say it all, before it ate him from the inside. And spitefully, he wanted everyone else to hear it too.

“You know, sometimes I wondered why I’m so damn obsessed with having pictures or video of everything, but now it’s become pretty clear!” That was really it, wasn’t it? A desperate attempt to
hold on to the information he knew was slipping through his fingers. An unconscious rebellion against the tampering of his own mind.

“You took my memories of that night. To cover up your crime. Because you killed Kaitou KID!” He pointed right at his father’s face, panting with the force of the accusation. It burned his tongue to say it aloud, and all around the room, teenagers tensed. “And you tried to make me forget it.” Leaving behind pieces, impressions, confused remains that made no sense, because they were what he picked up from the mind of the scene’s other witness. “But you failed. Because for some reason, you can’t take the thoughts and memories that weren’t originally mine.” All his investigations that his father couldn’t prevent, the lingering knowledge that could only be suppressed—it was not because his father allowed it, but because he couldn’t erase from Shinichi’s mind what was never Shinichi’s in the first place.

The closest he could get was making sure Shinichi didn’t know the stolen memories were there, like those damning glimpses he saw in the Baron’s mind of the night the first Kaitou KID died. Having forgotten such memories even existed, they didn’t come back to him until something properly reminded him, just like most decade-old recollections.

His father’s face was slack, bland and untelling, but his apprentices watched him uneasily, their eyes flickering between father and son with unconcealed anxiety. But under the weight of their stares, Yuusaku’s eyes just slid closed, and he shook his head with a furrowed brow.

It was not the expression of a guilty man.

And that burned. Because his father didn’t seem guilty, didn’t seem regretful; there was only the hard light of resolution in his eyes as they opened once more to stare into Shinichi’s furious face.

“Don’t pretend to not know what I’m talking about!” He yelled, but his voice broke on the edges of the words, something raw and hurt seeping through. “You knew this whole time that I was a meta! And you didn’t even bring it up! Didn’t even offer to help me control it!”

No, his father just packed his bags and ran away, over and over again. Was he worried that if he stayed, Shinichi would pick up his memories too? That the whole charade would be blown open? Or did he simply just not want to deal with it? The one person in the world that should have known what it was like, to know his mind wasn’t entirely his own, couldn’t even be bothered with him.

“All those years I spent,” as he speaks his voice falls, quivering like his vocal chords, like his clenched hands, as the weight of so many lonely years suddenly rushed over him, “scared of touching people, furniture, everything! And you could have helped me!”

His eyes burned, his brain burned; everything was a jumbled, burning mess. It was all too much, too many accusations and hurts and miserable truths to lay on the ground between them, but neither of them wanted to pick them back up.

For a moment, everything is quiet.

Shinichi stared into his father’s eyes, searching for something, anything.

There’s nothing but steel as his father finally spoke. His mouth quirked up in a wry, tired smile, and for a painful moment, Shinichi could see something soft in his father’s eyes.

Another delusion.

“Everything I’ve done has been for you.” Yuusaku spoke slowly, deliberately, leaving no room for argument. Like he was pointing out the obvious, but he knew the other party would never wrap
their brain around it. “You just…don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t!” Of all the nerve. “You won’t let me understand! Why have you been keeping this from me? Why bother keeping it a secret in the first place?” All these years, in his own home. Why go so far? “Answer me. Please.” Exhausted, he glanced around the room at faces that were too painfully familiar, now twisted and uncomfortable. None of them met his eyes. “You brought so many others into this. Hakuba. Hattori. Even Ran.” He turned back to his father with dread pooling in his gut, pouring over the hot flames of his anger and leaving behind something scorched and bleeding. “Why not me?”

“Because you’re useless to me.”

It took a moment, for the words to register. They seemed to echo in his head, resounding despite how blithe his father’s tone was.

And they kept coming.

“You abilities are just a mere shadow of my own.” Each felt like a knife cutting his skin, too, too close. That was true, but he was still young, there was no guarantee—“You’re useless in combat, have no offensive capabilities.” But—but neither did Hakuba at the start—“Despite this, you naively walk into dangerous situations just to satisfy your curiosity. And then you tell the whole world about it. I cannot think of anyone I’d want by my side in a dangerous situation less.”

Their minds brushed, briefly. Deliberately. His father reaching out to communicate one single thing: how that last sentence was the genuine, undeniable truth. The belief, the unwavering conviction of the statement, the surety in his father’s mind: it was all there, right in the face.

“You behavior today has only proven the belief correct. You aided and abetted a criminal organization and an internationally wanted man. And you betrayed everyone in this room to do it.” Those—those were his own thoughts. He couldn’t even deny them. “For what, Shinichi?”

“KID had some evidence I needed.” But was that really it, or was he just pitching a fit? Maybe it had started with coercion, but there were so many petty, vexed emotions boiling within him, until he felt like they were steaming out of him. “He offered it in exchange for my compliance.”

“You’re still involving yourself in this?” The disappointment and disapproval in his father’s voice was palpable. “What do you really think you can do for these missing kids? What are you going to do once you find something? Because last time, you walked into a trap and almost got yourself abducted. If Hattori-kun hadn’t been there, you’d be dead, and those kids would be in the exact same situation as they are right now. Or more likely, worse off.”

The truth was cruel. He thought he knew it.

But he’d been just as ignorant on that front as he was on everything else.

He clenched his eyes shut, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip as he forced the burn of tears from his eyes.

“There is nothing you can do, besides get yourself killed.”

Even so, even so, if he didn’t try, who would? What if he was the only one that could? He—

“Do you really think you’ll uncover something I can’t?”

“No, that’s—” It wasn’t that this was his case, he wasn’t trying to prove anything, except he was,
but that wasn’t what was important—“That’s not what this is about.”

“Alright. That’s fine. You tried your best.” The was something distinctly, disgustingly fatherly about his father’s expression, and he felt so small in the face of it. “But things went too far today. It’s time to stop. Just hand over what you have. ISHA will take it from here, under the official avenues.” But if he did that, then he’d never know, not until it was too late. “I assure you, the case will be in capable hands. I already selected someone to take care of it.”

Already?

So, they took him seriously after all? They believed the children were missing? They were going to handle it?

But, if that was the case, then…

What was the point of all that work, running around, compromising his morals, convincing himself he could do better, could outsmart the best of the best? What was the point of him?

“Don’t make that face.” He didn’t know what sort of face he was making. Suddenly, he just felt so lost. “We all make mistakes, and it’s late. It’s been a stressful day. How about you go back upstairs and get some rest?” The words were soft, calming. They seemed to dry his tongue in his mouth, to empty him of all the words he had thought he wanted to say.

With an encouraging smile, his father prompted, “Don’t Nationals start tomorrow?”

They did. He forgot about that. It didn’t seem important, compared to anything else. In truth, he didn’t really care that much for the soccer team.

“But—” A hand landed on his shoulder as the word formed on his lips.

“I’m sure the coach will let you play if you apologize for being absent. You’re his best player.” When he said that, Yuusaku almost looked proud, the cold, distasteful gleam in his eye almost completely concealed. “And if you do your best, I’m sure you’ll catch the eyes of the scouts again. You do every year.”

Once more, he tried to speak up. “I don’t want—”

“Give it a chance. You could have a great career in soccer. We can handle this.” His father held up a familiar thumb drive, and Shinichi’s breath froze in his lungs. When did he hand it over? When?

“Your team needs you. You guys could really be the national champions this year.”

He didn’t want—he didn’t care about that—

“Guys,” his father called, and the others he’d almost forgotten immediately shifted awkwardly. Ran stood out among them, her expression unhappy. His father’s hand on his shoulder, Shinichi was pushed towards her. “Shinichi here needs to get some rest before Nationals start tomorrow. All of you should too. Let’s call it a night, shall we?”

“Sounds great.” Hakuba answered, his voice strained, as he waved them all out the study door.

In a daze, Shinichi let them guide him down the hall. At the end of it, he was to go up to his bedroom, them down to the foyer. Just like they were told.

Useless, his father called him. And he was right.
The others stepped past him, their faces lowered and their bodies stiff as they took their first few steps down. He watched them, all still covered in soot and half-dried sweat, and felt so impossibly empty.

*Take a breath,* he told himself. Before they could go further, he forced the words out. “The championship game is on Sunday. If I give this up and we get there, will you come?”

All eyes were on him the moment he spoke, very wide and very desperate.

“Yes!” The response was immediate from Kazuha and Aoko, but the other three stared at him, faces slack and eyes stunned.

Hakuba recovered the fastest, locking down his face into something politely pleased. “Of course, we will. We’ll all come.” His voice faltered slightly, but no one called him on it. Coughing briefly into his hand, the next word came more genuinely. “Promise.”

Shinichi heard himself say: “Great. Thanks.”

Silence fell again, the five of them trapped on the stairs, seemingly unable to speak further or move on.

Hakuba’s eyes finally met his own properly, and they held each other’s gaze for a long, quiet moment. Between that moment and the next, Hakuba seemed to find something within himself. With a straight back and a determined expression, he said, “We’ll find the one’s responsible. Please, just trust me.”

“Promise.” The word tasted like ash on his tongue as he repeated it. Shinichi could feel it rekindling the fire within him, all the vicious emotions rising back up, with humiliation and resentment as fresh fuel on the pyre.

He had to focus on what was really important, so he forced them down, burying the escalating fury under ice and discipline. “Promise that if I give this up and stay out of it like you want me to, you’ll find the kids and save them.” He couldn’t. That was obvious now. He’d been stupid to ever think otherwise. “Even if I can’t do anything, you should be able to.”

Hakuba didn’t break eye contact, not for a moment, his face more and more grave with each word. “I promise,” he agreed, his voice somber but resolute, “Shinichi-kun.”


Chapter End Notes

The kiss was unplanned until I realized KID would never be so careless as to leave bare skin easily accessible. So then I thought, what would I do in Shinichi’s shoes, just from a practical and pragmatic standpoint?

There seemed like only one option, haha!

We may very well have only one really long chapter left in this first arc of the story. Then we'll probably go straight into the interlude... finally, new characters to work with! Please bear with me!
Give Up On You

Chapter Notes

So, turns out, the finale of Part 1 is gonna be...like...30,000 words long, so, uh, I'm splitting it up into two/three chapters. It was going to be just one, but I reached 13,000 words after only four plot-points.

The chapter was beta'd by mirrorfalls/Rubberlotus!! Say thanks, everyone, you've been saved from my type-os this time!

The world, for once, was far too quiet as they retreated downstairs. Silence, awkward and unnatural, encompassed his comrades. He could hear their heartbeats in their chests, each a little too fast, and could see the red in the corners of their eyes.

They should have been yelling at him. Hattori surely wanted to, and for once, he’d be right to. But no one seemed to know what to say, or what to do, or what to think. More had been revealed to them in a single night than in months, in such a confusing manner, so it was no wonder they were all still reeling.

Saguru himself wasn’t much better.

Because Shinichi knew.

And he was very much not emotionally prepared for that.

Saguru had hardened himself, emotionally, to ‘the Kudo issue’ a long time ago. Once, he’d been sensitive to them, but as time went by, the wedge of reality only dug in deeper and deeper between them and any emotions invested in it were only bound to hurt more.

There had been a time when Saguru had wanted to go to Teitan High with Shinichi, to walk to and from school together and talk about cases and mysteries and Holmes. It had been nothing but a fantasy in the face of their deteriorating friendship, until even Saguru had been forced to admit to himself it would never work. What cases could they discuss, when he was supposed to be dissuading Shinichi from pursuing investigations? What mysteries could he so cheerfully unravel, when he knew the darker, disturbing truth rotting underneath them?

The closer he tried to get to Shinichi, the more he seemed to hurt him. Over and over again he was forced into positions that he had no choice but to hurt him, deliberately. It wasn’t enough for them just to be cut on the shattered remains of a childhood bond, Saguru had to pour salt into fresh wounds just to keep both their heads above water.

He learned from the best, from watching Yuusaku, but for once seeing his mentor in himself only brought him immense shame. Self-loathing was ever present, lingering in the back of his mind every time he met the cold blue eyes of his former friend.

So he went to Ekoda instead, to get some distance, and hoped that Ran would be able to hold Shinichi together on her own. In hindsight, that was presumptuous of him. Ran was carrying
enough on her shoulders without having to be the sole reprieve to Shinichi’s mandated isolation.

In the end, it wasn’t surprising that they had ended up here, but somehow, he still hadn’t expected it. For Shinichi to turn on them like a dog beaten one too many times—he had never really considered such a thing possible, but now he could see that was a misconception grounded on Shinichi’s perceived stoicism. In the face of their disparagement, Shinichi rarely even batted an eyelid, not at all like anyone else Saguru had ever met besides Yuusaku, and so he convinced himself it wasn’t so bad, that Shinichi was even tougher than Yuusaku’s particularly twisted brand of tough love.

A faulty deduction.

No, it was nothing more than cowardly self-deceit: the refusal to recognize what was before his eyes for what it truly was, because he was scared of the truth.

But, even recognizing that, so what? What else could he do, but continue on like this? What could he have even done differently in the past? All that talk about finding the answer that even his mentor had failed to see, to what end?

There has to be a better way, he’d told himself over and over again. What better way?

There wasn’t one. It had been an impossible situation from the start. The bags under his mentor’s eyes and the exhaustion lingering in his once-keen gaze had been born from understanding that—that no matter what they did, what direction they took, they were already condemned.

There was no right answer. Saguru had only been tricking himself into believing there was.

At the bottom of the stairs, instead of heading towards the front door, Hattori veered off towards the hidden entrance to the Headquarters. Saguru was not so distracted that he could miss the fury in the other young man’s face, that he couldn’t feel the heat gradually radiating off his skin.

Saguru seized his arm. “Excuse me, but where are you going?”

“Where does it look like?” The reply was terse as Hattori jerked his arm away.

“Kudo-san sent us home.” They had to get out. Without a doubt, Shinichi was upset upstairs, and them staying would only make things worse. “It would be rude to—”

“Rude? Rude?” Hattori spun around and snarled in his face. “Is that really what’s important right now?” Hattori swept an arm through the air, his thick eyebrows slanted all the way down despite his wide, gleaming eyes.

Saguru opened his mouth, but Kazuha’s voice interrupted them, softer and more uncertain than Saguru had ever heard it before. “Did… Kudo-san really…” She hesitated over the words, a nervous look to her eyes as they fell on Saguru’s face. “Kill Kaitou KID?”

Saguru swallowed, and though he knew no one else could hear as well as he could, or see as clearly as he could, he still felt over-exposed in the dimly lit foyer.

“But KID is alive.” Ran frowned, her gaze also turned to him, seeking confirmation.

It seemed like they were having this conversation whether he wanted to or not.

He forced himself to relax, to speak clearly and calmly, with the proper poise. He couldn’t lose his cool, no matter what.
“The KID we know is the second. Shinichi-kun was speaking of the predecessor.” It had surprised him when he first learnt of it, but in some ways, it made sense. The KID of before his absence and the KID of afterwards had different styles, different personalities, and if old footage was to be trusted, different physiques. “The first Kaitou KID died in a confrontation with ISHA that escalated out of hand.” Though he’d already begun his training as a sidekick then, he hadn’t been there himself. Far too dangerous. “People got hurt, everything went out of control, and KID ended up dead.” Even if he hadn’t witnessed the event himself, he knew what he could admit without having to lie to his team. The bare bones of what happened were true, if vague, and all too typical. “Unfortunately, that kind of ending is not at all unusual in our field, for heroes and villains alike.”

Death was merely a hazard of the job.

“How could we leave?” Hattori drawled back. “Knowing our boss covered up the murder of Kaitou KID?”

Yuusaku walked past them, the words having no effect. Something of a smile lingered on the man’s face, distant but peaceful. He led them over to a portrait on the wall: an innocuous, meaningless painting of women in a garden of flowers.

Without looking at any of them, he said, “Kaitou KID lives on as a villain, but Kuroba Toichi died an innocent man.”

That brought them all pause, even Saguru. He found himself pursing his lips, rolling the words over in his head.

That was true. The man would be fondly remembered so long as memory of him lingered in the world: in the minds of his fans, his colleagues, and his fellow magicians, the image of Kuroba Toichi remained as clean and pristine as Kaitou KID’s white suit. Yuusaku’s eyes lingered on the laughing faces of the women in the painting, each indistinct and blurred by rough strokes, but unmistakably warm.

Slowly, in a solemn voice, he said, “That… was all I could offer him, my friend, in the end. His son was the one to change him back into civilian attire. Not giving that away… it was the only way I could respect that child’s feelings. My friend may have been dead, but if I could spare just a portion of his memory from being tarnished… I don’t pretend that’s enough to absolve myself of what happened. It is not justice.” He paused, his eyes sliding shut behind his spectacles for a moment. “But an admission of my guilt won’t ease that child’s pain either. He’s not a cruel or heartless person; he won’t be able to hold on to his hate in the face of someone who feels genuine remorse, but without it, what will he be left with? No justice, no revenge, no way forward. So, all I can do to allow that child to hate me with all his heart is continue to deny it.”
They all stared at him, at his tall back, at the serenity of his calm expression.

Hattori’s clenched fists shook. “That’s…” His voice trailed off, unable to find more words.

Yuusaku’s eyes slid downwards, his smile sad but certain. “What would have happened, if it went to trial? What jury would have sided with Kaitou KID against the Night Baron? None. All it would have done is bring more grief to his family, and killed Kuroba Toichi all over again in the eyes of those that remember him with wonder.” With one final glance, he turned away from the painting, from the close friends shown there, surrounded by beautiful roses. He faced all of them head-on. “This is all I can do for my friend now.”

With that, he started to take his leave, striding into the depths of the manor. Only once did he pause, with a few final words spoken gently over his shoulder.

“You all should really head home.”

They all stared after him, the mood of the room somehow even worse than before.

One by one, they turned to leave. No one rushed. If anything, they all seemed reluctant. But at the same time, it was impossible to remain for much longer. It was all just too much.

As they escaped onto the porch, Ran spoke.

“Hakuba-kun,” she said, her voice low, “what about the rest? Was that all true too? Has Shinichi’s dad been manipulating his memories?”

Saguru’s stomach twisted. He didn’t like the steely look forged in Ran’s lowered eyes.

“What did he mean ‘bout bein’ a meta?” Kazuha asked, missing the tension Saguru felt building steadily in the air. Her voice took a conspiratorial edge, something of an accusation lingering in her tone.

“Kudo-kun has powers?”

_That he didn’t tell anyone about_ was left unsaid, but they all heard it all the same.

“That doesn’t matter right now!” Ran snapped, and alongside her, Saguru flinched. It was not often he saw Ran angry, not with anyone except for her father and Shinichi himself, but had heard countless stories about her fierce temper. He could see it now, in her blazing eyes, as she rounded on him much like Hattori had before. “All those awful things Kudo-san said to Shinichi—” Her voice was rising, but it hitched there, anguish piercing through. Her eyes were too wet, he could see, brimming with tears. “How could he—”

“Ran—” He tried, but she cut him off, her foot coming down hard on the porch. It split underneath the blow, cracking like ice, but she didn’t even seem to notice.

“It’s not right! That wasn’t okay!”

In the face of her frustration, her indignation on Shinichi’s behalf, Saguru felt what words he had offer dry up on his tongue. He couldn’t make any excuses.

Because he felt the same way, didn’t he? Watching Shinichi’s face fall, seeing the resolution in his eyes gradually worn down, bit by bit before it was extinguished completely, faced with the desolation left behind, hollowed like an empty husk—he couldn’t bear the sight either, could he?
Hattori was burning again, burning footprints into the porch right alongside Ran’s crack, and Saguru didn’t know what to do.

Someone else spoke, for the first time in a long while. Aoko stood apart from them, her brow furrowed and her expression stubborn. She glowered at Ran and Hattori both. “Kudo-kun betrayed us. For KID.” Saguru looked between them, a sinking feeling in his gut, as Aoko continued. “He helped a criminal!”

“For good reasons!” Hattori snarled back, the air around him seeming to quiver with his heat.

“Look at Ran’s hair! He did that!” Aoko pointed at the scorched bob that remained of Ran’s once sleek hair. Ran’s hand raised to brush at the singed edges of it, but her face didn’t waver. Seeing that, Aoko looked her right in the eyes. “He unmasked you!”

Ran clenched her fist, her foot grinding into the porch again. It continued to splinter. “I lied to him first!”

“And Kudo-san started all this bullshit!” Hattori was quick to join her again, as the lines between them were clearly drawn. Despite the season, the cool April night burned with the thick heat of August’s sweltering afternoons.

“Heiji!” Kazuha yelled, her voice hitching dangerously upwards in both volume and pitch. “You —”

“Enough!” Saguru snapped, his voice cutting through the tension. Instinctually, all four of them turned to him, tuned to their leader despite everything.

Saguru took a breath before speaking. They had to get out of here before things escalated any further. Tempers were running too high to be safe. “This isn’t the time or the place to argue like this.” Every other mouth opened to protest, but he raised a hand to silence them. “We will talk about this. All of it. But not now.” Not here. “For now, let’s all go home.”

As he herded them all away, studiously ignoring their anger, he couldn’t help but glance back. The moment they were each on their way, splitting into the separate directions of their homes, he turned right back around and made his way back to the manor.

Too soon, he stood before Kudo Yuusaku again, his own fists clenched so hard they shook.

“Sir.” His throat was so tight he barely managed to force the word out.

“It was necessary.” The reply was cold. Yuusaku wasn’t facing him, instead gazing out the window, but Saguru could see his reflection clearly.

Saguru swallowed around the lump in his throat, and struggled not to cry.

Yuusaku gave him a stern look over his shoulder. “Get ahold of yourself. You’re getting caught up in Shinichi’s dramatics.”

“They’re not dramatics!” The words erupted from his mouth before he even registered he thought them. It felt like his eyes, his blood, and his heart were on fire, scorching hot inside him. Now that he was back before Kudo Yuusaku again, it was just as hard to think of the words to say, to express the horror and guilt and injustice he felt. But still, they came tumbling out, less dignified than almost anything he’d ever said before. “Sir, you can’t just— you can’t just —”

“I will say it again.” Cold eyes, so much like Shinichi’s, cut right through him. “You’re getting
caught up.”

Saguru forced himself to take a deep breath, in and out, even though it seemed to be almost impossible to control the rise and fall of his chest. He closed his eyes and tried to in vain to keep back the tears that leaked out.

For so many years, he had tried to emulate his mentor's affable air and unflappable composure, but in that moment, there seemed to be nothing he hated more.

But he had learnt it all the same, and like putting together the pieces of a shattered vase, he reconstructed himself with it. His voice steadied, and his heart hardened. ‘Isn’t this all for the sake of sparing Shinichi-kun’s feelings?’ Kudo Yuusaku was not a man that enjoyed hurting his son, that wanted to break people down and crushing their hopes. No, he was the opposite, but in that moment, it seemed impossible to believe. ‘To protect him? What’s the point if we just end up hurting him like this? You didn’t have to say those things—’

“Then what was I supposed to say?” Yuusaku interrupted him, not a single note of uncertainty in his voice. “What else could I say to put him back in line? How many lives did he put at risk today?”

Many. Too many. But they were the ones that pushed him to that edge. But Yuusaku could read his thoughts, and shook his head. ‘He is putting himself and everyone else in danger. Even Ran-kun.’ That was the clearest sign that something was very wrong. Shinichi cared more for Ran than almost anything else in the world, but there was no denying he’d just sided with someone else against her. It was not a good sign.

Saguru didn’t want, for once, to understand where his mentor was coming from. But he did, all the same.

Yuusaku stood up, with a face as cold and hard as a tombstone. “If I didn’t put an end to it here and now, he will do it again, and someone will end up dead.”

There really wasn’t a right answer, Saguru thought helplessly. They’d been doomed all along.

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The morning of Nationals, Shinichi unpacked all his new equipment from his bag and laid it out on his bed, piece by piece. He replaced it with his soccer gear, for the first time in weeks.

He considered doing the opposite, for a moment. He considered settling down at his desk and writing up an article explaining everything to anyone who would listen. He considered unmasking the Night Baron and all his little followers to the whole world.

But he didn’t.

All their lives would be in danger, or at least completely overturned. While some ISHA operatives were public figures and were open with their identities, it was neither safe nor easy to live like that. The danger to the operative and the people around them was constant, and they had next to no privacy, constantly hounded everywhere they went.
Shinichi, as the son of the Night Baron, would not be an exception to that. He was already somewhat notorious, but this would be another level of infamy entirely.

And that was only if ISHA didn’t just decide to take him under “protective custody” and he never had a day of freedom again. He’d have to say goodbye to the manor, to his career, to his school, and whatever else he had.

With all that laid out before him, he could understand a little better why the others were so secretive. They were just teenagers, but if their identities as the Irregulars were to be revealed, they could never have normal lives again.

While all meta-humans were expected to register their abilities with their government under each country’s respective Meta Regulatory Registration Act, the process had grown increasingly lax over the years. Countless meta-humans tried their hands at going unregistered, including Shinichi himself, out of distrust of government surveillance and the breach of their privacy. There was constant fear that someday, somehow, the Registry would become a tool of discrimination and prejudice, not simply a way of monitoring individuals with potentially dangerous capabilities.

For the most part, that fear continued to be unfounded. Each national Registry had become something of a fingerprint database; supposedly, investigators into metahuman crime could look up individuals with similar abilities to suss out suspects, but that was no different than running prints or DNA anyway. Obviously, paranoia dictated the government could be using the information for all sorts of nefarious purposes, but there was no evidence of that.

And Shinichi would know. He had checked.

He himself had never felt like it was necessary to register. His abilities seemed to have no bearing on anyone but himself, so it seemed more like a personal problem than anything that could be potentially used to harm others. Moreover, registering would achieve nothing, because it would still be up to him and him alone to respect others privacy and boundaries and monitor his own mental health.

To put it simply, he wasn’t the type of metahuman that posed a threat to public order, so registering never struck him as particularly urgent. The government offered training programs and support groups, but while those looked good on paper, they were truly just ways of funneling metahumans into ISHA and its sister organizations. Even if some help controlling his abilities would have been highly appreciated when he was younger, he wasn’t willing to trade his independence for it.

With his actions last night, he may have done so anyway. Would he be forced to register now, or would his father merely keep that much of a closer eye on him? What sort of punishment, if any at all, was waiting for him?

He didn’t want to think about it, and forced his thoughts in another direction. Any direction. What came to mind, looking at the white and blue stripes of his uniform, was the thief that had facilitated this mess in the first place, with a specific goal in mind that Shinichi still didn’t quite grasp.

He had completed his part of the task, and his father hadn’t even seemed to notice. Despite his evidently immense psychic abilities, it really did seem that his father couldn’t detect his every thought. If he didn’t consciously think about something, it could slip by. Maybe because Shinichi had spent so long trying to isolate his mind, maybe because of his father’s own limitations. Either way, just like he’d been asked to, Shinichi had dropped off the package in his father’s study, though he had little idea of what the robotic spider was meant to do next. Crawl onto his father and track him, maybe. Or sneak into whatever secret base they’d apparently set up somewhere.
None of that answered the why.

The Irregulars must’ve been surrounded by cutting-edge technology, all but drowning in it. KID should have already had access to any of the information he could possibly want from them. But he apparently didn’t. There was no reason to risk having Shinichi knowingly carry a bug into the den of a mind reader otherwise. Despite his initial deduction, was it possible that KID’s control over electronics wasn’t as absolute, after all?

Just like KID had spoken of the limitations of the Night Baron’s abilities, the thief himself had to have weaknesses of his own. Shinichi didn’t often ponder the exact capabilities of those with metahuman abilities, probably because he never spent much time deliberating over what he himself was and wasn’t capable of. KID evidently had, and didn’t that suggest his own powers had some glaring drawbacks?

But what, exactly? Proximity, like the Baron? Physical connection, like Shinichi?

KID had mentioned only needing one touch to defeat the Baron, which would be in line with needing direct contact, but if his powers were over technology, what would touching a human being do?

Unless his father was an android of some sort, which… wasn’t impossible. Shinichi couldn’t say confidently that the man wasn’t, mostly because he wasn’t sure about anything about anyone anymore. He’d missed so much for so many years, who was he to think there’s no way?

Why was he even bothering to try figuring it out? It had already been proven without a shadow of a doubt that he was too dim to see through anyone’s tricks.

He clenched his eyes shut and, for a moment, tried to not think at all. Tried to just let the early morning light wash over him.

Then he headed out.

At the tournament grounds, he obediently put on his soccer uniform and tied his cleats. His coach accepted him back a little too easily, nothing but a pragmatic gleam in his eyes that Shinichi was all too familiar with. As always, the man was focused on the matches ahead of them and little else.

His teammates gave him odd looks, but none of them complained or seemed to begrudge him.

Either way, it mattered little to him. For the others, this was the day they’d been anticipating all year, and the seniors had been preparing for this moment since they stepped onto the field in their first year. He could feel their excitement: it completely soaked the team equipment, the bus they arrived in, the very air they breathed.

It was water to his oil, utterly incompatible.

He felt adrift in their anxiety, their excitement, their hopes and their worries, carried downstream like driftwood as they headed off to their first match. Somewhere in his own gut, a similar anxiety burned, gradually working its way into his blood.

Shinichi was a little surprised to find himself restored to the starting lineup and hustled onto the field, but before he knew it, the game was underway. The rhythm came back to him swiftly, the easy patterns of passing and chasing clearing his head of all his worthlessly complicated thoughts.

At one point, he found himself charging an opposing defender with the ball, putting his weight behind the solid tackle as he forced the other player away. The rest of the defenders were already
in position, however.

Cornered, he had no choice but to back-pass to a teammate on defense behind him, and only then took a moment to stare at the opponent he’d stolen the ball from. The player had skidded across the grass, all the way to the boundary line. Odd, he hadn’t tackled the player that hard, maybe enough to stumble, but surely not enough to fly that far.

Glancing again, his eyes fell on the defender with the ball, setting up to kick it all the way down the field. Shinichi moved instinctually into position on the right flank, ready to retrieve, but the thought lingered in his mind.

The defender kicked the ball high into the air. He was skilled, and his aim was typically good, but unexpectedly the ball just kept on soaring, all the way over their heads and off the field.

They all stared after it, wide-eyed, before turning back to the defender, who seemed similarly baffled.

As the referee blew the whistle for out-of-bounds and the opposing goalie went to retrieve the ball, Shinichi couldn’t help but wonder.

He kicked one leg back and forth, as hard as he could. It wasn’t anything extreme, just a little unusual, but…

Wasn’t everything a bit too light?

It started with, of all things, a baby floating away.

Ran only witnessed it by chance, passing over a park on her way back from a landslide in Nagano. A whole baby carriage lifted off the ground, followed closely by the picnic table and the baffled mother sitting by it, drifting off into the open air.

Ran’s first thought was telekinesis, and she searched the area for the culprit as she swept in. But as her hand closed around the handle of the carriage, she found there seemed to be no force pulling it up at all. In fact, nothing resisted her as she pushed it back towards the ground.

Unfortunately, that meant nothing was resisting the baby, either. With a burbling giggle it remained suspended in the air, even as the carriage drifted back down.

“Hiroshi!”

The mother made an anxious grab for her son, only to float completely apart from her seat.

Ran stared at the odd scene for a moment, and then, for a split-second, stopped flying.

Logically, she should have plummeted to the ground, but there was no familiar pull of gravity. She floated just like everything else. Taking back control, she made sure to snag the baby before it could get too far away and placed it back in its mother’s arms.

“What’s going on?” The woman shrieked in her ear, with gratitude. Probably. Alright, mostly panic.

“Ah, please give me a moment…” She pulled up her interface and began searching the registry database for individuals with gravity-related abilities, but the list that came up was long and mostly unhelpful: some civilians, some heroes, and some villains, none of which would have any reason to
target a tiny clearing in one of Beika’s quietest parks.

And then the woman lurched downwards. Ran barely managed to snag her by the collar before she hit the ground alongside the carriage and table, as gravity unceremoniously kicked back in.

“How, but for now, going home might be a good idea…”

“You think?”

But it didn’t stop at babies and carriages, both relatively harmless objects. As she soared over the city, she noticed all sorts of odd, suddenly weightless objects: cars, packages, trash bins, construction equipment, and more and more people. All of them would shortly come crashing back down again, and soon enough she was flying in every direction, trying to keep things from getting high enough up in the air to be dangerous when the local gravity kicked back in.

Hakuba seemed surprised to hear from her so early, his voice thick and tired over the communicator.

“You’re saying stuff is just… flying away?” He cleared his throat, and she couldn’t help but smile as she imagined him trying to pull together his dignity first thing in the morning. “And there’s no sign of a culprit?”

“Mm.” Ran hummed as she settled a little old woman back in an area with seemingly normal physics, and saw her safely into her apartment building, where at least any further incidents of weightlessness would be less dangerous.

It wasn’t really what the Irregulars would call a disaster or a crisis. If anything, it was easy compared to some of the messes they dealt with, and almost a little fun. It wasn’t often she got the chance to slip through so many different nooks and crannies of Tokyo, and helping so many different people in quick succession was rewarding in its own way. There was less screaming than usual, mostly just lots of confused exclamations and people flipping over themselves in the air, and as she fell into the rhythm, she found herself genuinely feeling better. Helping people had a way of clearing her head and easing her heart.

But it was still strange, and seemed to be increasingly far-spread. That in and of itself was worrying: the first few incidents had been constrained to a couple blocks, but Ran was starting to drift further and further from where she’d started as she moved from one site to the next.

Was the culprit on the move? Or was the cause spreading?

Either way, despite the lack of extreme urgency, she still needed help.

“I’ll get the others.” Hakuba sounded like he hadn’t slept at all, the usual grace with which he spoke diminished as his words slurred.

Ran bit her lip and focused on retrieving a dog that was taking off. Seeing the others wasn’t something she especially looked forward to, not with so much left unresolved. But personal disputes has no place interfering with their work.

It wasn’t long before Hattori and Kazuha started buzzing around as well, though Kazuha’s powers were exceptionally ill-suited to the situation. Hattori could fly, but she bounced, which turned out be a very bad idea in zero gravity.

All she’d been doing was bouncing upwards to grab a mailbox, and then they were all watching with wide eyes as she just kept going up, up. She shot into the air with all the speed of a
hundred-yen superball, with far more height and no signs of stopping.

And then Kazuha started to scream, a long sharp wail that echoed all the way back down.

Feeling more bemused than panicked, Ran shot after her wayward teammate, catching up with ease despite Kazuha’s impressive velocity. Snagging her friend by the hand, she slowed them to a stop three stories above the asphalt.

“Maybe you should sit this one out, actually?” Ran asked, struggling to hide her teasing smile. Kazuha, panting with her hood knocked askew, pouted back at her through disheveled hair.

“I swear I didn’t mean ta do that.”

Back on the ground, Hakuba and Aoko had arrived in one of the smaller jets. Armed with that, and a few dozen grappling hooks, the two of them were lassoing rogue items left and right. Ran brought Kazuha down to the jet and settled her safely in back. Hakuba gave them an amused look and handed over some of his own grappling hooks, which Kazuha accepted with a sigh.

It was a relief to see tensions had eased since the night before, even if Ran herself still felt distinctly out of sorts. Her stomach twisted when she thought about it, and any further thoughts only stoked her anger, but there were other things to focus on. Truth be told, the distraction was somewhat welcome.

It continued on like that for the rest of the day and into the night, with no signs of stopping; as minutes turned to hours and the sun sunk below the horizon, Ran was feeling less and less optimistic about the matter, her previous good mood giving way. They were all tired, but whatever was happening throughout the city, it wasn’t taking any breaks.

As things went on, the news media caught on, and took up the job of warning civilians to stay indoors and anchor themselves to the floor or walls if necessary, with things like rope or cables; and if that wasn’t possible, to try remaining above cushioned surfaces. It wasn’t like things were literally getting up and flying away, just experiencing brief—sometimes too brief—disputes with the harsh mistress known as gravity.

And they were no closer to figuring out why.

Hakuba had contacted the Baron at some point, and gotten a response that seemed more bemused than anything else. Even he struggled to pinpoint a cause, but the situation didn’t warrant calling in any more Overseers yet. With most of the city retreating back inside for the night, it was mostly a matter of keeping anything large from crashing back down on anything important.

It was a long, miserable night.

Shinichi heard about the strange occurrences all around the city, of course, but the coach had assured them the upcoming games were still on. Nothing had happened anywhere near the fields after all, and with no signs that anything would, no one was particularly eager to delay the finals.

What he planned on doing if someone started flying off during the most important match of the year was anyone’s guess.

And they had, indeed, made it to the final four. When he went home, the manor was gratefully empty, and he found himself eating dinner alone in his room, like usual. Thinking only vaguely of
the strange incidents, he wandered over to the window and stared out over the neighborhood, wondering. Next door, the Professor’s lights were still on.

It had been awhile since he had time to visit Professor Agasa, hadn’t it? A long while.

Actually… when, exactly, was the last time he had spoken with Agasa? He’d been so busy chasing leads both within the country and outside of it for so long, he couldn’t remember. It must have been months, maybe even a whole year, since they last spoke properly.

Then again, when did he speak properly with anyone, anymore? What had he been doing, all this time, chasing sirens? What was the point of any of it?

Frowning, Shinichi lingered by the window for a long moment. And then he found himself at his own front door, toeing on his shoes.

Agasa wouldn’t mind if he dropped in unannounced. He never did.

And as expected, the door was unlocked.

“Professor?” He called as he entered, once more abandoning his shoes, “You here?”

“Shin—Shinichi?” A voice called back to him, a little shocked but mostly panicked, from somewhere in the labs below, echoing all the way up the stairs.

Then came a painful-sounding crash, followed by a yelp.

He rushed downstairs, half sliding on the railing like he had since he was five. At the bottom he found a familiar man collapsed on the floor, smoke curling off a dingy lab coat that, once upon a time, might have been white. A workbench had been turned over, and tools were scattered in every direction.

Shinichi wasn’t exactly surprised, mostly just curious. “Is that a jetpack?” On Agasa’s back was a strange metallic box, bulky and newly blackened with scorch marks. Shinichi helped him back on his feet with a inquisitive glance. “For the gravity thing?”

Agasa made a sound of agreement, but he looked at the invention still attached to him with something akin to complete despair. He chuckled sheepishly and scratched his nose like he always did when Shinichi caught him with a faulty prototype. “It still needs adjustment.”

Obviously, Shinichi thought, and normally the attention he paid to the matter would stop there. But recent events had left him just a little more sentimental for something so nostalgic, so untarnished. He couldn’t help but sigh a little fondly.

For as long as he could remember, Shinichi had seen this pattern over and over again. When Professor Agasa saw a problem, whether it be a gap in the available technology or a flaw in what did exist, he tried to fix it. It didn’t matter that he was only successful a fraction of the time, that so many of his attempts were disasters within their own rights. What mattered was that despite it all, he tried again.

Trial and error was essential in science, but Shinichi didn’t think that could make failure any less bitter to swallow over and over again, and then still give the next attempt everything one had… that took a certain something. Something really admirable.

It was the first time Shinichi had ever thought so, but suddenly he felt so stupid for missing it before.
He’d missed a lot of things before, hadn’t he.

“It’s good to see you, Shinichi-kun.” Agasa said earnestly as he set the prototype back on his righted workbench. “You had a tournament today, didn’t you? How’d it go?”

The nod to the question was instinctual, but then Shinichi paused. He hadn’t mentioned soccer, even once, to Agasa in a very long time.

“We won.” He said simply, his eyes wandering to find a calendar on the far wall. Agasa wasn’t a careful man, and he lost track of things easily, but both days of the Nationals had been circled neatly in faded marker.

Somehow, Shinichi felt warm all of a sudden. He hadn’t even realized he’d felt cold before.

“That’s good. I wanted to come, but my car floated away. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get a taxi if things continue like this tomorrow—”

He thought of Agasa’s old yellow VW drifting off, feeling both exasperation and amusement in equal measure. The twitch he felt at the corner of his mouth was all too familiar.

Agasa wanted to come watch.

Shinichi should probably have invited the man himself, but he hadn’t exactly planned on playing. But Agasa had evidently planned on coming ages ago, probably all the way back to the start of the season, when the date of the Nationals had been set.

Even though they never spoke anymore, even though Shinichi rarely even thought of the old man anymore, even though he’d couldn’t give a damn about the stupid Nationals period —

“You don’t need to come tomorrow. Ran and the others said they’ll come, so you don’t need to worry.”

Agasa looked like he wanted to protest. He gave Shinichi that worried look he always did when he felt like Shinichi was doing something reckless, only this time it was tempered by bemusement. What could possibly be reckless about this, after all?

Even so, something about the exchange hadn’t sat right with Agasa, so Shinichi smiled jokingly to ease the inventor’s nerves. “We’re gonna win. There, I saved you two hours and the taxi fare.”

Agasa pursed his lips and snorted. “Well, aren’t you confident.”

“I’ll drop by after we’re done celebrating.” Shinichi promised, and then he hesitated a little. His thoughts were like flies, buzzing noisily around his head, and he felt in he opened his mouth too much, everything complicated would come pouring right out. “So… can we talk, then?”

Agasa gave him a look, unmistakably sad. “Shinichi,” he said, very seriously, “You know you can come talk to me anytime, right?”

Shinichi was already turning towards the door. “Yeah, I do.” But at some point, he had stopped thinking he needed to. Or that he should. “Thanks, Professor.”

He really was stupid.
The next day arrived with little change. Shinichi glanced at reports of the Irregulars working through the night and into the dawn without knowing how to feel, and set out for the finals. Despite the endless news reports of something somewhere drifting off, he saw little of the episodes himself. Arriving back at the event grounds with no trouble, the strange moments he observed the day before persisted in his mind.

But really, it wasn’t any of his business.

As the finals started, he glanced only once at the stands, searching. No familiar faces peered back at him.

Naturally, he expected that. They had to be terribly busy chasing trucks and cats. It didn’t bother him.

Or at least, that was what he told himself, over and over again as the game progressed with no one showing up. Everything passed in a haze of disappointment, and then disappointment in himself for even feeling that way.

All he could do now was play. Playing harder and harder to distract himself from it; before he knew it, they were in the last minute of the final match, and he was making one last shot on the goal.

The white blur spun through the air in a perfect arch over the grass. The opposing goalie dived for it, but his outstretched hands were just two inches off, and Shinichi knew it would be too late even before the crowd exploded. The ball slammed into the net as the referee’s whistle blew, marking not only the final goal, but the end of the match. Cheers erupted from the stands and a smile stretched across his face even as he panted, his muscles burning. His teammates surrounded him in a bouncing, excited crowd of flushed faces and exuberant hands jostling him left and right with pats on the back, high-fives, and arms slung around his shoulders.

Their exuberance flooded into him until the delight of the victory overwhelmed him, and he laughed and cheered along as they herded him back towards the coach, a burning rush of adrenaline in his veins.

Everywhere he looked someone congratulated him, their faces marked with big, heady smiles, filled to the brim with pride that overflowed, pouring out onto the grass and wafting in the air.

Then it was over.

As soon as everyone settled back down, Shinichi was left bereft of their joy, and lack of his own was only all the more evident. Desolation settled back into his bones. Their coach made his speech short and sweet; the trophy was handed out, the crowd was still screaming and yelling and clapping, and the team dispersed to rejoin their spectators, family and friends.

His grin slid off his face, bit by excruciating bit, each little dip brittle as a sheet of cracked glass. He scanned the crowd again and again, sure that even his observation skills had been fooled, that an expected face would appear between the strangers, laughing and looking right back at him.

He searched and searched, and his eyes began to burn. The disappointment clawed at the lingering remains of the pride and victory that had made his heart swell, until nothing but shredded ribbons remained.

They promised. She promised.

They lied again.
None of them were waiting for him. They weren’t just late; they didn’t come at all.

He stayed there as the bleachers emptied, not sure why. His bag seemed too heavy to carry all the way home.

Teammate after teammate congratulated him one last time before hurrying off, their laughter and their jubilation still trailing in their wake, brushing his solitude off as just another Kudo thing.

He settled down in the stands and waited. He could still catch up to the guys that were going out for okonomiyaki to celebrate, or catch the bus home with the others that hadn’t had anyone to pick them up. If nothing else, he desperately needed a shower.

But his limbs felt like lead weights, and his house would probably be empty anyways, because he was the only one still waiting. Waiting for his parents to come home, for Hattori to open up to him, for Hakuba to try, for Ran to prove that twelve years of friendship couldn’t be erased by something as dumb as growing up.

But all he’d really been doing was covering his eyes and ears and ignoring everything he didn’t want to face.

But then, wouldn’t it be worse if the manor wasn’t empty? If he actually found his father or any of the others waiting in the foyer?

Was it really so bad that nobody was waiting and nobody was coming?

Despite it all, he felt a spike of satisfaction in his gut.

He’d made the right choice, to invite them with the promise of giving up the case. That they’d fail to show was always all but guaranteed, and the contrapositive was just as valid: if they didn’t show up, he wouldn’t drop the case.

He’d even told the professor to stay home, to make sure they wouldn’t be able to argue that they sent him in their stead. The convenient little loophole he’d built, to take the utmost advantage of his supposed surrender.

What was he supposed to do with it now?

His head was such a mess. He wasn’t thinking clearly, hadn’t been for days.

Standing alone in a now-empty field, Shinichi forced himself to stop agonizing and hurting and running away from both those things and think.

Satoshi had been kidnapped from a warehouse. The culprits: a gang led by a metahuman named Tequila, trying to meet some nebulous quota. A week later, a molten giant had stumbled back to that place and been utterly distraught upon finding it.

How else was he supposed to feel, finding himself too big to fit into his only sanctuary, to find the place he called home crumbling underneath his hands?

That had been no monster; that was Satoshi, turned into a force of nature by someone or something involved with TQ Electronics. He’d thought at first it was some kind of play on the English word “tech”, but couldn’t it also be an abbreviation of Tequila? If that was true, then they’d been kidnapping children and teenagers to use as test subjects for some process that induced massively powerful but uncontrollable metahuman abilities. Likely, a sort of drug, quite possibly developed by Miyano Shiho, who at some point had fallen in with them and disappeared from the scientific.
And the strange fluctuations in gravity were probably related, a warning sign of impending disaster. Another test subject was undergoing what Satoshi went through, and losing control of an already-deadly power that was growing exponentially more powerful. Somewhere in the city, likely in the warehouse district, possibly another building with ties to TQ Electronics—

But, what could he do about it?

A plucky reporter couldn’t prevent something like that, couldn’t even help with the fallout. And there would be fallout. And evidently, it was well on its way to reaching that point.

And there was another use for such research, beyond what the masked men seemed to be using it for. If there was hope for artificially inducing meta-abilities in people through the use of drugs, the opposite should also be possible.

What if that was the reason the Cats had taken all that research and equipment? To gather all the intel and resources necessary to nullify meta-abilities?

And didn’t that also explain how Kaitou KID fitted into the matter? What high-profile criminal—particularly one with a grudge and a blood debt—wouldn’t see the potential in being able to handicap the Overseers? The most powerful of meta-humans could be countered with such technology, even by someone with no powers to speak of.

Kaitou KID wasn’t aiding the Cats, he was investing in them. That was why he’d taken Miyano’s research for himself as well—with both his technopathy and deep knowledge of the fundamentals of meta-human physiology, he’d be able to take full advantage of whatever the Cats managed to produce.

But what would their next move be? Worst-case scenario, they were done preparing and their nullifier was finished, but what form would it take? An injection? A signal? An airborne gas?

No matter how they planned to do it, he had to tell someone, right?

He called Ran first. At the answering machine, he cut the call with a frustrated press and speed-dialed Hakuba. When that was a dead-end, he tried Hattori.

Nothing.

For a moment, he paused, considering. His father’s phone number was right there on the screen, buried at the bottom of his contacts.

He could send text messages instead, to warn them. Even if all of them had their hands full, they’d have to check their phones sooner or later. But even then, his fingers hesitated over the keys.

What was he so worried about, exactly? That they hadn’t put all the pieces together and figured out what the Cats were up to? Unbidden, unwanted, his father’s words rushed back to him.

_Do you really think you’ll uncover something I can’t?_

They must have already known.

Shinichi slumped down amongst the bleachers and stared at the azure sky spread out before him.

Thinking so hard about a mystery someone else must have already solved—really, just who did he
“Catch it, *catch it!*” Aoko yelped, pointing wildly toward a kitten ascending into the sky, its paws waving uselessly in the open air. Her own hands were full keeping a pair of weightless cars anchored without dragging them right down on top of herself.

Ran caught the kitten, feeling ridiculous. She didn’t know how Aoko still had so much energy, not when her own limbs felt like dead weights and her eyes could barely stay open. And she was *solar powered*. Aoko was running on nothing but sugar and mettle at this point.

She placed the kitten in a tree, where it clung desperately to a branch and, thankfully, didn’t drift off again. A topsy-turvy little rescue, just like everything else in the city. If she hadn’t been so exhausted, she might’ve laughed.

Instead, she went over to help Aoko corral the cars.

And then, everything changed.

There was a deafening sound, something between a sheet being ripped and a plastic bag being popped, only a hundred thousand times louder.

In the same instant, a black dot emerged in the sky, and suddenly *everything* was rushing past her: air, leaves, cars, concrete, Aoko. An immense, indomitable force like nothing she’d ever felt before seemed to seize her and drag her through the sky, the wind roaring in her ears like—like—

Like a vacuum!

Eyes blown wide open in her face, Ran had a terrifying thought. She forced herself to fly against what felt like impossibly strong gusts, struggling through the chaos of debris and wind towards Aoko. She caught her friend around the waist, but Aoko was limp in her grip as she forced herself against the brutal suction trying to drag her in towards the black dot. Everything else was flying right into it, regardless of size or anchorage, and it took all her remaining strength just to keep in place, to not give an centimeter to the pressure. All sorts of debris flew at them, but there was little Ran could do besides shield Aoko with her invulnerable body and take the brunt of each impact.

She had to focus entirely on not losing any more ground.

But then, over the howling in her ears, over the scrape of her teeth grinding against one another, she heard something new. Something like a strange, electronic buzz in the distance…

All at once, the force vanished, and she was falling. Instinctually, she looked back up and found the sky open and clear. The dot, whatever it was, had blinked out of existence as if it had never been there at all, and everything it dragged up came plummeting back down, including Ran.

Biting back a gasp and readjusting her grip on Aoko, Ran flew up.

Or at least, she tried to.

But nothing happened. She just kept falling.

A long-dead instinct clawed its way to the surface, and she opened her mouth to scream. The ground came up to meet them a heartbeat later, and Ran turned over, forcing herself to curl around
Aoko. She slammed into the concrete at a slanted angle, skidding across gravel, branches, and shattered glass.

And it hurt.

It hurt?

She forced herself to sit up despite the pain lancing through her, suddenly grateful they hadn’t been that high in the air. Her whole body ached, but Aoko seemed alright, just unconscious. Had the whiplash of the impromptu vortex been too much for her?

At the very least, her pulse was strong and steady underneath Ran’s fingers. But when Ran tried to stand up with Aoko still in her arms, she actually found herself struggling not to buckle under the weight. That made her blink in disbelief; someone of Aoko’s stature should have felt like a feather to her, but she was speechless to find her exhausted arms could barely lift the petite girl.

What happened to her powers? Fatigue? Had she exhausted herself so much, that even the blazing, undiluted sunlight pouring down wasn’t enough to keep her strength up?

That had never happened before.

Slinging Aoko’s arm around her shoulder and settling her own arm around the girl’s waist, Ran clambered to her feet and dragged Aoko up with her. The surrounding block, once a cushy business district, was completely wrecked: trees and streetlights had been completely uprooted and now laid strewn in every direction, every window had been shattered in their frames, and even parts of the street had been ripped up entirely, leaving ragged ditches of mud and dirt.

“Hawk,” she croaked into her communicator, “help.” The word came out slightly choked as she registered how much it hurt just to breathe, an ache developing under her breast. Her ribs, she realized.

It had been a long, long time since she’d had to worry about injuries. She couldn’t even remember the difference between the pain of a bruise and a broken bone, or how to tell how bad a hit she’d taken. But if she was still standing, that meant she had to be mostly fine, right?

She had to be fine, because Aoko was showing no signs of waking up. Carrying her, Ran limped out of the street and towards a less torn-up area, all while keeping a wary eye on the sky. If that vortex appeared again, neither of them would stand a chance.

Hakuba and the others came quickly, but not as quickly as they should have been able to. Just the sight of Hattori and Kazuha on foot was worrying enough, as Hakuba descended from above in the jet.

Immediately, all eyes were on Aoko, Kazuha rushing over to help carry her towards where Hakuba had the jet’s doors open and waiting. As Hattori helped Kazuha settle Aoko on one of the back seats, Hakuba caught Ran’s shoulder.

“What happened?”

Ran shook her head. “I don’t know.” She didn’t know where to even begin explaining either.

“We saw this thing in the sky…” Kazuha said from the side, trying to get the jet’s internal monitoring system to scan Aoko’s injuries.

Hattori nodded, coming to stand alongside Hakuba as the jet lurched back into the air. “We were
They all went quiet, exchanging glances. No one wanted to be the first to say it.

A sharp inhale was their only warning before Kazuha screamed at the top of her lungs. The sound was piercing, sending all their hands flying straight over their ears. But it definitely wasn’t supersonic. Nothing more than a normal scream from a normal teenage girl.

“Our powers are gone.” Hakuba whispered, shock clear on his face. Because of his power set, he was always the most vulnerable to Kazuha’s indiscriminate shrieks, and hearing one without losing an eardrum seemed to throw him off-kilter more than anything else.

“But why?” Hattori had his chin in hand, staring out across the city. “Think it’s a side-effect of the thing that tried to eat us?”

No one had an answer to that. Hakuba rummaged around the jet’s equipment cabinet, eventually emerging with several sets of high-end JSDF binoculars that the Irregulars had used maybe twice before in their short careers. “Let’s search the area for any clues.”

“Do ya even know how ta use these?” Hattori asked, one eyebrow raised as he took one sets out of Hakuba’s hands.

Ran was pretty sure Hakuba had never touched a pair of binoculars before in his life, but wisely kept her thoughts to herself.

“Honestly, Heliopause, it can’t be that hard to figure out.” He scoffed and brought them up to his face, peering through with utmost grace. “See—”

“Yer holdin’ ‘em backwards.”

He was. Ran bit her lip, stuck somewhere between laughter and complete, utter dismay.

“We’re in trouble, ain’t we?” Kazuha muttered in her ear.

They flew on in the jet, combing the area for anything suspicious, but it was a tedious process. It didn’t help how antsy she felt, in the jet’s cabin. She’d barely spent any time in here before, always skimming alongside or shooting ahead. Over and over again, she found herself at the doors, about to simply step out and explore the city herself, get a closer look or a better angle with her own eyes. Trapped together as they were, they could only search one area at a time, and even then, they had to maintain a safe altitude above the city. And even then, thanks to the recent gravity mishaps, their definition had to be narrowed down to exclude things like ‘cars on rooftops’ and ‘upside-down streetlights’.

But eventually, they found something that didn’t quite fit.

“Hey, guys,” Kazuha called, “does anybody recognize that tower thing?”

It wasn’t anything Ran had ever seen before. It looked a little like one of those cell phone towers that the city spent thousands every year disguising as trees, but far more lively. Cylinders that extended from its base spun in lively circles around the tower. At first glance, it could have been anything: a wind turbine or a signal tower. And yet, Ran was certain she’d seen nothing like it before.

Hakuba’s mouth quirked up into a smile. “Not bad, Banshee.”
They brought the jet in closer so it could scan the structure properly, but the readouts that the jet’s monitor spat back out meant nothing to Ran. Hakuba seemed to glance through them easily enough, his smile falling with each line of data. Finally, they all heard his comm channel open up.

“Sir, we’re sending you some scans of a suspicious construct downtown. It appears to be emitting something.”

There was silence in the wake of his call. They all shifted somewhat anxiously as the formerly amiable air filled with unfathomable tension.

Resisting the urge to wring her hands or something equally useless, Ran went to check up on Aoko. The other girl was still out, and with a sinking feeling in her gut, Ran knew that wasn’t a good sign.

The Baron’s voice came over her communicator, cold and crisp. “It’s not emitting a signal. It’s aerosolizing some kind of vapor.”

“A vapor?”

“It will take time to analyze its makeup and its effects. In the meantime, search the city for any others like it.”

Ran bit her lip as she heard the order, casting another worried glance at Aoko.

But they did as they were told, like they always did. The results were worrying: the strange devices littered the city, numbering more than a dozen at least. Hakuba was keeping careful track of their different locations on the jet’s built-in map, but even so, it was quickly becoming clear that this was a bigger problem than they initially assumed.

At some point, Hakuba and Hattori started whispering between themselves, their harsh tones betraying their deliberately low voices. Ran only caught a few words of the exchange, but what she did catch was far from comforting: bioterrorism.

And then they all heard it: a crack, a tear, a pop.

“Shit.” Someone whispered.

Ran stared at the sky, and the little black speck that had appeared in the distance.

“Hold on!” Hakuba screamed as the jet lurched in place, the cabin floor shuddering under their feet. The engines roared as they struggled against the sudden turbulence that was dragging the whole jet off course.

Ran clung to Aoko’s seat as she felt the rush of inertia, eyes still glued to the parts of the city that seemed to collapse into the hole. Everything was being sucked upwards into it, and though they were much further away than she’d been the first time, she could tell that this vacuum was much stronger than the last. Even from a dozen blocks away, they were being dragged in, the jet swept solidly up in winds that went far beyond any gale, any hurricane she’d ever encountered.

Everything spun as the jet rolled, screams cutting through the sheer cacophony outside—

And then it was over.

Just like before, the unstoppable, sourceless pull just up and vanished, leaving the jet rocking through the air. It took only seconds for the auto-pilot to regain control and right their flight path, but even so, Kazuha collapsed to the floor with a ragged sigh that was almost a shriek.
“That’s it!” Hattori snarled, dragging himself to the controls. “We’re blowin’ those things to hell!”

Still reeling, Hakuba struggled to grab him and drag him back.

“Calm down!”

“Like hell!”

“Don’t—”

“We got guns on this damn thing! How ‘bout we actually put ‘em—”

“And I’m telling you, we can’t risk it. We don’t have the slightest idea what that could do.”

“We don’t know what these things are pumpin’ inta the air either, but that doesn’t mean it can’t kill somebody! Who knows what the city’s breathin’ in while we’re hidin’ in here!”

Their voices echoed in the cabin, Hattori’s too loud and too angry for Ran to process in the wake of what just happened. Her whole body was shaking. The jet had dutifully carried them back to their previous position, where the tower was miraculously still standing. Still spinning, too, tirelessly filling the air with something they’d probably all be better off without.

Another voice interrupted the argument, echoing over five separate comms.

“We do know, actually.” The Night Baron said, his voice cheerful compared to their hoarse yelling. “What you five are looking at is what took away your abilities.” His words were like a bucket of cold water dumped over her head, but his tone was nothing of the sort. If anything, he sounded optimistic. “Those towers are dousing the entire city with anti-meta gas.”

“Seriously?” Kazuha wailed, scrambling over to the window and staring at the tower. “But then what’s makin’ those black holes?”

Ran was pretty sure if those two dots had been actual black holes, they would all be dead, but in concept, they seemed similar enough. They’d all been trying very hard to not say the possibility aloud, as if denial could protect them.

“Does it matter right now? We trash these things, we get our powers back!” Hattori shoved Hakuba off him, and Hakuba allowed it surprisingly easily. In fact, he actually nodded along, a contemplative look on his face.

“Heliopause is right.” Ran’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard those words, especially not out of Hakuba’s mouth. “One problem at a time.”

The two turned back to the jet’s control panel, this time in agreement. But before they could take another step forward, the Baron’s voice rippled through the cabin, suddenly viciously firm.

“Don’t destroy it!”

“Sir—” Hakuba was cut off immediately, the urgency in the Baron’s voice overwhelming his quiet protest.

“Whatever you do, don’t destroy any of them!” The Baron paused for a moment, long enough to lower his voice once more. Quietly, he said, “We need those devices, Hawk.”

Hakuba went very still, incredibly still, his face slack with what Ran could only call desperation. He looked like Odysseus lashed to the mast, his ears filled with the words he always wanted to
“We’ll retreat for now.” He ordered.

And so they did, changing course for the hidden entrance to the Headquarters. Ran, at least, was eager to get Aoko properly examined.

It occurred to her to check her phone. One missed call from Shinichi, but that wasn’t all that unusual—

Oh.

Was it that late in the afternoon already?

“Something wrong?” Kazuha asked, peering around at her from the seat in front.

Ran stared back blankly. “We forgot about the game.”

“The game?”

Hattori shot up, ramrod straight, in his own chair. “Nationals.” He hissed.

“Seriously? You’re worried about that?” Kazuha shook her head. “Kudo-kun will understand. We haven’t exactly had an easy day.”

“Maybe,” Ran muttered. They had an assortment of fantastic excuses to choose from, but that did nothing to ease the sudden guilt building in her gut. “But we promised.”

Shinichi had asked them to come, despite everything. That had meant a lot to her, then and there. That was what she’d thought, anyway.

Then she’d let him down. Again.

Kazuha sat back in her chair, ignoring Hattori, who looked like he wanted to tear his own hair out. “It’s not a big deal, Angel. He’s probably gone home already.”

Ran pursed her lips. Somehow, it didn’t feel like that would be the case.

“Take me to the field.” She said abruptly, and Hakuba glanced at her from the pilot’s seat. He stared at her, and as hard as she tried, she couldn’t read his expression.

But she refused to waver.

“Drop me off, take Aoko to HQ to get looked at, and then come pick me back up.”

Hakuba turned back to the front, refocusing on flying. “Are you sure? He might not even be there, you know.”

Ran said nothing.

He would be there. She knew.

When she arrived, the field was a desolate sight, empty of people and decorated with nothing but the remnants of whatever trash had managed to roll beneath the stands. She could almost hear the echo of cheers and shouts, could imagine herself in the bleachers, cold under her thighs as she curled a little up on herself. Shinichi would meet her eyes from all the way across the midfield line,
his face split in a confident grin.

Once upon a time, she wouldn’t have needed to imagine. There was a time when she would’ve gone to every one of his games, rain or shine. But it had been a long time since then.

Vaguely, distantly, some part of her wanted to scream.

“Ran.”

His voice called from behind her, steady and solid, and yet, for a moment, it echoed in her ears like an ephemeral dream.

She whirled around, and Shinichi was there: still in his soccer uniform, cleats and all, traces of dirt still smudged across his face. His usually tame hair was a tousled mess, but he looked as gorgeous as ever, with those shocking blue eyes, those unmistakable sharp features, that cold, smooth poise…

No one had ever said love was easy. It wasn’t for her parents. From what she’d seen, love was as rocky as a landslide and unpredictable as a typhoon. It blew hot, it blew cold, and some days it didn’t blow at all.

But no one said it would be this hard.

Shinichi looked at her—really, truly looked at her for what seemed to be the first time in months, maybe years. Her hair cropped short, her face burdened with misery, her eyes misted with guilt.

He loved her, with all his heart, would have done anything he could for her. It had been a long time since he’d been in any position to protect her, to be her shield, but there were times, over and over again, that he’d have done it without a second thought.

He still would, if he was capable of such a thing. If intentions mattered at all in this world, that would have been enough.

And knowing that should have made it simple and easy to forgive her this and move on with their lives. He’d been prepared to give her his life, so many times, so what was a couple lies? Some secrets?

Compared to the depth of their love, what were his petty feelings? It shouldn’t matter how miserable it felt to be left behind, how it hurt to learn how little he was trusted. She was more important than the ache in the back of his throat, the lead that seemed to pump in his veins.

I just want him to be safe, she said, desperate and struggling against the weight he had all but dropped on her himself.

Once upon a time, she trusted him. When they were younger, he was her knight and her hero. He could do anything he put his mind to.

What did she see when she looked at him now?

The same weak little fool his father saw.
Was Hakuba, of all people, her hero now? Or had she just outgrown such things, racing ahead of his childish dreams of happily ever after and fairy-tale weddings?

Her world was so much bigger than him, filled with people more capable, more powerful, and more important. People that were more deserving of her fierce loyalty and her passionate heart, that could help her scale cliffs and slay dragons he didn’t even know existed.

That was it, wasn’t it?

All the trust, the belief, the admiration, that has once been for him was for someone else, now. Compared to the brilliant, extraordinary people she surrounded herself with, what was he but a burden? She couldn’t rely on him for anything, couldn’t even trust him with his own agency. All he did was give her more to stress about.

Just when did Ran start thinking of him as someone she had to shelter?

That wasn’t what he wanted.

From the start, that wasn’t what he wanted at all.

“I’m sorry I missed the game.” She said first, her eyes earnestly guilty. “Things just got so hectic suddenly, and…”

He shook his head. “You don’t need to give me excuses anymore, Ran. I get it.”

She winced. “I’m sorry. I’ve been lying to you. For a long time now.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t know what else to say to that. It felt like anything more would get caught in his throat and choke him.

“And I know I should have told you.”

“Yeah.”

“But, it’s just…” Her voice faltered and faded into nothing. Just what, he wanted to ask, to force her to put it all in her own words and explain to him how she justified it to herself.

But he couldn’t. He didn’t want to hear it. His own conclusions would probably hurt less. So he filled in the blanks for her, making it easy. “That you thought I’d stick my nose into it?” A note of derision wormed its way into his voice. Not just for her, but for himself too. “Get in the way of you guys playing hero?”

“We aren’t playing!” She said hurriedly, and he knew that face, that desperately upset face he’d seen it so many times before. But it faded as soon as it emerged, replaced with something stronger and sturdier. Her voice, though it wavered, was certain. “I—I am going to be a hero, Shinichi. I like being a hero, and I’m good at it too. There are so many people in the world I can help. But… leaving you out was wrong.”

“Yeah.” Again, it was the only response he had. It came out weak and ragged, like his vocal cords had been wrung out within his throat. He didn’t need to be told that it was wrong, or that she was sorry. He really didn’t want to hear any of it.

“Shinichi,” she said, right there on the field, to his face, “I just wanted you to be safe.”

It burned. Even though he’d steeled himself for it, it burned like she had splashed his face with
boiling water.

Shoulders slumping down, Shinichi closed his eyes and admitted defeat.

“We should break up.”

The words were shockingly easy to say, without hesitation or fear. They hung between the two of them like a guillotine, so close to bringing everything to its inevitable end, only left suspended by a little red string that was never meant to last.

Amethyst eyes just stared at him, disbelieving. Ran’s face had gone slack and soft like dough. Though he waited, moments passing them by, it didn’t seem like she was going to say anything.

That was alright. That was better. He really just couldn’t take it; what would he even do if she protested, if she refused to let go? It was better that she didn’t even try.

“I never wanted to become a burden on you, Ran.” Admitting it just made him feel guilty, for weighing her down for so long. All he ever wanted was for her to be happy, and yet, somehow, it had become like this. “I never wanted to hold you back. You’re right. You can do amazing things, and you should. I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“Shinichi…” His name was a plea on her lips. There were tears in her eyes, and though seeing them hurt, maybe this would be the last time she cried because of him. He really hoped that could be true.

Feeling the heat of the sunset on his face and the light of it stinging his eyes, he did his best to smile. “So don’t worry about me anymore.”

A dark shadow blocked out the sun, a black stain of ink on a fiery canvas. A familiar jet descended from the sky.

“Your ride is here.”

Ran spun around and stared at it, something like devastation clear across her face. The jet’s doors peeled open for her, the Night Baron’s icon grinning its eerie welcome.

But she didn’t move, so he had to. Shinichi turned away and walked over to where he’d left his bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

It felt lighter.

“This is goodbye, Ran.”

And he walked away, without once looking back. Somehow, though his eyes burned and his hands were shaking on the straps, it had been easier than he imagined it would be.

It was a relief, truthfully, to not have to worry about that anymore.

He could focus on other things, like the two big problems that had been plaguing his life for weeks, and had been plaguing the city for even longer.

On one hand, kidnapped children turned experimental subjects undergoing meltdowns in the middle of the city. And on the other, a terrorist organization creating something that could negate meta-abilities.

Both were problems individually.
But couldn’t one solve the other?
Wreckage of Disregard

Chapter Notes

Whelp, I split the finale again... somethings are probably worthy of getting their own cliffhangers, right? Last chapter got a huge reception, which was incredibly exciting! This fic seems to be taking some of you on a bit of an emotional journey, which is both invigorating and terrifying to watch.

To celebrate reaching 1,000 kudos, I've posted the playlist I made for this fic down below~! Beware my terribly plain taste in music!

Everyone, give special thanks to the beta-reader, mirrorfalls aka RubberLotus for working so tirelessly on this and putting up with my stubborn ass

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d known from the start that there had to have been more to that night—from the moment his father’s blood-stained secrets unraveled before his eyes, he knew.

Every news station had reported the same thing: a heist gone wrong and turned deadly, claiming the lives of a beloved magician and three other civilians. Behind the tragic little tale, lingering eternally in his mind, there was an untold story of a devastated little boy that dragged his father’s stained mantle home to his mother. Of a child that changed the narrative.

*Kaitou KID did it*, they all reported.

But he knew better. Kuroba Toichi was a man that could perform miracles, but murdering himself wasn’t one of them.

Even so, murder mysteries weren’t particularly Kaito’s area of expertise. He could admit that, as he shoved pictures and security footage aside with his lip curled and eyes burning. Slamming his hands down on the table, he pushed away and marched back over to the portrait he had peered at, stared at, *glared* at more times than he could count. From an afterlife of pigments and canvas, his father smiled back at him, as mysterious and secretive as he ever was, that look in his eyes always promising a show but never giving up the act.

The part of Kuroba Toichi that patiently and proudly taught his son his every trick couldn’t possibly be captured in the strokes of a paintbrush. It died with him, and there was no one left in the world to hold Kaito’s hands steady and show him where the cards were hidden.

Even so, he wasn’t entirely alone. It had been a long time since he’d last seen the old man—not since a week or two before his father’s death—but Jii hadn’t changed much at all. At the sight of Kaito, he’d all but burst into tears, words jumbled between hitching breaths.

“Young master, you’ve come back.”

Truth be told, Kaito had little patience for tearful and heartfelt reunions, but he could certainly fake it until Jii had pulled himself together.
And then they got to business, secluded away in the depths of his father’s old workshop.

The storeroom door didn’t even creak as Jii nudged it open; his arms were filled with rolls of paper, as worn and tired along the edges as the wizened face that eyed them.

“Here they are, all the blueprints from that night.” The old man released them carefully on the table, taking time unwinding each and weighing down their corners; however frail his hands looked, they were still as steady and nimble as they’d been ten years before. Before Kaito’s eyes, an immense spread of detailed plans unfurled.

Kaito stepped over to look down upon them, eyes flitting over the white on blue, blue on white.

Alongside him, Jii fussed. “But, Young Master, I’ve gone over them thousands of times, run the calculations and simulations over and over again.” Kaito had no doubts about that—it was written in the lines etched in Jii’s face, whispered in the groans of unoiled joints. “And I’ve never found where things went wrong.”

Of course not, Kaito thought, already immersed in the meticulous schematics laid before him. For all his whimsy, his father had never been a careless man. A miscalculation, an accident—such nonsense was utterly inconceivable. Just as the weathered blueprints left no room for error, his father had simply been too good to fail.

There were no errors to be found. It was perfect. Everything should have gone exactly as intended. The only way things could have gone as they truly had was if his father wanted them to.

But...

Kuroba Toichi would never purposely endanger so many lives, would he?

Even if Kaitou KID’s tricks didn’t simply just go wrong, there had to be a variable that went unaccounted for: a third party of some sort. It must have been sabotage that started the tragedy of that day. Even if it was his father’s tools that performed exactly as intended and still ended up rusted with blood, his father couldn’t possibly have been the one to do it.

His father, first and foremost, had been a gentle soul. Mischief and daring ran in his veins, but killing? Never.

Someone, somehow, had tampered with the plans, the equipment, maybe both. A lack of evidence couldn’t compete with the certainty cemented within Kaito’s heart: his father was a good man, who believed in life and wonder, who wanted nothing more than to see every smile in the world.

But the Night Baron should have known that, should have trusted that Kaitou KID couldn’t possibly be responsible for the heist suddenly turning into what could only be described as a terrorist attack. It didn’t make sense. It shouldn’t even have taken the world’s greatest detective to see that the modus operandi was completely uncharacteristic of the Moonlight Magician.

Except the Baron had somehow missed it. The full force of the Overseers had descended upon Kaitou KID, and the resulting battle had been bloody, and reckless, and like nothing ever witnessed before at a KID heist. And his father had fought back, just as hard—why? Why? That wasn’t like him.

None of it made sense, even eight years after the fact.

All that was really known was that when the smoke cleared and the damage was done, there were
four people dead—three victims of a heist gone terribly wrong, and one more killed by the Baron’s own hands.

The Baron, Aoko, the masses: they all called the first Kaitou KID a murderer, and maybe they weren’t entirely wrong. But Kuroba Toichi couldn’t have just woken up one morning and decided to take a life.

Kaito knew this down to his bones.

Something, or someone, had made Kuroba Toichi a murderer.

And had made the Night Baron put him down like a dog, for endangering the public, for taking civilian lives, for stepping over the line.

The paper crinkled under his clenched hands, his fingers trembling with force that nearly tore right through the fragile sheets.

Investigating like this was pointless. There was only one man in the world who could possibly know what really happened that deadly night: the bloody Baron himself, the so-called hero that mercilessly murdered his father but didn’t even have the guts to own up to it.

Kaito intended to change that.

Just one touch—it was all he needed.

But for that, how, exactly, could he drag the Baron out of the shadows?

For the second time, Kaito pushed away from the table, turning on his heel to once more meet the eyes of a dead man. On the other side of that portrait was the visage of a legend that still lived on. In the dreams of the public, Kaitou KID was still out there: his father’s ghost, an undead existence kept alive by belief and amazement nurtured in hearts all over the world.

If he could take up the mantle, breathe new life into that myth, truly bring the phantom back to the land of the living…

Not even the Baron would be able to escape his haunting.

It was a long way home, full of detours and reroutes and a city not quite in a panic but certainly building up to one. But as Shinichi stumbled through it all, phone in hand, he barely spared it a glance.

There was an entire folder on his phone dedicated to Ran: selfies and group pictures and snapshots of their dates, back when they still went on them. Two hundred and sixty in all. From each and every one, she beamed at him, her smile as radiant as her eyes were joyful.

With each flick of his fingers, a different photo slipped into frame. He noted the date at the bottom of each one, wondering if his freshly enlightened eyes could catch the exact moment the girl in the photos stopped being just Ran and added Angel to her identity. Would he see it in her face, if he just looked hard enough? If not in her eyes, in her posture? Her clothes? Or her accessories?

He paused on one particular photo, taken during that one memorable day at Tropical Land. Shining out of his phone display, he and she were glued at the hip, grinning into the camera, with the park’s
largest fountain gushing all around them from forty-odd nozzles in the ground, its foam gleaming in the brilliant sunlight. It was a simple, innocuous snapshot of an admittedly less than perfect date: just two teenagers, happy as anything. But looking closer, he could see something glinting on both her ears, and remembered—that date had been their first since Ran got her ears pierced, hadn’t it? He’d spent minutes at a time staring at them dreamily, until he’d suddenly realized just how hot his face felt.

She had caught him staring, at one point, and grinned. With a long, slim finger, she had tapped the glimmering studs. “Do you like them?”

“Yeah.” The word had slipped out before he could stop it, and by the time he remembered how to shut his mouth it was much too late. At Ran’s pleased expression, the teasing tilt of her brow, he’d only grown more embarrassed. With a little too much aggravation, he had hastily tacked on, “but won’t they be… inconvenient? You’ll have to tape them up for karate.”

Ran would have usually gotten angry at that sort of statement, or laugh it off, but her reaction had been strange, even back then. Without meeting his gaze, Ran had looked down at the concrete path. Though she was smiling, she had suddenly seemed a little wistful.

“It’s alright,” she had said, “I was thinking of quitting anyway.”

He stared at that photo for a long while. That was the moment, the exact moment, it had been over. It hadn’t been just karate she’d been prepared to give up to be a hero.

It was then that she quit him too.

To resent her for that decision wasn’t his place or his right, he knew. He had always loved her bravery and her compassion, how brashly she ran to the rescue and never away—Ran always said he would do the same thing in her shoes, that he would go in headfirst and help however he could. She understood it, better than anyone. They were the same, a mutual recklessness learned practically from each other.

That must have changed then, too. Before then, she’d always seemed a little impressed with his work, even if the nastier situations worried her. Ran had been proud of him, unlike everyone else. But somewhere along the way, all that concern for his safety and admiration had hardened into anger and scolding, until again and again, over and over, she kept telling him: stay here, go home—

His thumb hovered over the little gray box that said delete. It went against everything he knew to erase photographic evidence.

He pressed anyway.

Just like that, the photo vanished, and the one after it, and then the next too; his thumb coming down harder and faster on the button with each familiar picture of her and those damn earrings. The school festival, the karate regionals, the Tale of Genji project, the trip to Meiji Shrine, the summer on Izu Beach—delete, delete, delete.

Too soon, there was nothing left to erase. Too few pictures had even been taken after that day at Tropical Land, because he’d seen so little of her ever since.

The pictures of Hakuba went next. And then his parents too. Not that there’d ever been all that many of those.

When his photos were emptied of everything that wasn’t strictly professional, he moved on to the
text messages. He’d never been one for casual texting, but all those logs, pages upon pages of chatting with Ran, planning dates, exchanging pictures—each line of text seemed to punch a hole in his brain, blank and white.

He didn’t want to think about any of them. He just wanted them gone.

There were texts from Hattori, too. More of them than he’d ever really thought about, but then, he’d never paid much mind to the clumsy, stumbling conversations they tried to have. It never mattered how abrupt or stagnant his replies were, because Hattori would almost always answer his every message with five more.

Hattori was Heliopause, obviously. That hadn’t quite sunk in, two nights before, because he didn’t quite know what to do with it. In hindsight, the incident at the warehouse made more sense, now that he knew that, and made the lingering resentment he felt over the matter sour in his chest. Shinichi’s own reaction back then—it had been so petty.

Because at least Hattori had been trying. He had been lying and keeping secrets, yes, but he’d been doing so badly. So very badly. And if nothing else, Hattori had actually put effort into connecting with him, over and over again.

He lingered at the bottom of the chat log with Hattori, his fingers hovering over the keys.

I broke up with Ran, he typed, and seeing the words printed suddenly made it all so real.

Shinichi had really left the person he thought he loved most in the world. The once-best friend he’d so desperately wanted to make happy. The girl he had dreamed of marrying, someday.

He backspaced, holding the button down long after the words had already vanished.

Ran would probably tell Sonoko first, and then there would be hell to pay. The whole school would know that they’d broken up. It was going to be awkward.

They were all going to be so mad at him.

Few had ever said so to his face, but everyone had always thought that if either of them were going to get dumped, it was going to be Shinichi. Ran was too good for him, after all. That was what everyone thought. He’d heard it all the time.

And that was it, wasn’t it? The whole problem?

It was all because he hadn’t been good enough for her? For them? He didn’t deserve her? That’s what everyone always said, right? That she was too good for someone like him! Well, they’d all been right all along, hadn’t they?

He’d just been the only one too blind to see it.

All that rushing around for so many years, trying to help whoever he could, fix whatever he could, bring light wherever he could—how could any of it ever compare to catching helicopters and fighting monsters?

Yet, even so, it was supposed to matter. Shinichi had always believed that. He never wanted to be a superhero; all he wanted was to be able to help whoever was right in front of him, if he could.

Why wasn’t that enough? Maybe he was just plain bad at relationships—that was a fair critique. And maybe when others pulled away, his first instinct was to let them go—but wasn’t that to be
expected?

If they wanted to leave him, who was he to stop them? That was their own decision!

He’d be fine on his own, anyway. No one needed to stay back to babysit him, or put him before themselves. They were all individuals with their own lives. They could make their own choices. And so could he.

The manor Shinichi came home to was about as empty as his phone. He marched up to his bedroom, ditched his soccer bag into a corner, and reached for his tools, his cameras and passes and tripods, only to halt with his hands outstretched.

Force of habit, nothing more. He didn’t need the full kit, not for this. A single camcorder—even just his phone—would do. The lighter he traveled, the better, probably.

Even if leaving without them felt like leaving an arm behind.

He meant to leave as soon as he was ready, march out the front door as quickly and curtly as he’d come in. But something—something made him stop on the landing of the second floor, the floor dedicated to his father’s work. The floor he’d done his best to avoid for years.

Leftover sentiment? He had no time to waste on it. It was morbid curiosity that had him grinding to a halt.

He did not go to his father’s study, but further in, wandering through workspaces until he reached that door.

It wasn’t as if there was anything particularly notable about the door; in color and size, it was just like all the others. But as a child, he’d for some reason always felt it was forbidden: just the glimpse of it in the corner of his eye would fill him with a trepidation he didn’t understand, strong and deep-seated enough to send him scurrying back downstairs to safer grounds.

He’d only built up the nerve to face it once before, at eleven years old. His father and mother had been touring Switzerland at the time, and couldn’t possibly catch him. Even still, he’d felt his heart pounding in his chest as he reached up to that dull bronze knob.

On that day, with his breath caught in his throat, his hand had brushed the doorknob, just the lightest and quietest of touches: hesitant and assured, dreading and resigned and hopeful. Each sensation across his fingertips had blossomed new sentimentalities in his chest and mind—

—his father was smiling, ubiquitous and amiable and taunting—
— the knowledge of everything in his eyes but the answers to nothing on his lips—
—worrying and waiting for the end that would not come—
—because he wouldn’t let it—
—and he wrote with no ink staining his fingers—
—but on his heart and his soul, black smudges on his mind and conscience—
—parting fact from fiction as easily as oil from water—
—relishing and fearing how he could mix the two with his own hands—
—just shake the bottle, watch the bubbles foam and float and scatter and struggle to right themselves—

—dark little bubbles in a crystal-clear body like shadowy figures on the edges of a bright new world—

—all swimming before his eyes, threats and toys and marvels —

—and he’d pulled away his hand, knowing nothing except what he needed to know. His father’s mind was truly alien from his own, similar but distinct, and almost unhinging, as if his own was somehow unwound with each trail of his father’s thoughts.

Where his father thought of the people around him as characters, inspirations, novelties to watch, Shinichi had always considered them to be pieces in an endless game, moving and shifting to aid or oppose both plans and devices, but always in predictable patterns. Always following rules previously established and understood.

Thinking of that all now, once more before the door he hadn’t opened then, Shinichi understood. For a very long time, he’d been playing by his own rules and assuming everyone else had been given the same rulebook, but evidently, he’d been very wrong.

It was about time he started learning the real rules and trying them out for himself.

At eleven, faced his father’s mind and machinations, he had turned tail and fled like a good little boy. But he wasn’t a boy anymore. Wasn’t much good to his father, either.

Now, standing where he’d stood before, he felt nothing at all. It was just a door: no eerie, unbidden feeling that he was treading where he wasn’t allowed.

There was nothing to run from anymore.

His hand closed around the door handle, and—

Nothing happened. It was still just him and his own thoughts.

Shinichi stared at his hand, at the cold metal underneath it, and felt something plummet in his chest.

“Shit.”

He hadn’t even noticed until then, but everything was gone: all the sensations that usually plagued him. In a city on the brink of disaster, he hadn’t felt anyone’s fear, or worry, or anger—for hours, at least, all he’d been feeling was the maelstrom within his own chest.

The power nullifiers the Cats had developed, they weren’t just ready, they were already deployed. Ran hadn’t been on-foot at the stadium to ply out at some thin veneer of normalcy; she couldn’t fly anymore.

But he hadn’t been exposed to anything suspicious, and there was no reason for him to be specifically targeted. Had they dumped it in the city’s water supply? But what about water filters?

No, it had to be airborne. That would be the best method, offering maximum coverage whilst remaining relatively undetectable, at least until it was too late. That meant the Irregulars, the Night Baron, and any other Overseers unlucky enough to be within the city limits were likely powerless.
Would his father really be that careless, though?

It didn’t matter. There was another person in the city that was a far greater concern at the moment: the metahuman causing the gravity fluctuations. Why weren’t they being affected?

Wait.

What if the fluctuations were due to the nullifier trying to work on the victim? The nullifying agent and the inducing drug already in the metahuman’s system; it would explain why the effects were not constant, but instead coming and going like the tide.

Both must be biological compounds, something that either suppressed gene transcription or expression, and if they really were founded on the same research, could it be that they were compatible?

And, in light of that, wasn’t a certain someone suspicious?

No, he’d been suspicious from the start. All that thinking, and Shinichi had missed so obvious an answer—his head really hadn’t been in the game at all, to have forgotten the principle of parsimony. The inside job; someone at the university was working with the Cats. He’d been thinking and thinking: they were likely the mastermind behind the nullifier in the first place, they had to have extensive knowledge of the field, and even known about the files one of their colleagues had...

Wasn’t there a much simpler explanation?

Another, more obvious answer?

He tore out of his father’s rooms, legs racing almost as fast as his thoughts. There really was no time for them now, not when all the puzzle pieces were falling into place so cleanly.

In five seconds’ time he was out of the house, leaving the front door still swinging on its hinges. Then, he was bursting into Professor Agasa’s nextdoor, to a loud, startled cry and a clatter of plastic on tile.

“Professor!”

“Shin—Shinichi?” Professor Agasa had one hand over his heart, reaching for his fallen TV remote with the other. “What are you doing here? I thought you would be out celebrating?”

Celebrating what? Oh, right. The game. “There’s no time for that!”

“Eh?” The professor was stunned by the urgency in Shinichi’s voice, eyebrows pinched together. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“I figured it out!” Shinichi hurried past the professor, towards the stairs that would take him down to the lab. “I know what’s going on! And if we don’t hurry, it’s only going to get worse!”

“Slow down, slow down.” Agasa stumbled after him. “Do you mean the lapses in gravity? I was thinking there might be a gravity distortion device hidden somewhere—”

Glancing around, Shinichi shook his head as they arrived in the lab. While the equipment laid out there was extensive, it wasn’t exactly what he needed. Not that he had a good idea of what he needed in the first place—this sort of extensive spatial distribution analysis wasn’t something he had much experience in, nor ever had to do on such a short time frame before. “They aren’t lapses.
And they aren’t caused by a device, but by a person.” He searched the room one more time, then turned back to the professor. “One of the kidnapped children.”

“You’ve lost me.” Professor Agasa frowned, and reached out to grab Shinichi by the shoulder. “Start from the beginning.”

They didn’t have time for that. He couldn’t waste time going over his deductions at this point, not unless they could work and talk at the same time.

But there was one important thing he needed to say, wasn’t there?

He met Professor Agasa’s eyes, and found himself smiling. It didn’t come easily, and felt tight and brittle on his face, but it was genuine. “I forgot to thank you for remembering the game, the other day. It means a lot to me.”

Suddenly, he felt a knot of shame building in his stomach. Hadn’t it been Professor Agasa who gave him his first camera? Taught him to use a tape recorder? Helped him set up his website?

At some point, though, he’d stopped coming to see Professor Agasa. More than that—Shinichi had almost stopped thinking about him entirely. This man that had such a hand in raising him, but it felt like they hadn’t spoken in years before the previous day.

The sombre words hung between them, and Shinichi could see his own guilt in Agasa’s face. It made him look so much older, nothing like the carefree and whimsical man Shinichi remembered.

“Shinichi…” he said, trailing off, but not stopping. “I…”

What Agasa wanted to say, Shinichi didn’t need to hear.

“It’s alright. I know now, about my father and the others.” It hadn’t been much of a leap of logic to go from that to Agasa being in the loop as well, to realize that someone of his skills, so close and available, would have been too far too convenient for them to resist. “You’ve known for a long time, haven’t you?”

The Irregulars’ gadgets and tools had to have come from somewhere, and there was likely no one better for that job than Agasa.

Shinichi didn’t know how to feel about that. How to even begin feeling about that, so he didn’t bother. Instead, he looked the professor straight in the eyes and finally found the voice to ask: “Can you lend me a hand?”

Professor Agasa stared at him for a long moment, the wrinkles by his eyes deepening into furrows. Solemn and dour, but without hesitation, he nodded. “Follow me.”

Together, they went into the back of the lab, to an ancient-looking desk almost buried under miscellaneous junk. As Shinichi watched in silence, Agasa took a step forward, and the desk, clutter and all, snapped in half, sliding apart to reveal a hidden door snapping open behind it. Hands in his pockets, trying his level best to not gape, Shinichi stepped through.

A different world unfurled before his eyes. An immense laboratory, filled with technology he barely recognized as even possible. Jets, generators, bikes, weapons—there was too much to take in all at once. Entire sections dedicated to costume accessories, with goggles and masks outfitted with microchips and displays and more functions than most smartphones.

There was so much to look at, Shinichi found himself turning in circles as they moved among lab
benches and machinery. One particular section of the lab caught his eyes, if only because it was so mundane compared to the others. There were none of the massive engines or blasters that littered the rest, just shelves of what were at first glance simple, everyday objects.

Unable to help himself, Shinichi picked up a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. There was a well-concealed button hidden on the frame, and when he pressed it, a terminal suddenly popped up on the left pane, accompanied by a compass screen.

“Are these tracking devices? Built into glasses?” That wasn’t all: looking again, there were weapons disguised as watches, belt buckles, and ties. It was an armory, but not for a superhero. This section was tooled for far more covert work. “Do you work with spy agencies too?”

“Actually…” The professor hesitated. His gentle features furrowed, skittish and maybe even a little guilty. He took a breath in through the nose, and scratched his chin, quite obviously looking anywhere else in the room but Shinichi’s direction. “I made them for you.”

Shinichi paused, right in the middle of putting the glasses back down.

“For me?”

“I thought they would be useful for your investigations.” Busying himself, Agasa plucked a camera off the shelf and showed it to him. Even though Shinichi’s own equipment was by no means cheap or out-dated, with just a glance he could tell that this camera made his look practically disposable. Just the sheer amount of buttons and settings alone had his fingers twitching, even without any idea of the functions that were built in. Agasa plopped it in his waiting hands as he moved on to a seemingly ordinary pair of sneakers, then an equally plain wristwatch. There he paused, with a sheepish smile, before fitting the watch to Shinichi’s wrist.

The band was a little small, like the watch had been made for someone a few years younger. Agasa checked the tightness and frowned a bit, but when he moved to unstrap it, Shinichi pulled his wrist away.

The professor finally met his eyes again. “Of course, your father found out, and well…” He trailed off for a moment. Shinichi couldn’t really imagine his father being displeased with the professor over anything, much less angry. They were both so… cheerful. But evidently, there had been some sort of serious conversation, because Agasa’s shoulders slumped. “He didn’t think it was a good idea.” The professor chuckled awkwardly, before perking right back up. “But it takes more than that to keep a true genius down, of course! Look over here!”

He waved Shinichi over to just beyond the section they were in, to an alcove carved into the wall. An assortment of systems had been set up there, with nearly a dozen monitors gathered around a central computer. Most of them were flashing with headlines and tweets, snapshots from around the city with timestamps, and even some live news broadcasts.

“This here keeps track of all the news in the city, even the country!” The professor patted the central computer a little too proudly. “All your work, especially.”

With just a few taps of keys, the monitors were overwhelmingly covered with newspaper excerpts and screenshots from sites, all focused on a single topic: a teenage reporter taking the Internet by storm. Everywhere Shinichi looked, his old scoops looked back, from the prefectural election fraud case to the murder-suicide of the Bank of Beika board, from that oh-so-innocent interview with Hawk to that baffling night he’d met the Kaitou KID. Everything was covered, from the start of his career to last week: years of work, laid out in thousands of little boxes on screen.
Shinichi felt his grin before he even registered that his heart was pounding in his chest. The sight of his smile had Agasa puffing up with pride. “Impressive, right?”

Absolutely.

It was exactly what he needed.

“You said these systems keep track of all the news in the city?” His voice didn’t waver, but it was a close thing. His smile was so wide, his cheeks actually threatened to ache.

Agasa paused and considered him a bit more carefully. “More or less.”

“Can you get them to sort out all the reports of gravitational fluctuations in the past forty-eight hours? What we need to do is plot all these fluctuations to a map.”

“Ah, probably…? But why?”

“They barely reached the tournament grounds, despite claims of them hitting all over the city at random.” The tournament grounds stood on the edge of residential Tokyo, where there was room for large expanses of empty field. And the worst they’d gotten over there had been a few moments of lightness, not full-on weightlessness. “More likely, they’re spreading out radially. Which means there’s a center, a focal point. That’s where I’ll find the cause of this.”

Agasa got to work immediately, pushing the systems to compile reports from the past two days into a workable dataset: location, time, duration, spread, and range. He took the resulting data to different software specialized for spatial visualization.

One by one, little red dots appeared on the map of Tokyo. For the most part they were sparse, but there was in fact a notable center to the spread, an area directly in the middle with more clustered there than anywhere else on the city.

Shinichi pointed at the focal point. “That will be where the gravitational fluctuations will be at their worst—where those pseudo black holes will appear the most often.”

Sumida. That was where the metahuman was.

Too close for comfort, honestly.

“I heard that there had been no pattern to their appearance, even though they’ve got the whole city in a panic…” Agasa muttered, eyes on the map that clearly suggested differently. “Because they seem to be getting bigger.”

“They aren’t random. They’re fluctuating, just like everything else.” Shinichi had his chin in hand, eyes focused on the screen, as he zoomed in on the city and found the most affected blocks; somewhere, in one of those buildings, was what he’d been searching for since day one. But going there was dangerous, insane even. With how unstable the gravity in the area was due to become, there was no guarantee that he’d survive. But, if he went there first… “They aren’t just getting bigger and more powerful. The breaks in-between are getting shorter. Not linearly, but exponentially.”

Agasa’s eyes were on him now, as he changed programs and ran the temporal data over the spatial. With a graph of the time between each “black hole” opening before them, it was easy to see that the duration of time between each was shortening rapidly.

“Eventually, there won’t be any time left between them.” Shinichi admitted, grimly pushing the
program to generate a predicted model and showing Agasa exactly where on the resulting speculative graph the time between each opening hit zero. “But, that makes them predictable.”

If he timed it right, they had a chance.

It took longer than it should have to notice that Agasa looked terrified.

“If there’s no more time in between them, you mean, it won’t close.” He seized Shinichi by the shoulders, calloused hands shaking enough to rattle. “Shinichi, are you saying that an actual black hole is going to open up in Tokyo?”

That was, technically, what Shinichi was saying.

And that was scary. But at the same time, it was such an abstract concept, it didn’t shake him at all. He leveled a steely stare into the professor’s eyes, and tried to ease the tension that suddenly filled the room.

“I don’t know nearly enough astrophysics to say what could be classified as an actual black hole.”

Freaking out now would do no good for them or anyone else.

Agasa took a shuddering breath and stumbled back a step. “We have to evacuate the city.”

“Even if evacuations began this minute, it wouldn’t be enough.” There was no way they could get ten million people out before the worst, and certainly not with a fair share of those people already on their way to the Overseers’ specially fortified shelters. All he had to do to see that was look at their calculations again. “We have less than two hours to save Tokyo.”

“Save...?” Agasa stared at him, his mouth hanging open. “Shinichi, how are we going to stop this in two hours?”

“It’s plenty of time.” Shinichi said confidently, despite Agasa’s disbelieving eyes. And he wasn’t lying; it was more than enough for what he had in mind. “I need to get to Nanyo University. Lend me a ride.”

For a second, it looked like Professor Agasa wanted to protest. Instead, he merely went silent, and slowly turned back to the systems, reading over the information displayed there one more time.

Some kind of certainty crept across his face, then: a sort of resolve settling underneath the nervousness. Agasa took a deep breath, and then returned to the shelves of unutilized gadgets and tools.

“You’re going to need more than a ride.” He said as he gathered an armful of inventions and handed them to Shinichi, one by one. “Let’s get you suited up.”

As it turned out, there was a great deal more than just tracking devices. The watch from earlier had a built-in tranquilizer gun, one that could break skin from over a dozen meters away and knock a full-grown man out for up to an hour, depending on how Shinichi chose to adjust the dosage. The sneakers absorbed kinetic energy and could deal it right back, for both kicks and boosting jumps. Most importantly, there were grappling hooks like the ones Hawk used, which would probably be the most essential later on. Agasa took his jacket and replaced it with one with a built-in harness that the hook’s lines could connect to, to both absorb shock and make their usage more manageable, once paired with a special pair of gloves.

As they fitted everything, Agasa fussed anxiously. “Now, your father isn’t an easy man to keep
secrets from...”

The understatement of the century.

“I don’t expect to keep this secret from him.” Shinichi admitted. “But my father is the least of our concerns at the moment.”

The professor said nothing to that, his expression tight, and he offered one more thing.

“Take this, too.” It looked a bit like Ran’s earrings, but less like jewelry and more like a miniature Bluetooth. It was probably originally designed for someone with pierced ears, but this version had been modified into a clip-on. “It’s a communicator.”

“For communicating with who?” He didn’t really need to ask, though; he had an idea. Agasa’s silence in response to the question only confirmed it. “Alright, give it here.”

He’d never once thought the day would come that he’d get an Irregular comm of his own, of all things, and he’d certainly never wanted one. Truthfully, he still didn’t want it. Some petty part of him wanted to throw it across the room or stomp on it, but instead he clipped it on and took a deep breath.

He’d take it, but that didn’t mean he had to use it; Shinichi had to do this himself. Maybe the whole city was in danger, or maybe the whole country. Maybe the stakes were bigger than he could possibly imagine. But the source, the metahuman they would call responsible, the lost kid out there with no one to count on—it wasn’t their fault. He had to help them.

There was a good chance that the Overseers, the Irregulars, anyone else, really, would just… put the kid down. Like Satoshi, or even the others that possibly came before him. For the greater good, the protection of the people, for public safety and order.

And maybe that was the right thing to do, even, in its own way. Utilitarian as it may sound, that was how the world worked.

But he just couldn’t let that happen. There was no way he could accept that. This wasn’t just about saving the city, saving the public, or saving the day.

This was about saving one single life.

Tucking away the comm in his pocket, he gave all the various vehicles scattered around the lab a cursory look. He could probably manage with just about any of them, but he had to take the gravity distortions into account before he chose.

Noticing his issue, Agasa took him by the elbow and led him towards a sliding steel door. Beyond it was what could only be called a hangar, filled with jets, cars, and motorbikes in every direction. These were models he didn’t even recognize; they were far beyond anything he saw in use by any ISHA operative.

Overwhelmed, it took a moment for him to register that Agasa had dragged them over to one particular vehicle. It could only be called a motorcycle without wheels: sleek, dark turquoise and shimmering black, and with only two shallow caverns where the wheels should have slotted into the frame.

“Take this one.” Agasa said, completely ignoring his look of utter disbelief. “With things how they are, you won’t be able to get through the gravity distortions with an ordinary vehicle.” Anything that had wheels, and therefore needed a surface to run on, could be a potential hazard. But
Shinichi’s answer to that had been one of the jets, or maybe the still in-development jetpack. Not a ground vehicle with the wheels plucked off.

The professor patted the seat, and despite how dubious he felt, Shinichi got on. “This hoverbike is equipped with the most powerful engine I’ve ever created.”

A hoverbike.

Shinichi couldn’t help but bite his lip doubtfully. “Is this what the Overseers use?” It really, really didn’t look familiar.

“No, it’s a prototype.”

Shinichi took the handlebars with no small amount of hesitation. “But it’s been tested, right?”

Agasa coughed.

Shinichi stared.

“Uh, a little?” Agasa pinched two fingers together and laughed nervously. “Well, it’s about to be…”

Comforting. The city was facing imminent doom, and he was still being used as a test monkey.

“Great.” He said with the exact amount of enthusiasm the situation warranted. “Thanks. What’s it called?”

“The Turbo Engine Hoverbike!”

Of course. Shinichi didn’t know what he expected.

The bike came alive with a few taps on the console centered between its handlebars. And he meant that literally: burning with light that blazed inside its chassis, fluorescent lines spread through the bike like veins as it hummed underneath him. It rose from the ground with a quiet rumble, hovering inches above the lab’s steel floor.

Alright, he would give this one to Agasa. It was pretty damn cool.

But he was not calling it the Turbo anything.

“...I’m going to call it the Nightingale.”

Agasa gave him a cheerful thumbs-up, then sobered. “Be careful, okay?”

“I will.” He lightly flexed his fingers over what he correctly assumed to be the accelerator, and the bike swept forward with startling speed. A grin tugged on the edges of his lips as he forced it to swing around the professor, who scrambled backwards with his hands in the air.

In the face of his cocky smile, Agasa’s tightly-wound shoulders eased, just a little. He turned to a nearby shelf and came back with a sleek helmet in hand. “Call me if you need help.”

“I will.” Shinichi took the helmet and fitted it over his head. Then, with a deep, steadying breath, he turned the bike towards what were undoubtedly the hangar doors. “I’ll see you later, Professor.”

As he clenched the accelerator all the way down, the bike lurched forward and the doors slammed open. He was off.
Kazuha was fifteen when she’d shattered her first window. It was old, comparatively—Heiji had started leaving charred handprints on furniture and walls when he was twelve, but his powers had been evident long before then. She was a late-bloomer.

But watching the glass come pouring down in shiny little shards, out of the window frames, and seeing the wide-eyed, startled look on Heiji’s face…

When it sunk in what happened, it had been the happiest moment of her life.

She had powers, and that meant Heiji wouldn’t have to keep secrets from her anymore.

That didn’t mean it was all good. Learning to control her abilities was still a work in progress. And it was work. It was hard, and tedious, and frustrating: two steps forward, one step back, for what seemed like an eternity. Hakuba’s eardrums could probably attest to that. She couldn’t talk too loud, couldn’t scream on roller coasters or in haunted houses, couldn’t even raise her voice too much when she was arguing with Heiji.

Seriously, how that still rankled.

And planning the angles of her ricochets didn’t come naturally either. Or at least, the planning part. The Baron had tried to teach her to think ahead, to calculate the angles before she bounced, but it just didn’t work like that. There was never time to do that silly stuff in the middle of a mission; all she could do was move, let the kinetic energy flow through her and pop out, like a spring.

It was instinct, or something like that, that got her where she needed to be: her intuition, not angles or math or fussing. She just had to trust her gut.

But for all the blood, sweat, and tears, Kazuha never forgot what it was like to be powerless.

How could she, after losing so many nights of sleep to wondering where Heiji was and what he was doing. Who was he calling? Running off to see? What was he doing, without her?

Night after night, staring at her phone screen until her eyes burned, waiting for him to text back.

No, she would never forget how that felt.

And now, powerless as she was, she could yell and scream as much as she damn well pleased.

“He what?”

Ran curled into herself as Kazuha’s voice echoed through the jet’s cabin. Her eyes were on the floor, one arm tucked around the other, and Kazuha was going to kill someone.

“Not now,” Ran said, her voice barely even a whisper. “Please.”

The boys were making a point of looking at everything except the two of them, both of them gathered at the controls and making themselves look busy. Busy doing what Kazuha had no idea, because they were running on a whole lot of nothing at all. No leads, no ideas, and no superpowers.

And then Kudo had to go and break up with Ran!

It was just one thing after another!
“When I get my hands on that guy, he’s gonna be real sorry he was ever born.” She growled with clenched fists. That made her feel a little better, but Ran? Not so much. Ran loved Kudo, and Kazuha’s frustration with him couldn’t compete with that.

It wasn’t that Kazuha didn’t get how Kudo felt, at least about the whole secrets thing. She knew exactly what it was like, and in a lot of ways, that was what made it so easy to be angry with him and the choices he kept making. Heiji had kept his fair share of secrets from her before she’d joined, but she didn’t go running off with super-villains or sabotaging his missions. It had hurt to be lied to, especially by someone she cared so much about, but hurting that same person right back wasn’t going to fix anything either.

And Kudo’s stupid daddy issues had nothing to do with Ran. There was no excuse for taking it out on her, of all people!

But Ran didn’t think that way. Kazuha could tell with just a glance. “It’s not yer fault, Ran-chan! Kudo will get over it, and when he does—”

“What the hell are ya goin’ on about, moron?” Heiji cut in, glancing back to glare at her. There was a sort of harried look in his eyes, and a bead of sweat dripping down the line of his jaw. “Did ya forget the black holes destroyin’ the city? Get yer stupid head outta the clouds!”

Kazuha’s mouth snapped open, about to tell Heiji exactly where he could stick his stupid, insensitive machismo, but Ran caught her by the shoulder and reeled her back in.

“He’s right, Kazuha-chan.” Ran said, shaking her head. “We need to hurry and figure this out.”

But Ran’s eyes didn’t so much as flicker up, as if she couldn’t bear to raise her head. Even though her face was down, Kazuha could clearly see the misty film of water threatening to leak out of her eyes.

Ran was balancing on the brink of tears, and there wasn’t anything she could do about it.

And there wasn’t anything they could do about the black holes either. They were just a bunch of normal teenagers in a jet, going up against something that was only supposed to happen in movies and comic books. Black holes? On Earth? Way above their pay grade.

Wasn’t it about time to call in the real professionals?

“Can’t we call that one Overseer?” She thought of all the international heroes on the news and in the database, the ones that they sometimes met at big events and got to shake hands with. Her personal favorite, Shriek, wouldn’t be a good fit, but there had to be someone that could handle this. “What’s his name—Eradite! Can’t he slow down time or somethin’?” Admittedly, Kazuha didn’t really know what that guy’s deal was. But Heiji didn’t like him much, always getting that cute jealous look on his face whenever the popular hero was mentioned.

Both Hakuba and Ran flinched, just a little, and Kazuha suddenly remembered why Eradite rubbed Heiji the wrong way. Wasn’t Eradite Kudo’s favorite Overseer?

The look on Heiji’s face as he swung around to glower at her was confirmation enough.

“Are you stupid? He slows down his perception of time, not actual time!” He snapped. “There ain’t nobody that can pause time! Else, they’d be runnin’ the world by now!”

Feeling a flush creeping over her face, Kazuha huffed. At least she was trying—she didn’t see anyone else coming up with any better ideas.
At the very least, it had gotten Ran a bit out of her funk. Biting her lip, she finally looked up, her still-shiny eyes turning to Hakuba.

“Then maybe Override? Couldn’t he help?” Her voice hitched, just a little, but anyone that pointed that out would have hell to pay. “He can negate forces, right?”

Despite Kazuha’s withering glare, Heiji gave Ran a disbelieving look, one eyebrow quirked up as he frowned. “That guy’s specialty is suppressing explosions! We dunno if this kinda thing even qualifies!”

“Isn’t there someone that can help us?” There had to be, right? There was no way ISHA didn’t have a contingency for something like this.

But Hakuba shook his head and faced them, his expression grave underneath his mask.

“Even if there was, it would be worse to bring them here.” He said. “Any Overseer that comes here will lose their powers too. Like it or not, we’re on our own.”

He was right, Kazuha knew, but still the words felt like a punch to the gut. Outside their jet, the city was drifting by underneath them, still standing tall at first glance. But if she looked more carefully, it was easy to spot where streets and blocks had been ripped right out of the ground, leaving behind jagged ditches of dirt and mangled foundation.

Where was it all going? Everything was getting sucked in, but where did it go after that?

“Hey, Heiji—”

Her question was cut off by a sound she’d come to know and dread. The awful pop of another “hole” opening echoed over the whole city, louder than all the ones that came before. All of them tensed, Hakuba’s hands flying to the controls as Heiji looked wildly around, searching the skyline.

Hakuba brought the jet up, increasing the altitude until a black dot finally became apparent, all the way over on the other end of Tokyo.

It was much further away than the others had been, but even at a distance, Kazuha could tell it was bigger and worse than the previous ones. Before their eyes, entire skyscrapers were being ripped up and swallowed whole, like something out of a billion-yen Apocalypse flick.

All they could do was watch in terror as city blocks were turned into ribbons, dragged inwards and crushed into nothing. Instinctually, Kazuha covered her mouth as a horrified scream tried to press its way out of her lungs. If one of the those opened above one of the shelters, it wouldn’t matter how reinforced the bunkers were. Thousands, if not millions, would die in an instant.

And they would be helpless to do anything about it.

Heiji’s eyes were glued to the black hole on the horizon, his teeth grinding against each other as more and more of the city was sucked in. Then he roughly, almost physically tore his gaze away, and with blazing eyes, faced Hakuba.

“Let’s smash those towers!” He roared, his voice ragged with panic. “Better than flyin’ in circles while the city is gettin’ wrecked!”

Destroying the towers wouldn’t fix the problem, but if they at least had their powers back, they’d be able to do something. They could save people, even if it was just a few.
All eyes fell on their leader, but he didn’t look back at any of them. His burgundy eyes were still set on the skyline, unwavering.

When the answer came, it wasn’t what anyone wanted to hear. “We can’t.” Hakuba had a white-knuckled grip on the control board, resignation evident in the desolate lines of his face. “ISHA needs them. We need them.”

“For what?” Kazuha snapped. The Night Baron had said the same thing, but neither of them had explained why. What did the Overseers want with anti-meta gas? Why would destroying it be such a problem? There was no way it could compete with the physical impossibility eating their damn city!

But Hakuba didn’t answer. Ran stepped forward and seized his arm, forcing him to stare her in the face. They were both pale and worn-out, bruised and roughed up: brought down to equal footing.

“Whatever it is, it can’t be worth risking everyone’s lives!” Ran’s voice was fierce, and Heiji stepped forward to stand right at her side.

“We can’t just do nothin’!” He stared Hakuba right in the eyes, unwavering. Kazuha nodded her agreement, punctuating each word, but Hakuba didn’t retreat either. With pursed lips, he stared right through each of them, one by one.

“We aren’t going to do nothing.” Hakuba said, and the words were steady and firm. “Our only option is to find the source of these phenomena, and destroy it.”

It was, at first glance, a completely inconspicuous building of no discernable utility. Short, stout, and completely unremarkable. He imagined, if he questioned the employees of any of the neighboring buildings—all sparsely manned storage facilities—they’d tell him it was an office of some sort, or something. None of them would be sure, but none of them would care enough to be suspicious, either.

The insides were a different story. The first floor would strike even the untrained eye as a little odd—what sort of office building had showers built into the bathrooms? Wasn’t the break-room kitchen just a little too robust? —and the lower floors of labs and armories would completely annihilate the veneer of normalcy.

But what gave the whole facade away to him was not any of that. With his first step inside, he understood that something was significantly off about the building’s design. The size of the building outside and the size of each floor on the inside didn’t match up the way they should have.

It was the walls. They were just too thick.

They would need to be, to be properly reinforced. A flimsy headquarters simply wouldn’t do for a terrorist cell.

As expected, the building was vacant, for the most part. The usual residents must have been dispersed all around the city, covertly guarding the nullifiers that must have been set up every few square kilometers or so.

The few stray Cats that remained were simple enough to slip by, until he made his way deep within and finally found the laboratory.
There, a man in a pristine white labcoat was desperately rummaging through a tray of vials. He entered quietly—despite not being particularly concerned about being overheard by the few terrorists on standby upstairs—and waited for a moment, observing his prey.

Then, Shinichi announced himself.

“Professor Hirota.”

The scientist spun around with a startled sound, wide eyes locking with Shinichi’s own.

“You’re… the reporter? What are you doing here?”

Sneaking in hadn’t been exactly difficult; for all their skill at subverting other people’s security systems, the Cats weren’t that particularly remarkable at maintaining their own. It was no wonder KID had such an easy time slipping into their midst, if even an amateur like Shinichi could creep in.

He didn’t bother to hide his grin as he prowled closer, carefully on the look-out for any hidden weapons or panic buttons. But Hirota Masami really didn’t seem to be carrying any. He was puttering about a terrorist cell with nothing but his test tubes and centrifuges quite comfortably.

“A better question would be: what are you doing here, Professor?” He asked, placing himself between the professor and the exit. “What you’ve been doing here for quite some time.”

Hirota Masami was frozen in place, but his hands were trembling against the lab bench. A drop of sweat crept down the side of his face, perilously clinging to a high cheekbone. He didn’t respond, just curling into his raised shoulders as Shinichi locked the door, the deadbolt sliding into place like the hammer of a Colt.

If Hirota Masami wasn’t prepared to speak yet, that was fine. Shinichi had plenty to talk about on his own.

“Nanyo University’s stadium is a designated shelter. Most stadiums and convention centers these days are. It stands to reason that is where you would be, considering the current circumstances, and it also stands to reason that once you realized said circumstances were getting worse, not better, well… you’d have to do something about it, wouldn’t you?”

“What—whatever do you mean?”

“I tracked you here, all the way from the university.” He’d planted a bug, helpfully wrapped in some chewing gum, right on the brake pedal of the professor’s car, parked right in his assigned and reserved parking spot. As expected, it had stuck itself to the inside of his shoe with him none the wiser.

Having the right tools sure made things easy.

“But why?”

Shinichi snorted softly, more to himself than anything else. “During our interview, you said, and I quote, that your colleague was searching for a way to prevent and control meta-organism abilities.” At the time, the statement itself had struck Shinichi as odd, on many levels. It had been obvious why the Red Siamese Cats might want such research, but the implications it had for the professor and his colleague had taken longer to parse out. “To find that, she came to you, right?”

The man’s adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed. Slowly, his mouth cracked open.
“What makes you think that?”

Wasn’t that always, always the million-yen question.

But he didn’t need psychic powers to have figured this one out.

“Let me propose a puzzle to you, Professor.” Shinichi took a slow step forward. “First, let’s say, hypothetically, there exists a criminal organization that kidnaps children and teenagers.” Then another. “Second, a rampaging colossus that seemingly appeared out of nowhere tore apart a downtown district.” And another. “Third, a prodigy in biochemistry with no publicity, no degree, and not even a high-school diploma.” Once more. “Fourth, a professor on the cutting edge of his field, researching how dangerous superpowers can be.

“It isn’t easy to get these four pieces to fit together.” He admitted. It certainly had taken some time for him to digest it all. “Except, there was that photo you had, of a research team at Oxford, with one Miyano Shiho. How, exactly, would such a young woman with nothing to her name get invited along on a research project to the most acclaimed institution in Europe?”

The photo had been the key to it all, the one little thing that tied together all the pieces that just hadn’t seemed to match up.

“By all accounts, Miyano doesn’t even exist to the scientific community, and yet for some reason, she was at Oxford with one other Japanese scientist. I mean you, of course.” Shinichi met the man’s eyes. “A scientist with whom she shared multiple unpublished research papers on the subject of metahuman abilities.”

Hirota Masami tensed further, winding tighter and tighter as he stared at Shinichi with barely restrained apprehension.

“Meta human abilities. No mention of meta-organism.” The distinction was important. Just the fact that the professor had been so insistent upon that particular term gave away his personal investment in it. “Miyano Shiho was interested solely in the manifestation of abilities within humans, wasn’t she?” Every single one of the papers he had seen with her byline had been regarding humans, not any other lifeforms. “Not at all what you suggested when we last spoke.”

“How—?” The professor snapped, eyes so wide Shinichi could see the whites around every curve of his irises. His voice was like jagged glass now, all attempts at a peaceful veneer lost. “You stole those papers?”

“Of course not.” Technically. “Though if the digital copies hadn’t been taken too, I imagine you would never have reported the theft of the hard copies. You only did it because that meant a third party was onto you, one that you knew nothing about and feared would give you away.” KID’s theft of the files had been a blessing in disguise, in that regard. “And that’s because you told the Red Siamese Cats to retrieve them from your office. It was too dangerous to deliver them to the Cats yourself, and email could be traced. You and the rest of the Cats couldn’t take the risk, not with your objective so close.

“But truly, it was also to allay suspicion from yourself. Once the nullifying agent was active, the first to be suspected would scientists with the capability and expertise required to create such a thing. You had to get rid of those papers without anyone knowing you had them, but someone besides the Cats did see them, and worse, took them right from your computer. Hiding it was no longer an option at that point, right? You had no other choice but to play the victim and hope it made fingers point elsewhere.”
It had almost worked, too. At the very least, it had led Shinichi himself on the wrong trail and bought the Cats enough time to complete their preparations. But there were still holes Shinichi hadn’t been able to fill. “What I want to know is how you knew Miyano Shiho, and why you allowed her to join you on your research trip.”

The professor’s shoulders slumped down, the tension all but dripping out of him as he settled back. There was resignation in his downturned eyes, but not enough. Shinichi could still see a glint of resolve in the man’s weary look, and it kept him on edge.

“Miyano-kun was one of my students.” Hirota Masami said, his aged voice softening around the name.

“Miyano Shiho?” But that couldn’t be. There was no record of her, and Shinichi had looked, in every possible nook and cranny, regardless of accessibility. Or legality.

Hirota Masami shook his head. “No. Miyano Akemi, her older sister.” Shinichi paused, the new information catching his interest. “It was through Miyano-kun that I met Shiho-san, who was brilliant, and capable, and, and… the smartest person I ever met.” A fond smile crept onto the man’s face, and he shrugged almost helplessly. “She had so much potential, but she wasn’t even in school. I couldn’t bear to see all that talent go to waste, so I offered her a research position, a chance to join a team coming together at Oxford.” The smile slipped from his face, leaving behind something a little jagged along the edges. “At first she declined, but later she called me back and asked if the offer still stood.”

“How did she change her mind?”

“Her… employers wanted her to get our research, I found out later. At the time, I didn’t even ask for a reason, I was so damn pleased.” He shook his head, and though there was regret seeping into his smile, it didn’t fade. “Our research that summer was revolutionary. Made every other paper on meta-abilities look like child’s play.”

Shinichi digested that for a moment, before carefully probing further. “And then you found out she was using you?”

“No!” The denial was immediate, almost vehement. There was no doubt in the professor’s eyes. “Shiho-kun did more than any of us that summer. And it took time, but she was open with me, eventually. She had no choice but to do what she did. They control every aspect of her life.”

They, he said, as if that explained anything. The strangest part was that it did. Shinichi was bitterly coming to understand that there were more powers, unsuspected and unchallenged, at work in the world than those that were immediately apparent.

Had the Miyano sisters been kidnapped children too? Was it possible for victims to actually join the organization, the syndicate—whatever it was—and progress through the ranks? It seemed like a farcry at best.

It was more likely that they were involved through blood ties. But those ties must have only served to chain them to the organization if so much of their lives were being completely regulated. But whether she was a willing participant or not, the facts remained that Miyano Shiho had somehow dragged dozens more vulnerable children down with her.

“So, Miyano Shiho was being made to pursue her research into the causes of metahuman abilities with human experimental subjects.” Shinichi filled in, waiting for the professor to deny it. But he didn’t, and taking a deep breath, Shinichi continued. “And said subjects proved to be both
dangerous and highly unstable.”

“Yes.” Hirota Masami agreed. “Far more than they should have been, too.”

More?

The subjects weren’t supposed to be so unstable?

There were a thousand reasons a less-than-legal group might want to artificially manufacture superpowers, but Shinichi had been thinking that maybe the particular motive in this matter was the production of “weapons” of mass destruction. Satoshi, the gravity metahuman, and all the others who’d possibly come before them: they had the potential to be national disasters, far more dangerous than any run-of-the-mill metahuman. The typical meta could maybe threaten an entire city block, if they were particularly dangerous, but creating black holes, on command or not, far outstripped that.

And their creation had been accidental?

That didn’t seem right.

And wasn’t it the professor who’d said that there was no basis for the development of meta-abilities in people born without the right genetic code for it?

If they already knew that, then Miyano Shiho’s research wasn’t necessarily about the production of superpowers, but the amplification of them. And the result was working far too well. The distinction didn’t change much, but it did shift his estimation of the motives behind the matter.

Whose abilities, specifically, did they aim to boost?

Unfortunately, that was a question he’d have to investigate later.

The professor’s smile was tight as whipcord now. “Shiho-kun forwarded all her research to me. She wanted me to create something to counter it.”

“Miyano Shiho asked you to develop a way to neutralize the metahuman abilities she amplified.” Of course she had. The impeccable timing of the disaster in the city and the release of the nullifying agent couldn’t have been coincidental. “But you couldn’t make something like that on your own, not without resources.” In need of a sponsor, the professor could only turn towards groups willing to invest millions, potentially billions, in anti-meta technology, and there were few of those that an old man who’d probably broken all of three laws in his life would know how to find, let alone contact. “So, you turned to a group with similar interests.”

The Red Siamese Cats were almost five decades old, and infamous enough to mark the pages of history books; they were probably the only anti-meta cell the man could find on such short notice.

The professor shifted uneasily on his feet, his hands twitching as guilt settled in the withered wrinkles on his face.

Shinichi took a deep breath. “I’m not here to accuse you of anything, Professor.” The matter of the terrorists could wait until the city was no longer on the brink of total oblivion. Compared with the S-class metahuman having a melt-down in the middle of Tokyo, domestic terrorism could wait.

He met the man’s eyes, determination burning inside him like a beacon. “I’m here to know if you succeeded.”
Hirota Masami kept his gaze for a long, lingering moment. And then he straightened, a similar resolution settling in his brittle frame. “The Red Siamese Cats were interested in my research on the global threat posed by meta-organisms.” He admitted. “They offered to provide me with everything I needed, as long as they got full access to the result.” The professor turned back to the vials he’d been fumbling through. He plucked one out, and rolled it in his palm. The liquid sealed inside looked no different from water. “As you’ve probably noticed, the results have been so far less than satisfactory. The prototype released today can neutralize unamplified abilities, but it’s not nearly enough to combat Shiho-kun’s drug.” He replaced the vial and turned away from the workbench.

Shinichi followed him warily further into the lab, not exactly expecting a trap but keeping alert nonetheless. As bench after bench of compounds and machinery passed them by, Hirota Masami picked up the pace. Abruptly, he stopped before a freezer, specially locked with what looked like a high-keypad. Shinichi watched carefully as he typed in the code, and the freezer opened with a rush of chilling air. Negative eighty degrees Celsius, Shinichi guessed. The temperature preferred for the long-term storage of blood. Within, there were shelves of what were probably blood samples, but at the top, in its own tray, was a strange, small suitcase emblazoned with the red logo of a stylized cat.

The professor pulled on a glove and brought the suitcase down, almost reverently. As he did so, his eyes turned back to Shinichi, and there was a look about him, a light to his eyes, a slant to his smile, that was all too familiar. Fanatical. Dangerous.

With dread sinking like a rock in his stomach, Shinichi forced his eyes back to the case. Hirota Masami hefted it higher, displaying it before him. “This is another version, more potent, but it’s incomplete. It must be administered directly.” He placed the case down on a counter, and settled his gloved hand over it. “We’ve fallen short of our true goal.”

“We?” Shinichi repeated, uneasy but admittedly interested.

The professor threw him a careful smile that crinkled the corners of his wrinkled eyes. “I didn’t join the Cats for Shiho-kun’s sake.”

“Then why do something so dangerous?”

The gloved hand lingering on the front of the case clenched, and the man met Shinichi’s gaze once more. His face was drawn now, and grave as a tomb. “Have you heard of the Pandora Effect?”

Shinichi blinked, and searched his memory.

_Pandora._ A darknet market, now defunct. A genus of fungi. A Danish jewelry conglomerate. A species of moth. A moon of Saturn. More songs and musicians and bands than even he would care to memorize. All stemming from the same source -- the first woman in the world, or so the Ancient Greeks believed. The woman whose insatiable curiosity had wrought disaster and released every evil and hardship upon mankind.

But the Pandora Effect? He’d never heard of such a thing. Only knew it didn’t sound like anything good.

“I suppose you wouldn’t have.” The professor shook his head. “But I’m certain you are aware of a certain phenomenon that has been observed in Tokyo for approximately a decade, possibly much longer: a completely unprecedented increase in the rate of violent crime.”

Shinichi froze.
That was a familiar topic, one he’d even written about before. In fact, he had always felt like he was something of an unofficial expert on the topic, considering how often he found himself in the middle of a crime scene.

He’d borne witness to every facet of that phenomenon since before he’d gotten his first camera.

“Not only has there been a statistically impossible increase in the rates of murder and assault; we’ve been looking at increased rate of suicide, depression, and mood disorders among the population as well. More and more people are dying prematurely in Tokyo every year. Why do you think that is?”

“Social unrest. There are greater publicity and communication systems now than there has been ever before; people are connecting with one another more, and on a larger scale, than in the past. This has made, both local and international, environmental and economic, disasters increasingly apparent globally—“

The professor cut him off with a chuckle.

“An excellent theory based on sociological factors.” Of course it was. Shinichi had done his research. “But then, why just Tokyo? Why not New York? Hong Kong? Moscow? And why only now?”

Shinichi’s mouth clicked shut.

He didn’t know.

Hirota Masami paced before him, back and forth, back and forth. “No, this isn’t a societal issue. This is an isolated phenomenon. And what is the most common cause for isolated phenomenon?”

If an object floated away, if a camera exploded, if a photo vanished without being deleted… the first explanation that came to mind was always, always—

“A meta-organism, of course. *Pandora.*”

Chapter End Notes

As promised, *the official playlist!*

Should feed a couple of the theorists among y’all at least!
Long before Shinichi was even born, there was a time when it was not unusual to be anti-meta. In fact, the distrust toward metas was so prevalent, so rampant, there wasn’t even a term for describing such prejudices. A considerable amount of distrust towards seemingly ordinary humans with decidedly unnatural abilities was considered, at the very least, advisable.

And now, looking at the professor before him, Shinichi felt almost like he was peering through time, a century’s worth of suspicion and fear made tangible and sapient.

Anti-metas liked to blame everything on meta-humans: climate change, social upheavals, wars, recessions, epidemics... Shinichi himself wasn’t exactly fanatical over ISHA—if anything he was something of a harsh and unforgiving critic—and he was no stranger to carefully analyzing how their every action and choice tended to impact the world around them. But even for him, the claim that the notable, and unprecedented, upward trend of violence within Tokyo was the result of a meta-ability seemed outlandish. It wasn’t a matter of rising global temperatures or measurable property damage; those acts of violence were choices made by individuals, expressions of free will, however horrific they might have been.

Of course, mind control was a thing, obviously. He was still coming to terms with that, himself. He’d always known it was a thing, but it had never been a personal thing. It wasn’t something he had ever had to worry about, until it turned out his own father was a powerful and unrestrained telepath with less than stellar scruples regarding the matter.

But what, some meta out there was making people hurt each other? To what end? What was the point?

He didn’t know what to think.

“The original Pandora unleashed a plague of greed and hate, which would drive men to fight, cheat, and die.” The professor filled in the gaps with words. “The world we live in is a great deal more complicated than that of myth, but it seems the differences aren’t quite as vast as we’d like to think. Maybe there was even some truth to the original tale: for all we know, the ‘first woman’
may very well have been the first meta-human.”

The characterization of Pandora varied from myth to myth; some depicted her as simply curious, others made her outright malicious. There was always a certain level of misogyny to the story, men laying all their crimes and shortcomings at the feet of a woman and blaming her and all others for their own vices. It was the kind of tale that didn’t meld well with modern audiences and their sensibilities, but still persisted with Christianity and all its little permutations, with Eve and her Original Sin.

But what if, in this case, instead of just the inevitability of crime, of human nature, there really was a cause?

Shinichi wasn’t so naive to simply believe that was the case without a shred of evidence. On the other hand, the sheer, unflappable sureness on Professor Hirota’s face made it almost impossible to dismiss the whole thing out of hand.

But figuring out whether there was credible evidence behind the theory wasn’t exactly a priority at the moment.

“So what?” He found himself hissing, impatience rising in his blood.

“It could be anything. An animal, a person, a plant. It could be a fungus, or even a micro-organism.” If the professor didn’t even know what species he was looking for, it was hopeless. It was impossible to investigate every single living organism in six-hundred square kilometers; even using a conservative estimate, that put forward billions of suspects. “It could be anywhere in this city, and it could be propagating. It could be in the air, the water, or it could be walking among us, its victims none the wiser.”

The theoretical genetic inheritance of meta-abilities wasn’t as simple as two-allele Punnett squares and the height of pea plants. The offspring of a meta-organism didn’t necessarily develop the same abilities as its predecessor, if any at all, and the manifestation was known to skip generations. If both parents were metas, the matter only got more complicated: take Ran, and how she had apparently inherited both her father’s strength and durability, and her mother’s ability to absorb energy from sunlight. If this Pandora did indeed exist, and it was reproducing, there was no telling where or when one of its descendents would manifest similar capabilities, if it had not happened already.

Shinichi could admit, the picture the professor was painting was genuinely alarming.

“How are we to stop such a thing? The air-borne compound is only a temporary fix. It barely lasts for a couple of hours.” Hirota Masami gazed down on the case gripped in his hand, a frown settling into his wrinkled visage. “And I was only able to make a single viable dose of the permanent version.”

Shinichi’s heart leapt into his throat, eyes falling back to the case clenched in the professor’s hand. “A dose that can negate Miyano’s amplifier? Permanently?”

“It can eliminate a single meta’s ability entirely.” Hirota Masami confirmed, and there was something almost reverent about the way he gazed at his creation. “My Silver Bullet.”

The temporary nullifier was likely a sort of inhibitor, preventing either the translation or expression of certain genes, or blocking certain proteins for the same result. But to permanently erase a meta’s abilities required somehow altering their very genome. Was it a kind of gene therapy? But a ‘cure’ of sorts for what was, in the end, mere genetics, just what people were and how they were born—
the concept of it reeked of Eugenics, gene cleansing in all but name. The longer he looked at the case, the more uncomfortable he felt. But at the same time, wasn’t this the solution he came to find? If this nullifier really did work, then both Tokyo and the kidnapping victim threatening it could be saved.

Even if the concept of altering someone so fundamentally, so physically, so permanently, went against his own principles, could he really decide it wasn’t worth a life? Worth millions of lives?

This whole saving people thing… it wasn’t so easy to see where the lines of right and wrong were drawn from the inside, was it? There was a cost to every decision, even the ones made with the very best intentions.

But regardless, there and then, there wasn’t much of a choice to be made at all.

“Hand it over.” Shinichi took a decisive step forward. “I can get it to the test subject in time—”

“No.” The reply was immediate and firm—utterly uncompromising. The professor hadn’t even considered his words for a moment. “I didn’t make this for Shiho’s test subject.”

It was meant for Pandora, evidently.

Infuriatingly.

Shinichi found himself grinding his teeth together, a rush hot anger twisting within him and struggling to snap right out of his veins. “You don’t even know where Pandora is! What it is! There’s barely more than an hour until Tokyo is wiped off the map!”

“And Pandora could wipe out civilization as we know it.” The professor hissed back, his words coming out clipped and short and unyielding. He ignored the snarl twisting Shinichi’s lips and the curling of his fingers into fists, dismissive. Everyone was always so damn dismissive. “If it is a bacterium, it could have already multiplied thousands of times. If it’s a fungus, it could have already spread its spores all throughout the city. But for now, I’m certain of one thing: it is still confined within Tokyo.”

Shinichi’s breath caught in his throat, choked by his own mounting horror as the implications of the man’s words reverberated throughout the empty laboratory.

“I’ve seen the symptoms. Irrationality, violent impulses, inappropriate and unregulated anger and frustration. Destructive tendencies beyond any sort of control. It must be stopped, before it can escape out into the world.” Hirota Masami insisted, his voice not even wavering in the face of the madness coming out of his mouth. “When Shiho-kun told me about her most recent subject, I was relieved.” He met Shinichi’s horrified gaze, matching it with his own, filled with desperate hope. “The subject is going to swallow up everything in this city: every person, animal, and microorganism. Nothing will escape.

“And then, to destroy Pandora in its entirety, regardless of what it is or how much it has propagated, all that will be left is terminating the subject. If it even survives that long.” There was certainty gleaming in the man’s eyes, even as his hand trembled around the case’s handle. “Today will cleanse everything. Tokyo may die, but humanity will live.”

Shinichi sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. “There are better ways!”

The professor hefted the case up, jostling it before his eyes just a little. “Using this, yes, Tokyo can be saved, but there will be nothing left to counter Pandora. It will spread, grow more powerful,
more prevalent. Who knows how many will suffer unknowingly at its hands for the rest of time?”

He peered at Shinichi from behind the thick lenses of his glasses. “Are you familiar with the rest of Pandora’s story?” Hiorta Masami did not wait for him to reply, a wry smile tugging at his lips as he turned his eyes back to the presented case. “How humanity’s only salvation was keeping hope trapped in its box.”

“Are you insane?” Shinichi hissed, his teeth clenching in-between every word, until he could feel the ache in his jaw.

It was just a stupid story. But history was filled with crusades and quests: from Alexander the Great to Richard the Lionheart, there had been countless men, countless nations prepared to kill for the sake of stupid stories.

Hiorta Masami’s eyes snapped to him, a dark and furious fire blazing behind the superficially gentle visage.

“Pandora has already killed hundreds! Ruined thousands of lives! And it will only kill more the longer it is left unchecked!”

“That’s nothing compared to thirty-eight million! You can’t let an entire city die just to stop some theoretical doomsday!”

“What if it will save billions of others? Do you not understand what Pandora is capable of?” The professor’s voice dropped into a hoarse, exhausted plea. “Imagine it. Imagine being forced to kill someone you care about, someone you thought you loved until Pandora sunk itself inside of you.”

Somebody he thought he loved.

“Think of all the people in this city, hurting their friends and family for reasons they don’t understand.”

—the murder he’d reported on, just a month and a half ago, the baker poisoned over something as inconsequential as a neighborhood contest. The victim’s friend and murderer, half hysterical as he admitted to what he’d done, every step he’d taken to slip the poison onto the rim of a measuring cup, completely oblivious to his own inability to articulate why—

“Think of all the people being hurt by someone they trusted, not even knowing why.”

—the otherwise-loving husband that stabbed his wife, how he described the mild annoyance he’d been nursing against her pregnancy signs exploding into raging resentment, how devastated he’d been left in the wake of that terrible, transient anger—

Something must have shown on his face, and the professor pursed his lips. It couldn’t have been more than a crack, just the slimmest glimmer of understanding, but the old man leapt upon it.

“Do you really wish the same upon the rest of the world? On the rest of humanity? All the billions that are to come after us?”

Shinichi shook his head.

It wasn’t the time for wondering. He had to focus on the now.

“You don’t know if it will even really come to that!” The escalation was almost absurd—an absolute reversal of priorities that he would never have expected from one of the world’s leading scientists, or even just a rational—

Shinichi paused.

Was it possible that the professor himself was under Pandora’s thrall? Pandora should have been affected by the power nullifiers, but there was no guarantee that the nullification of its hypothetical abilities could undo whatever damage it had already wracked on people’s minds and emotional states.

If that was the case, then there was no reasoning with the professor. If Pandora could make friends and lovers kill one another, nothing Shinichi could say now would change this complete stranger’s mind. It was pointless to try and reason with him—even worse, it was a waste of valuable time.

All Shinichi needed was the case, anyway.

And that made things quite simple, didn’t it?

Shinichi checked the watch settled on his wrist, noting how much time he had wasted on this conversation as he lifted it up.

The professor didn’t see the dart coming, though his eyes briefly went wide as it hit home. A second later, they were sliding shut as he collapsed, and case slid from his hands.

Only then did Shinichi see the pressure-switch hidden within the handle.

The moment the pressure of the professor’s hands lifted from it, alarms erupted throughout the building. They flashed red and white along the walls, over his head, and built up into a steady wail as the echoes of human shouts filtered through the walls.

Shinichi grabbed the case and ran.

“Man, things are really going to hell up there.” Kaito scrolled through his eight separate social media apps, his brow climbing a little higher with every post. For the most part, it was selfies of people plastered against their ceilings, or pets drifting through the air. But the more serious implications of the situation were filtering through: cars that had crashed down on houses, ravaged city blocks, nervous tittering over the recent evacuation order.

Evacuation orders weren’t as uncommon as they used to be anymore, but it was a little unusual to see people being ordered out of the city, rather than to the usual shelters. Hell, most people were heading to the shelters anyway, as far as he could tell.

The doc had said everything was under control, though. Said that once the nullifiers hit whatever was causing the problem, everything would be fine.

Kaito wasn’t so sure anymore. The nullifiers had been on-line for a while already, and yet, the situation seemed to be getting worse.

But did he really care? That was the million-yen question.

There was something hollow yawning open within his chest, that had been yawning since he was just a kid but scraped red and raw now that the one person that had tried to fill the hole had scooped herself back out of it.
Aoko had been a bandage over a gaping wound, never really what he needed but comforting in the superficiality she’d allowed him to hide behind. Would it have been so bad to bask in that charade of normalcy, ignoring the emptiness to play pretend all his life?

Plenty of other people found contentment, that way. Plenty of others dreamed of a life so simple, so devoid of conflict and complications. Plenty of others would give anything for a chance at a quiet, simple life with a girl they (once?) loved.

He tried to picture it, and swallowed down a rush of bitter frustration.

It would kill him, probably, to bow his head and call it quits. The contempt, the misery, the failure would swallow him up and break him down into nothing. And maybe, if he truly loved her enough, that wouldn’t matter, he wouldn’t matter; his life would be a small price to pay for her happiness.

Maybe he didn’t love her and never had. Or maybe he did, and maybe he just loved his father more, too much to let the man go unavenged.

Then the world on his phone gave another lurch, another shaky little video showing another familiar landmark warp and buckle.

And all of a sudden, he decided that he did care. He cared about seeing his mission through. And that meant that anything that interfered with his plans had to be dealt with.

A fist crashed down on the table he’d been propping his legs on. “Oi, you!” Lethargically, his eyes turned to the side to find a man in light-weight armor snarling in his face. One of the terrorists—Katamura, age thirty-two, almost a meter-eight and ninety-nine kilos, dark cropped hair, long eyebrows, bulbous nose. “Get off your phone! We’re on duty!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kaito sighed, tucking his phone into his own armor, setting his heavy boots back on the scuffed floor. The voice of his alias came easily: drawled, low, and just a bit raspy. A former smoker struggling not to fall back into bad habits. When he shrugged, he felt the padding of his disguise shift against his skin. “On standby in the bunker. It’s not like we’re the ones guarding the nullifiers.”

“The call for us is going to come in any minute now.” Kaito didn’t roll his eyes, didn’t even pinch his lips together. Not physically, at least. Wouldn’t want the world’s most tryhard terrorist to get any more agitated, after all. “We gotta be ready for when those Overseer wannabes make their move.”

*That* idea had some merit. It even got his blood pumping, just a little. He let a lazy, but no-less-predatory, grin slide over his lips. “Excited?”

“Can’t wait.” Katamura hissed, a ridiculous oversized ball of energy and barely contained aggression. “Once we take down the kiddies, they’ll call in the big guns.” Wouldn’t that be nice? “We’re gonna bring those freaks down to our level and teach them a lesson.”

Kaito doubted that last part. At the very least, it was easier said than done, but who was he to knock down such ambitious dreams?

Instead, he laughed, the sound practically creaking out of his lips. “Damn straight we will.”

The Red Siamese Cats were a means to an end, but conversations like these weren’t entirely unpleasant. Kind of homey, if he thought about it. Maybe because the lies he spilled here were more grounded in reality than those he lived and breathed during school hours.
A sharp wail interrupted his thoughts, as the alarm fitted on the wall flashed near blindingly bright. In an instant, he was on his feet, watching Katamura’s hands fly to his fancy German-made rifle.

“Shit! That’s the intruder alarm!”

Yeah, no shit. It wasn’t exactly easy to confuse with the fire alarm.

Not that that told them much. The fact that the Cats’ security system had no way of indicating the source of the trigger, or the nature of the intrusion, or even the location of the breach without making their way to the main office—well, Kaito had thought it was convenient. It would make his eventual job easier.

Sadly, as it turned out, he wasn’t the only thief in the world. Not even the only one intending to rob the hardened terrorists blind, apparently.

There were a few likely sources: the entrance, the garage, the laboratory…

“Go block the exit!” Katamura barked as he stormed into the hallway. Kaito followed at his heels for a few moments, back straight and face appropriately obedient. “I’ll go check the labs!”

They separated at the hallway’s junction, Katamura rushing down while Kaito lingered in the stairway.

Ugh, would be so much more convenient if I got the labs. He wanted to grumble, contemplating his options. Would it be worth the risk if he just ignored his orders and went down anyway? Or was blocking off the exit actually the better option? The intruder would have no way out, and if it was Kaito at the door, if the intruder wasn’t necessarily his foe, he could potentially let them go.

He wasn’t particularly eager to see what the Cats did to intruders.

Familiar footsteps approached, light but solid, and paused behind him. Kaito could feel Jii’s heavy stare on his back, could imagine his bemused but slightly frustrated expression.

“Yeah, yeah.” Kaito sighed, settling his hands on his hips. “Let’s just collect our prize and blow this stand.”

An unexpected variable could put their whole mission in jeopardy. Any number of situations could arise, from murder (with which he wanted no business with) to the cops showing up (ditto). In either case, Kaito would vastly prefer being already clear, prize in hand, than being caught up in whatever imminent mess was upon them.

He had planned to wait a little longer before making his move on the Silver Bullet, but he was nothing if not opportunistic.

But as he moved towards the stairs, he heard sharp, harried steps coming back up towards them. Instantly, he and Jii were ducked behind a corner, peering around to keep their eyes on the stairwell.

They didn’t have to wait long.

“Kudo Shinichi?” He hissed, his voice not rising over a faint whisper as he recognized those ridiculously long legs and that impossibly neat hair. “What’s he doing here? He’s not supposed to
And he was gone in an instant, too, sprinting up the stairs without a moment’s pause, barely in sight long enough for Kaito to register that he was carrying something silver and rectangular in his hands.

For the best really. Kaito wasn’t ready to see him again, not after the—what happened last time! He still had no idea how he was supposed to deal with that!

That moment when he’d been so shamefully, horrifically honest, only to be answered by the press of lips on his own. His first kiss, and it had passed like a shooting star, barely giving him a moment to think before it was gone. The kiss he was supposed to someday steal from a beauty carried in his arms as he soared over the city, snatched from his grip like his opponent was the one that was a master pickpocket.

The worst part being that it had been actually pretty great.

He shook himself, absolutely refusing to think about it. He’d been very deliberately avoiding the thought of it, and the involved party himself, for days. Kaito never thought for a second he’d have to deal with it here, of all places.

Wait, actually…

This was the base of a terrorist cell.

Why was Kudo Shinichi here?

“Jii-chan…” Kaito said slowly, struggling to compute. “That was Kudo Shinichi, right?”

“Yessir.” If Jii’s scans said so, then there was no way Kaito was mistaken or anything. It wasn’t a lookalike or a robot designed to mimic the reporter, that had been the real deal.

And that same real deal had been carrying some kind of silver case. A silver case with a flash of red that was most definitely a cat insignia.

“And that case he was carrying…?” Kaito trailed off. “Was it what I think it was?”

Jii’s voice was completely toneless now, the way it always went when human faculties had failed him and he was resorting to nothing but good old-fashioned ones and zeroes. “I do believe that was the Silver Bullet, young master.”

“So, he has my meta nullifier?”

Ha. Funny joke. There was no way.

“Yessir.”

Goddamn it all straight to hell.

“He has my meta nullifier!”

There was a racket coming from the stairs, and four guards rushed towards them, faces twisted with fury. Katamura was in the lead, looking much less stupid than he had two minutes ago—

“After him!”
They split up, for lack of better ideas, ditching the cramped, unwieldy jet for motorbikes that would allow them a bit more mobility while they scoped out the area and searched for the liable cause of the miniature apocalypse eating the sky and everything beneath.

But some things in life were simply easier said than done.

Like finding the source of their problem without his senses.

In terms of metahuman abilities, Saguru had always known his weren’t particularly impressive. Not as flashy as Hattori’s, as versatile as Aoko’s, or as magnificent as Ran’s. They weren’t even noticeable: no one could tell he could see farther and clearer than them, or that he could feel danger like a sixth sense.

But he hadn’t needed spectacular abilities to be chosen by the Night Baron. Saguru had always taken pride in that fact: he’d been chosen for his sharp mind and natural intuition.

He didn’t need anything more, he’d told himself so many times, that it never really occurred to him that he’d someday have to prove it.

Or that he’d thoroughly fail to do so.

Thankfully, before he could chase that inadequacy-fueled rabbit down the metaphorical hole of existential crisis, he got an unexpected call over his comm. Curiously, he didn’t recognize the caller’s comm code at all—it was not any of his teammates, which should have been fundamentally impossible.

KID was Saguru’s first, infuriated thought, until a very familiar, very alarming voice crackled over the line.

“I could use some help.”

Shinichi. Flat, a little strained, but undoubtedly Shinichi.

Jesus bloody fucking Christ—“Saguru! Language!” his mother had hissed, once, so long ago—nothing was going his way today, was it?

“Where are you?” The words came out harsher than he meant them to, and his hands clenched around the handlebars as he forced himself to take a deep breath.

“I’m heading east on the 319, towards Sumida.”

Saguru opened his mouth, then closed it again with a click, cutting off the sharp breath he’d been sucking in.

As if to celebrate how much of a clusterfuck the situation had devolved into, a second call came through the bike’s controls, identified by a grinning white mask. He didn’t answer it, but it didn’t—
matter. The Baron’s deep voice still reverberated through the air.

“Is that my son on the other line?”

Saguru so didn’t need any of this right now.

“Kudo-kun.” His voice was steady again, nice and calm, and he resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. He was driving. It was already tough enough to keep his eyes on the road. “Why are you going towards Sumida?”

“Because I stole an experimental meta-ability nullifier from the Red Siamese Cats—”

Wonderful.

“Tell him to come home now.”

Saguru would’ve like to do just that, really, but somehow it felt like a truly terrible idea. Just like attempting to manage two separate phone-calls at once with the father-son duo from Hell.

Thankfully, at least, Saguru could proudly claim to be one of the most tolerant and patient people on the planet. So instead of doing something immature, like hanging up on one of the two unreasonable people snapping at him, he transferred Shinichi’s call to the comm in his ear.

Then, just to be safe, he took a deep breath. “...Kudo-kun —”

“Also, they’re trying to kill me.”

Of course they were.

He expected nothing less.

“You promised you would stay out of this.” It was pointless to bring that up now, as Shinichi couldn’t exactly turn around and take the angry terrorists home with him, but Saguru felt a little better with it on the table anyway. It gave him a sort of vindicated feeling, which considering the current circumstances, he desperately needed.

“No, we made a deal, which you failed to uphold.” And there went the vindication. Welcome back, the crushing weight of his own guilt. Shinichi didn’t wait long for the salt to sink into his wounds, though, plowing on with nary a pause. “Hakuba—Hawk, if I can get this to the epicenter, I can stop Tokyo from getting sucked into a black hole—”

Saguru opened his mouth, then paused and reconsidered.

Did Shinichi just say Tokyo was going to get sucked into a black hole?

“Alright, I need you to slow down and explain properly. Did you just say Tokyo? All of it? Not just —”

“Hawk, we have a little less than forty-five minutes until Tokyo is wiped off the planet. I have a way to stop it, but right now, a bunch of terrorists are chasing me and I could really use some help.”

Saguru valiantly resisted the urge to scream.

“The nullifier I have is a single dose that can permanently negate a meta-human’s abilities, but I need to get it to the meta-human causing the gravity fluctuations before three more holes open
That was a lot of information to take in at once.

“Did he just say he has—”

“Yes.”

“Hawk, you need to retrieve that nullifier.”

“He says he needs it to save the city.”

“I know. But not before we at least analyze it, figure out its components—” Saguru’s head was buzzing, trapped somewhere between desperate hope and a sinking feeling of imminent dread. This was everything they had been searching for, and it wasn’t like he’d given up, or doubted that they’d find it, but—

It just was so sudden.

Too good to be true.

Over the line, he heard the soft sound of the Baron taking a deep breath.

“Hawk, more than the air-borne version, we need that version.” But, according to what Shinichi just said, so did everyone else in the city. They all needed it, just as much. “I’ll report the situation to ISHA, we’ll find another way to deal with this metahuman, or at least a way to buy some time.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable stipulation. But…

“Kudo-kun, we need to analyze that nullifier of yours. We’ll escort it to a lab—”

“There’s no time!” Shinichi snapped, his voice uncharacteristically harried.

Saguru’s nerves were already stretched thin: from the confrontation with KID, to Shinichi learning the truth about them, from a sleepless night spent working himself to the bone to a day equally exhausting and ten times more dire. Exhaustion weighed on him, but his blood was running hot in his veins.

It wasn’t a combination that made for calm, collected conversations.

Shinichi always made things difficult, and he was used to that, he understood why better than anyone. He got it, and he sympathized.

But with the whole city at stake, there was no time for letting their own issues interfere.

“We’ll make time!” Saguru hissed back, a little too forcefully, for the compromise he was trying to broker. “We’ll talk the metahuman down, or take them down if need be, if you know where they are, we can handle this—”

“No!” Shinichi cut him off again, his voice rough and a little breathless. “No! They aren’t some terrorist, or villain, or monster; they aren’t doing it on purpose! They can’t control it, Hakuba!”

They couldn’t control it?

His hands tightened on the handlebars, clenching around the rubber under his gloves. He could hear his heart pounding in his chest.
...Nothing could ever be easy. It really always had to be so difficult.

Goddammit.

“The only way is to get rid of their powers.” There was a true edge in Shinichi’s voice now, sharp but jagged, and it was so terribly familiar. He could feel it in his own bones, burning behind his eyes, scraping against his every thought.

Saguru knew that desperation all too well.

“Hawk, listen to me—” The Baron was talking, firm and unyielding as always, but all Hakuba could hear was the bitter, wild strain in Shinichi’s every breath.

“Can’t you for once just listen to me?” Shinichi said, and he thought of libraries and camcorders and walls he didn’t know how to break down. He thought of words he didn’t want to say, but said anyway. He thought of every time he pretended to turn a deaf ear, even though he could hear better than anyone else on the planet.

He thought of the weight of what he knew, of just what picking a side could lead them to.

Saguru stared at the communicator built into the bike, at the flashing white icon.

And then he hung up.

“Hawk?” Shinichi’s voice echoed in his ear, not quite plaintive but not entirely steady either.

They’d figure it out, he told himself. They’d find another way.

He’d find a way to do this the right way, no matter how impossible. No more compromising.

“I’m listening.” The Baron was going to lecture nine Hells out of him when this was done with, but for the moment, Saguru pushed his treachery-fueled guilt aside and focused. “Alright, Kudo-kun, we’ll do this your way.”

For a moment, it was quiet.

“Great.” It wasn’t easy to decipher the tone of that single word, but it was strong for all that it was breathless. “I think I can send my location using this thing—ah, there we go.”

On the display in the corner of his eye, a panel popped up: a little blinking dot speeding almost unbelievably fast across the map, heading straight for Sumida.

Saguru tapped his own comm, eyeing all three numbers that collapsed down over the screen.

“Did you guys get all that?” He adjusted his own course to collide with Shinichi’s own trajectory, and hit the gas.

“Like hell we did!” Hattori’s voice came snarling through. “I’m on my way over!”

“Wait a sec! Heiji!” Kazuha yelped. “This is crazy! In case ya guys forgot, we’ve got no powers right now!”

“Yes, but the Cats didn’t have any to begin with.” Saguru could feel a smile tugging at his lips. He wasn’t exactly the type to run from a challenge, and he’d stood his grounds against worse odds than this. “Sounds like a fair fight to me.”
"I’m going!" Ran agreed, as if there’d been any doubt.

"Not ya guys too!" Kazuha wailed. She wasn’t usually the voice of reason, and clearly, she wasn’t taking her new role gracefully. When no one backed down, she made a sound of frustration that rumbled over the comms. "Fine! I’m comin’ too!"

The Nightingale was an absolute blessing. Shinichi was pretty sure he’d be dead right now, without it, even if the terrorists seemed hesitant to open fire on him so long as he was carrying their precious nullifier. Not to mention the bike was faster than their armored vehicles, and far more maneuverable over the shredded streets of Tokyo.

For now, he was outpacing them.

But that was no reason to get careless.

Just a few kilometers from the heart of Sumida, a blur veered into the road and came up alongside him. For a moment he tensed, clutching the handlebars and half a breath away from jerking left, until he recognized the icon emblazoned on the side of the rider’s helmet.

Hawk.

Hakuba.

“You’re early.” The words came more easily than they probably should have, but with the wind roaring by them, he couldn’t even be sure Hakuba would catch them. “I haven’t even been shot yet.”

“Very funny.” The answer came back in stereo, as a faint voice swept away as they shot down the street, and as an echo over the comms. Hakuba glanced behind them, the streetlights streaking across the bulletproof visor of his helmet. “Where are your friends?”

“I think I lost them when I took the exit about four blocks back. I’m sure they’ll catch up.” They seemed hellbent on it, at the very least.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” It was easy to imagine the self-satisfied smirk that probably accompanied those words. “Is everyone in position?”

“Roger!” Kazuha chirped, and Shinichi found there were a few blinking dots scattered across the map displayed in the center of the Nightingale’s console. One was right alongside his own, but the others were weaving through the blocks around them.

“Kudo-kun, did the Cats get a good look at your bike?”

“I don’t think so.” Despite himself, Shinichi smirked. “This thing moves damn fast.”

“We have a few advantages that are working in our favor, here. First, it’s dark out. Second, most of the streetlights have been torn out. Third, with the evacuation, the streets are mostly empty.” “The Cats are searching for someone fleeing from them on motorbike. Give them something to chase, guys.”

“You got it!”

“That should at least buy us time.” “Care to use it to catch me up on what we’re getting into?”
“I don’t know where to start, honestly.” “Remember those missing kids?”

“Yes.”

“And the guys in the bird masks?”

“How could I forget.”

“Those children were kidnapped, and experimented on, and now they are the direct cause of the recent attacks upon Tokyo.”

Quiet. Shinichi listened to the wind, watching Hakuba out of the corner of his eye.

Hakuba was smart. Even with just a few pieces, he could put the puzzle together.

Shinichi remembered that day in the library, when he first alluded to the possibility of the lava giant being in actuality a terrified child. Hakuba hadn’t listened to him then, and now Shinichi knew why. Without even realizing it, he’d been all-but calling Hakuba a murderer, right to his face.

And now, that theory seemed to be reality.

By misfortune and circumstance, the Irregulars had killed a child.

Had they known?

Probably not.

But if they had known, would it have changed anything?

And then Hakuba hit the brakes, shrieking to a stop in the street. Shinichi slammed his own down, struggling to bring the Nightingale to such a sudden stop. He glided down sideways, for almost half a block, instinctively dragging a foot along the pavement.

Behind him, Hakuba jerked off his helmet. Underneath, his usually-tidy hair was in complete disarray, and he gripped the helmet in his hands far too tightly. With his mask in place, Shinichi could only imagine the look in his eyes, but he was sure it wasn’t pretty.

“We—” Hakuba started, choking on the word. Shinichi gave him a moment, watching his mouth twist and contort and his throat bob. “We thought that it was because…”

“The Pandora Effect.” Shinichi filled in easily. For him, too, the pieces were all falling into place. “You guys thought it was because of whatever was causing the increase of criminal activity in Tokyo.”

That seemed to shake Hakuba just as badly as the truth behind Satoshi. His head jerked up, staring at Shinichi with what could only be called complete devastation.

It took another moment for Hakuba to resettle, for his expression to even out and his painstakingly-trained self-discipline to slip back into place.

“... How do you know about that?”

Shinichi quirked an eye-brow at the carefully measured response that slipped out from Hakuba’s tightly pursed lips.
He could know everything, if he wanted to. Until very recently, just acknowledging that made him deeply uncomfortable. But being underestimated to such an extent, even if it was the result of his own careful restraint, itched.

Did his father and Hakuba seriously think he wouldn’t notice? That he completely lacked any sort of pattern recognition? There was a difference between being oblivious and being willfully ignorant. He had a bad habit of leaning towards the latter, but no one had ever even suggested that he was unobservant before.

Hakuba withered under his gaze, fraying at the edges with weary shoulders and a clenched jaw.

“I noticed it a while back.” And he wasn’t even the only one that realized that Tokyo was becoming a hotspot of unusual activity. But the reality of the situation, it seemed, was not a conclusion anyone came to easily. “I thought it was strange that the rate of violent crime in Tokyo was rising so rapidly, that there was some sort of societal shift going on. Seems like there is a more concrete explanation instead.”

“Shinichi-kun,” Hakuba said, and his voice was very soft, yet firm. Not Kudo, but his first name, and even then it itched. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Is now really the time?” Because unless what Hakuba had to say could stack up to thirty-eight million lives on the line, they really didn’t have the time or breath to waste.

“Yes.” There was steel in Hakuba’s voice, unbending and solemn, so much so that Shinichi forced his mind away from Sumida and the living, breathing, ticking time-bomb hidden within it. “If there was ever a time, it is now.”

It felt, suddenly, like they were standing on the precipice of something—of some revelation beyond any of the secrets already spilled between them—as if he was balancing on the brink, his fingers prickling with nervous energy.

“The truth is—”

A figure in white dropped down to join them, mantle floating elegantly behind. At the sight of the thief, Hakuba’s mouth instantly clicked shut, frustration lingering uncharacteristically in the frown creasing his lips.

“KID.” The word came out like a blade, colder and harder than Shinichi would’ve ever thought possible. Evidently, what Hakuba had to say wasn’t for others to hear.

Never a good sign.

Well, then whatever immense confession Hakuba was choking on would have to wait. They were out of time.


And that answered the final question.

The whole time, KID had been after the nullifiers. More specifically, a permanent version, and most likely, intended for Shinichi’s own father.

If the Night Baron lost his powers… well, KID wouldn’t need to lift another finger. Whether the Baron was forced to retire, or his enemies caught up to him first, it would be it would be the end of
his father’s superhero career, one way or another.

Despite everything, the thought made Shinichi go cold, icy fingers dragging down his spine.

Just for a second, his eyes cut to the briefcase stowed in the Nightingale’s storage compartment. “That’s what you’ve been after the whole time?”

It was possible KID didn’t even intend to stop there with his father. Why would he? With time, Hirota Masami might even be able to mass-produce the permanent dose, or KID himself could find a way to replicate it using the research he stole. The thief could very well be aspiring to leave every Overseer powerless, ripping the carpet out from under one of the most powerful organizations in the world.

It would be anarchy, but the execution was the farthest thing from madness. It was careful, rational, meticulous.

But the result would be complete anarchy.

“Indeed.” KID smiled, sharp enough to cut. Under the rim of his hat, his eyes were nothing short of voracious as he reached into his jacket and pulled out his card gun. He spun it with flourish, and in the blink of an eye, they were looking down its barrel. “Now, I’d like the return on my investment.”

Shinichi snatched the case up and clutched it to his chest.

He wasn’t about to surrender it to anyone.

“Unless you have another way to stop the city from being swallowed by a black hole,” Hakuba stepped in between them, bo-staff in hand, “that’s not happening.”

The smile cutting KID’s face all but disintegrated, leaving behind a dull line. KID considered them a moment, sharp eyes flickering between the brandished weapon and the case in Shinichi’s hands.

“Seriously?” There was a dull note of disbelief to his tone, trying to sound unimpressed but not quite succeeding.

“Seriously.” Hakuba parroted.

Both of their feet were planted, grips firm on their respective weapons. The sight almost made Shinichi bang his head against the closest wall. There was no time for juvenile stand-offs.

He turned on his heel and left them behind, ignoring their near-simultaneous outcries. It wasn’t like KID would actually shoot him anyway, at least not in the back.

“Shinichi-kun!”

“Hey! Hold on!”

They were close enough now that he could make it on foot. Behind him, there was only one set of footsteps, but he had no doubt KID was following as well.

“Do we even know where the meta is?” Hakuba called, and Shinichi glanced back at him. Despite their belligerence, they were running side by side. KID’s expression was trapped somewhere between pleasant and disgruntled, like someone else was peering out from behind the gentleman’s mask.
"If you were a scared little kid in Sumida, where would you go?" Shinichi answered, his eyes set on the sky as he ran. Before him, he could see a tower rising above them, shining in the dark with a phantasmal brilliance.

"... A police box?" Hakuba’s voice lilted upwards questioningly at the end.

"Bootlicker." KID muttered under his breath, in a tone that didn’t even try to play at his usual affable air.

Shinichi rolled his eyes and pointed upwards, right at the Bell Tree Tower dominating the sky.

Hakuba followed his finger, mouth falling a little open. "Why there?"

"It’s familiar." In a city of dark and seemingly interchangeable buildings, every child would know the tallest one around. Between field trips and tours and childish daydreams, there was no other place in Sumida a child would know better. “No matter where you are, it’s there, towering over everything else, shining in the dark.”

“A beacon.” KID hummed, the light of the tower bestowing his white suit with an eerie glow. “It’s as good a guess as any.”

With KID with them, behaving for the moment for whatever reason—survival, Shinichi hoped—getting in was easy. But the elevators were dark and unmoving, and Shinichi cut the thief an expectant look.

KID shrugged, just the slightest twitch of his shoulders behind Hakuba’s turned back.

Right, no powers. KID had temporarily sacrificed his own technopathy when he helped the Cats hamstring the metahumans of Tokyo.

That meant they were taking the stairs. Up at least a hundred stories.

“This is gonna hurt, isn’t it.” Not only that, it would take time. At least twenty minutes.

They were really cutting it down to the goddamn wire.

“Better get going then.”

It was determination that got them to the observation deck, in the end.

He’d always heard that the human body was capable of incredible things when lives were on the line—those stories about mothers lifting cars off their babies couldn’t all have been made up—but this was the first time he experienced it himself. His legs trembled beneath him as he stumbled out of the stairwell, and though he was breathing harder than he’d ever had before in his life, his lungs pounded like there wasn’t a wisp of air in them.

But they’d made it, with five minutes left.

Hakuba stumbled to the side behind him, catching the wall to keep himself upright as he shouldered past Shinichi. Despite how hard he was breathing, the blond scanned the deck vigilantly.

But it was empty, except for a single little figure, sitting alone in the middle of the floor.
She was younger than he expected: ten years old at the most. Not even reaching one-hundred and fifty centimeters, she was tiny, with scruffy brown hair and murky eyes.

Daichi had given him a list of names, and whatever information any others could provide. It had been more extensive than he’d expected, considering the providers were street kids all-but scattered to the wind, but the ever-increasing anxiety of watching their peers vanish one-by-one month after month seemed to have loosened some tongues. Some had been harder to get information on than others. Not all the kids on the street went by their real names. Nicknames were common, and managing to get the exact kanji out of anyone had been almost impossible.

From there, he’d been able to compile a tentative list of the probable victims: pages and pages of missing-person fliers and newspaper clippings he had matched to the names he’d been given. He hadn’t stopped until he’d memorized the entire packet, each little face engraved in his mind.

Shinichi pushed past Hakuba’s defensive stance and hurried closer, ignoring Hakuba’s attempts to haul him back.

“Isikawa Haruka-chan?” She jolted at the call, terrified eyes flickering in his direction. In person, even in the dim light, he recognized the color: they were just like Ran’s.

“Y-you know my name?”

Hers had been among the ones that hadn’t been easy to suss out; some of the kids had taken up nicknames before they’d wound up on the streets, which made linking them to missing-person reports a complete nightmare.

“I came to find you.” He kept his voice as soft and steady as possible. “Do you prefer Santa?”

She stared at him, eyes wide in her face and her lips quivering.

“Is it alright if I come closer?”

Haruka’s breath hitched, and instinctively, he took a step back. It took a long, quiet moment, the only noise the sound of her weak sniffles, before she nodded.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” His hand clenched around the handle of the briefcase. “Did they hurt you?”

“They—” Her voice broke off, wavering pitifully as she swallowed around a wet sob. “—Kicked me a lot. My chest hurts real bad.” Each word seemed to shake as badly as she was, as her dirty hands curled in the stained front of her shirt. Her breaths were shallow, and he didn’t think it was just because of panic.

It wasn’t the time or place for anger, but that didn’t stop him from feeling it.

He moved closer, opening the case as he moved, hyper aware of each second that passed them by. He showed her the contents, revealing a glass syringe that gleamed in the light.

“This medicine is going to make you better, okay?”

He thought being straightforward would help. He didn’t want to seem like he was trying to trick her.

But Haruka tensed at the first glimpse of the syringe, rocking backwards and scrambling to her feet in an instant.
“Better?” She shrieked, and as she fled backwards, the light through the windows revealed pale arms mottled with bruises and injection marks. “Better? That’s what they said!”

He clicked the case shut instantly, and raised his hands, as non-threateningly as he could. When he took a step after her, she snarled like a wild beast.

“No! Stay away from me! No more needles! Don’t touch me!”

With each desperate word, the floor underneath them lurched. All three of them were sent stumbling over the deck. The glass in the windows contorted, for a single moment curving in, and then it shattered.

Shinichi lost his footing on the fourth immense shake, hearing the horrible groan of bending metal somewhere underneath them. He threw his hands out to catch himself before he collapsed onto the floor, and bit back a scream as shards of glass cut into his hands.

And then he realized the handle in his fist wasn’t attached to anything at all. His fall had snapped the handle clean off, leaving the rest of the case to go skidding over the shaking deck.

“Shit!” Shinichi gasped, struggling to get his feet back underneath him.

White streaked across his vision as KID threw himself after the case, right as it was about to go over the edge. He caught it by the corner just as it slipped over, on his knees in glass.

But before they could even take a breath, the entire floor tilted under their feet. KID went over immediately, a gloved hand just barely managing to catch hold of the edge. Shinichi tried to run up the tilting floor, but his soles slipped against the glass. His stomach lurched in his chest as he fell, plummeting down.

Hakuba, one hand grasping his staff, braced against the remaining base of the ruined windows, tried to catch him, but the space between their outstretched hands was too great.

He heard someone curse, and the case went flying by him, back onto the deck. Then a hand was grabbing him, catching in his jacket and finding its grip around his wrist. He jerked to a stop, dangling from KID’s arm with nothing but three hundred meters of empty air underneath him. KID had a firm grip on a makeshift railing, but the strain of both their weights was obvious on his face.

Up the tilting deck, the case was coming skidding back down.

“The case! Get the case!” Shinichi yelled, at Hakuba, at KID, at anyone.

But KID didn’t let go, white glove slipping on his hand as he struggled to keep his grip on the railing. They both flinched as the building shuddered violently once more, tilting back in the other direction. KID’s grasp on his wrist clutching tightly as they were nearly shaken off. Hakuba stumbled over the shaking walkway, crashing down to the metal lattice that thankfully held firm under his feet.

The case was far more easily dislodged, and Shinichi watched in horror as it tumbled down, silver reflecting the city lights as it plummeted out of his sight. His stomach dropped with it.

And then Hakuba jumped after it.

“Hakuba!” He screamed, codenames be damned, as the same time he heard KID curse again. Hakuba was nothing more than smudge of color one instant, then gone in the smoke and dust the next. Shinichi couldn’t see where he’d gone, if he’d caught himself with a grapple, or anything.
Futilely, he searched the wreckage below them for a glimpse of blond hair, or a blur of dusty brown.

Nothing.

KID dragged them both back up with effort, his muscles straining under his white suit. The deck was mostly righted again, and there was a little girl curled in the air above it, utterly weightless as she curled up in on herself.

Shinichi shook KID’s arm. “Did you see where he fell? Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine.” KID didn’t seem even mildly concerned. Shinichi shoved at his chest, stumbling back to his feet. The lattice under their feet shifted once more, barely managing to hold against all the abuse it had weathered, but its stability was the least of his concerns. The syringe within the case had to have survived the fall, they had to assume that, because otherwise the whole city was doomed.

Shinichi set his eyes on Haruka.

Curled in a ball, isolated as she floated in the air, untouchable to a world that had shown her no mercy: there were no words to describe what he felt for her.

No one should ever have to be untouchable.

He clenched his fists.

“I’ll stay here, you go and help him search for it.”

“What? There isn’t time to get it all the way back up here!” KID snapped, turning on him. His suit was shredded at the elbows and knees, blood seeping through the edges, but Shinichi was sure that the glider hidden underneath would be intact.

“We have to try!” There had to be a way to get a small briefcase back up a tower in such little time, they just had to find it first. Hakuba and KID were both clever, if they worked together and Shinichi managed to buy them some time, they could still salvage this.

“She’ll get you killed!”

“Yes, she will.” Shinichi agreed, gazing at the quivering figure. “Unless you get that case back up here in time.”

KID stared at him, his mouth opening, then closing. And then he spun on his heel and threw himself from the tower, slipping out of sight in an instant.

“It’s alright, Santa,” Shinichi said. Wide, glossy eyes turned to him, set in a blotchy, crying face.

“I—I didn’t mean to.” He watched her eyes fill with tears that didn’t quite fall but instead floated from her eyelids, perfectly round. Her mouth worked, struggling around the hitching sobs wracking her whole body. “I don’t wanna hurt anybody!” Her voice rose like a wail in the empty, ruined deck, as her shaking hands tore at her hair. “I just want to be left alone!”

“I know.”

He knew.

He knew exactly what that felt like.
“But I’m not going to leave you.” She stared at him, crying, lips trembling. He reached out for her, arms extended. “Can you come down?”

She shook her head.

“I can’t. It’s coming.” She whispered, hugging herself. There was despair in her eyes, heartbreaking on such a young face.

Time was almost up, and they both knew it. But that emotional outburst that triggered the near destruction of the tower…

It proved that her powers were linked to her emotions.

He couldn’t give up yet.

“It’s going to be alright.” He moved closer, still reaching for her. A dirty hand slipped down and grasped at his fingers, trembling against his skin. He gripped back as gently as he could. “You just need to stay calm, okay?”

“I can’t stop it.” She whispered between unsteady breaths, tears streaming freely into the air.

“I’ll help you.”

She shook her head, so wildly her whole body rocked in the air. “It doesn’t work like that! I’m gonna kill everybody!”

“No, you aren’t.” He said, as carefully as he could. “That’s not going to happen, okay?”

“I’m gonna die too.” Broken sobs made the words almost completely incomprehensible, and though it started as a shout, it ended as a miserable whimper. “I’m scared.”

He opened his mouth, half a breath into another platitude, when the communicator in his ear came alive with a horrible shriek that had him flinching.

Just seconds later, he felt his phone vibrating in his pocket, and he slipped it out and answered without taking his eyes from Haruka.

He expected Hakuba, but what came instead was Ran’s voice. He’d recognize it anywhere. But it was garbled, cutting in and out between blasts of static.

"Ran?"

“You—to get ou—ght now! That pla—ing to blow—”

Shinichi jerked in place, head snapping in the direction of the windows.

Something was going on down below.

“Hold on.” He said, releasing Haruka’s hand.

He had to check.

Haruka tensed in the air, wailing as she tried to catch hold of him again. Instead she only turned uselessly in the air, and he raised his hand placatingly as he hurried over to the edge. Her cries turned to begging the further he got, and though it hurt to leave her there, he had to check. “Don’t! Don’t leave me alone! Please! I don’t really want to be alone!”
From the edge of the deck, he glanced back at her, mouth opening to comfort.

But then he saw it.

It could have been just a speck of dirt on her shirt, blacker than anything he’d seen, but he knew better.

“I want my mom.” She whimpered.

Ran didn’t know what was going on anymore.

She’d taken the Cats that followed her on a hell of a wild goose chase, weaving through the streets and alleys until they’d finally managed to corner her after a wrong turn. But Ran remembered the bruises Aoko and Hakuba had returned with, and the way their costumes had reeked of burned rubber.

The Cats had learned too late that she still maintained her karate skills, honed them whenever she could. Skills that no nullifiers could ever take away. It was them who were trapped with her, in the end, and when she walked away it was with barely a hair out of place.

Bell Tree Tower was a disaster zone by the time she’d gotten there, the tower teetering dangerously as if any moment it might snap like a twig and come collapsing down. High above her, she saw something silver gleaming as if fell, just for a moment, and then there was a familiar figure disappearing into the dust after it.

“Hawk!” She yelled into her comm, but was met with only static. Maybe whatever was causing the tower to bend like plastic was interfering, maybe it was something else entirely, but whichever it was, the interference left her lost.

What was she supposed to do?

Ran couldn’t see where Hakuba had fallen, but she kept her eyes on the tower as she switched the channel of her comm from the team’s dedicated line to that of the ISHA support line. An encouraging beep came through the faint static, and she quickly rattled off her identification code.

The support line was emergencies only, specially set up so agents could stay updated with any pertinent information while in the field. If there was anything she needed to know, anything to know, she’d learn it there.

“Location: Sumida, Tokyo, Japan, Earth. Current status: Class S danger zone.”

Class S?

Ran felt her blood run even colder in her veins. That was the absolute top of the scale.

“Emergency preventive measures have been authorized. All agents are advised to immediately retreat from disaster epicenter.”

She had no idea what that meant; being a trainee hero, she wasn’t very experienced with the support line, or the policies that were behind the directions it gave. While she got the gist of what was being directed, Ran felt utterly helpless to grasp what it really meant.

Biting her lips, she took another look at the tower and ignored every instinct that told her to step
“What preventive measures?”

“Precision ballistic strike authorized.”

“No.” Ran’s voice sounded faint to her own ears, the words stuck in her brain but failing to compute. “No!”

Jargon be damned, she knew exactly what that meant.

“By whose authority!?” She shrieked into the comm.

“All offensive emergency actions require authorization level eight or above.” Besides the Baron, the person she knew with the highest authorization level was Hakuba, who only had level three, which was already high for a field agent; her mom, in the legal department, had an authorization of level two.

Eight or above? Did the Baron even have that much authority?

Struggling to thin around the pounding of her blood and the panic settling over her, she all but screamed into the communicator. “Abort!”

“Operative identified as Irregular Operative Two, Angel. Authorization level one. Operative does not have the level of authorization required to complete this command. If you believe there has been an error—”

“Error!” She snapped, to trigger the system’s help features. An empty dial-tone was the only answer. “Contact the system administrator! Emergency!”

“We’re sorry, it seems that the requested services are out of order at the moment, please try—”

Furious, she threw the device at the ground with a strangled scream. Without Angel’s strength, it didn’t even dent against the concrete, just skittering over coarse ground with a still-flashing screen.

What the hell was going on?

Shinichi was up there!

How the hell did they stop a missile? They couldn’t exactly recall it!

Who could stop the missile?

She could: she could fly up there, catch it, divert it, throw it into space like all the movies. She could stop a missile.

Except she couldn’t.

Shinichi had to get out of there—but he didn’t know. There was no way for him to know.

Ran scrambled for her comm, her heart lurching in her chest painfully as she realized the screen had cracked. They were built to be durable, but not enough to survive someone genuinely trying to break them. But she still had her phone, which she dragged from the pocket hidden in her sash. She wasn’t supposed to have it in costume, but Angel always had to be in so many places at once that there was usually nowhere to even leave it before she had to be in the air.
Shinichi was the third speed-dial, after her mom and dad.

If she had her powers, how hard she pressed the button would have shattered her phone entirely. Her hands were shaking against the hard plastic as she brought it up to her ear, hearing nothing but the pounding of her heart and the ringing. With each ring, a fresh spike of anxiety cut through her.

Four rings, and then Shinichi answered.

“—an?” His voice was marred by horrible static. Something was still interfering with the signal, but there was no time to waste.

“Shinichi! You have to get out of there right now! That place is going to blow up!”

Dial tone cut her off nearing the end.

Did he hear it?

Was there even still time for him to get out?

No, there probably wasn’t, because she—

There he was, she could see him on the edge, looking around for her. Briefly he glanced back, and went very tense, before he turned back to her and relaxed again.

Above him, she could see it coming.

And as she watched, her stomach twisted with something horrible.

Resignation.

*I’m so sorry, Shinichi."

They looked at each other, twenty stories and a thousand broken desires between them, and he smiled. Firm, fierce, and unafraid; a little cracked at the edges but so undeniably him. A hand came to where the glass of the window once was, fingers spread against empty air.

With a hollow ache settling inside her, Ran knew he wasn’t reaching for her. It was a meagre gesture, some paltry attempt at comfort, the only remaining of connection between them.

Hopelessly, she lifted her own hand in response, focusing on her own outstretched fingers before realizing that the direction of her gaze made him blur and fade. It was already so hard to see him, even with the telescope built into her mask, because the whole world was swirling as heat spilled over her cheeks.

She couldn’t lose him yet—not like this, not now. There was so much left to say, left to admit, left to forgive, left to argue and laugh about. All that time they’d wasted saying nothing at all, too trapped in their own heads deluding themselves to see that they were whittling what precious time they still had with one another away; suddenly, she wanted to take each moment back and spend it more carefully, more greedily. She wished she could have told him to forget his career and go out with her more, that she could have turned her comm off and ignored news and focused on him, that they had known that if they didn’t try then, they’d never get another chance.

But he was already gone, and had been gone for a long, long time. The clock was ticking down and there was no time for the thousand of apologies echoing in her head, no time to even try.

And yet, in that moment, connected by only two outstretched hands, she felt closer to
understanding him than ever before.

Because they never could have done it. He could never ignore a story to chase, and she could really ask him to. She could never ignore a person to save, and he would never ask her to.

Five. She choked on her own voice, her tongue twisting in her mouth.

Four. She jerked forward, eyes locked on his distant figure even as she knew something was plummeting from the sky.

Three. She tried to fly, but her goddamn legs wouldn’t leave the ground.

Two. She watched his eyes close, as if deciding on the final image he wanted to see was not whatever was coming next.

One. He jerked back, eyes blown wide with surprise, white settling on his shoulder and around his chest as he was swept up in a sheet.

Zero. Not a sheet. Shinichi disappeared in the cape, tucked into a chest and under a confident grin. They charged forward, bursting into the night with an explosion tearing out behind and above them, a ferocious rippling of fire and smoke and bright light. The thunder of it drowned out everything, echoing in her ears like a funeral dirge, but Shinichi and his unexpected savior were tumbling through the air, wrapped in ivory. The force of the blast knocked them down and out, and she was moving again, her feet dashing towards the free-falling pair’s apparent crash course with the pavement.

Then the wings opened, and they were swept back up and forward in a graceful curve, revealing a grinning phantom thief with a stunned reporter in hand.

The hang-glider was a step up from tumbling out of a careening helicopter, at least.

They touched ground a considerable distance away from the remains of the tower, stumbling to a stop on a shredded street. KID let him down, the action borderline ungracious, and rolled his shoulders as the glider collapsed.

Shinichi stared.

“What? You’re heavy!” KID huffed.

That wasn’t the problem.

KID shouldn’t have been able to save him. KID should have been at the bottom of the tower, or at least sprinting up the stairs to get back up to the top. There was no way he should have been able to get to the bottom and back to the top of the tower in the time that had passed.

Was there a trick? A hidden elevator? The DOVEs? A grappling line?

“How did you—” And only then did it hit him. “You never left.”

KID had never actually descended the tower, he hadn’t gone after Hawk, hadn’t tried to get the nullifier back—

KID almost seemed to flinch, a wince lingering at the corner of his mouth, under Shinichi’s
burning eyes. “I never would have made in back in time.”

“You could have tried!”

“And you could have died.” KID said right back, smooth as anything. Shinichi wished he would roll his eyes, or snap, or anything but stand there looking perfectly unruffled. The person he’d caught glimpses of earlier was gone, leaving nothing but the mask. “I think a little gratitude is due.”

Yeah, well, that wasn’t happening.

KID may have managed to save him, but—

They couldn’t do a single thing for Haruka in the end. She died, terrified and alone, at eleven years old, over something she’d never had a semblance of a say in.

Maybe if he hadn’t wasted so much time trying to reason with Hirota Masumi, maybe if he’d arrived just a little earlier, maybe, maybe, maybe.

Maybes didn’t fix anything. He’d failed, plain and simple, and a little girl had died because of it.

He didn’t know what sort of face he was making, but it couldn’t have been pretty, not when it made KID look at him like that.

For a moment, the detachment of KID’s expression wavered, and became something a little gentler.

“We…” He trailed off, just for a breath, and then came back strong. A hand, the glove covering it near threadbare from everything that had just happened, settled on his shoulder. “We did everything we could, Kudo.”

Did they really?

Then why did he feel so guilty?

He felt like an overfilled glass, the thick uncompromising guilt overflowing until it seeped out of his every jagged-edged crack.

Was KID feeling guilty too?

Were his powers coming back?

Was that why he felt like this?

He couldn’t tell.

KID plucked his hand back, a little too quickly.

“It’s not over yet.”

KID stared at him. “What?”

“Santa wasn’t the only one. There are others.” Up to twenty, probably. Maybe more, maybe less. It didn’t matter. He had to find them, get to them in time, before—Before. “I won’t let this happen again.”

“Kudo—”
“Hirota Masami.” Once more, the professor was the answer. “We need to find him, get him to remake the nullifier. We’ll need enough doses for however many kids are—”

“You need to calm down. Breathe.”

He didn’t need to breathe, he needed to fix this.

The glasses. He still had the glasses.

He pulled them out and shoved them on his face and checked the professor’s position. Surprisingly, he wasn’t where Shinichi had left him, but much closer. The man must have been chasing the Silver Bullet himself, desperate to retrieve what he thought was his only hope now that the city had failed to vanish.

Shinichi didn’t wait another moment, rushing towards the blinking dot overlaying his vision. KID chased him through the streets, and though he knew he should be exhausted, he didn’t need to stop. His legs, which should have been killing him, felt utterly numb.

Blocks away, he tried to burst out onto a side street, only to be jerked back. KID plastered them to the wall, one hand settled over Shinichi’s mouth as he tried to yell, the other pointing.

And then Shinichi saw what KID saw: a hulking, giant of a man in all black, and a string-limbed professor collapsed on the ground of an alleyway.

As soon as he was sure Kudo wouldn’t give them away, Kaito released him and settled against the corner, peering out.

“Tequila.” Shinichi whispered as he pressed close and glared at the horrifically scarred giant that Kaito recognized vaguely from the video he’d lifted from the reporter’s camera all those nights ago.

And there was Hirota Masami, too. Kaito didn’t like where this was going.

Tequila advanced upon the professor nice and slow, like a predator. The man scrambled back, but he wasn’t getting far.

“Did you really think Sherry had us fooled?” Tequila was saying. “The only reason you’ve been allowed to live this long is because of Pandora. But you haven’t even been able to find that for us.” Pandora this, Pandora that. It was like, the only thing everyone was talking about these days. Kaito was getting real sick of hearing about it, whatever it was. “And today was the last straw. The destruction of Pandora, the creation of the Silver Bullet—we can’t allow either of those things, you see.”

Hirota Masami shivered, eyes wide and voice pleading. “You don’t understand! If—if you kill me, there will be no way to stop it! You’ll doom us all!”

A barking laugh echoed throughout the street, Tequila’s head thrown back with horrible mirth. The grin spread over his face, tugging at the horribly burnt skin in a way that had Kaito’s stomach turning.

“Trust me,” he crowed, “we understand.”
And then he flicked the professor right in the forehead. Even just that modicum of contact had the Professor’s head snapping back.

Tequila rose back up, rocking back on his heels with one last nightmarish smile. He left Hirota Masami there on the concrete, reeling but still breathing, and for a moment Kaito didn’t understand why, after all that, Tequila was letting the man go. It was a relief, regardless, but—

—and then there was a noise like a firecracker—

—and the professor’s head exploded.

Kaito was going to be sick. He couldn’t tear his eyes from the red stain on the pavement, or the smoke rising from where the man’s head should have been.

He remembered the color of his father’s brain, but this, this was different—

Kaito didn’t know how long he’d stared, until he felt Shinichi tugging on his sleeve.

“I’m going after them.”

What?

“Are you crazy?” Kaito stared at him, still stuck on the red and the black and the mess. He wanted to rewind time, to catch up, to see what the hell sort of nonsense was going on in Kudo’s head. “Did you just miss the exploding head part?”

Shinichi glared into his face, pale as the moon and just as unaffected by shit like logic, and sense, and self-preservation. “Tequila could lead me to the other kids. I’m going.”

“You are crazy.” And people called Kaito a lunatic. This guy saw a man blow up someone’s head and thought chasing the killer was a good idea. At least Kaito knew when it was time to cash out and wipe his hands clean. “Whatever, knock yourself out, stringer. I’m afraid I’ve got other commitments.”

“Hold on.” Shinichi caught him again, and Kaito struggled to not tense up or back away. “I need you to do me a favor.” Something square and hard pressed into his hand, the edges catching on his gloves. It was the same thumb drive as before, this time marked with the little sticker Kaito himself had marked the memory card with. “I prepared this beforehand. Tomorrow morning, I need you to put this up on my site. Don’t let anyone take it down, no matter what.”

“And what’s in it for me?”

“You used me.” The words were flat, but were said with such acidity that they almost burned his skin. “You used me to help terrorists build a bio-weapon.”

Fair enough. But Kaito had totally saved his life back there too. In any world that made sense, they would’ve been even.

But he thought of the devastation still lingering on the edges of Shinichi’s face, the telling sheen in his eyes, the way his fingers shook around the USB stick.

He thought of pushing out the pin of the briefcase’s handle and watching it tumble from Shinichi’s hands. He thought of the weight settled against his chest, hidden by the lapel of his jacket.

And he let none of it show, shrugging smoothly under the sharp gaze.
“Come on, what’s a little deceit among friends?”

“Friends aren’t tools, KID. And tools aren’t friends.”

Oh.

Ouch.

That one stung a little bit, he wasn’t going to lie.

From since he could walk, Kaito’s mother had taught him the importance of resourcefulness above all else.

Anything could be a point of entry, anything could be evidence.

To overlook the potential usefulness of something was the gravest mistake a thief could make. If he didn’t make proper use of something, didn’t take every potentiality into account, it would be used against him.

Why were people supposed to be any different?

Why not make use of them? Wasn’t that why humans lived together? To make use of one another?

Just like he used Aoko, taking advantage of her friendship and generosity to slip passed the police’s defenses. She’d been such an easy, reliable point of entry, such an obvious weak link, the perfect excuse and impenetrable cover, he hadn’t even thought twice.

She had just been trying to be kind and understanding. All Aoko had wanted was to support him. And he’d known that, and he loved that, and he—

He threw it all away.

He made his only friend into just another tool.

For some reason, that... that hurt. That cut him, somewhere deep.

“Are you saying I’m a tool?” Kaito joked weakly, and his voice sounded strained, even to his own ears. A slip up he really couldn’t afford.

“The only one I can count on right now.” Shinichi pressed he drive into his palm, his gaze unwavering. “You owe me this.”

The thumbdrive was warm, even through his glove, as if it had been clutched very tightly for a very long time.

Kaito wondered what caused Shinichi to think he’d need such a thing that morning, or afternoon; what made him think, what if I don’t come back tonight?

He knew he shouldn’t let Shinichi go alone. He knew the reporter was going to get himself killed.

But, there was an object digging into his chest, refusing to let him forget what he’d done by pressing into him, accusatory, with every rise and fall of his chest.

Kaito had somewhere else to be.

He couldn’t give up now.
He had to see it through, to make it all worth it.

“Who authorized that?” Saguru’s voice had gone hoarse, but still he hissed into the comm, ignoring the feeling of sandpaper against his throat. “Who?”

“I don’t know.” The Baron answered, his tone seemingly level and calm but cloaking sharpened steel. “But I assure you, I will find out.”

_Aren’t you supposed to know everything?_ Saguru thought, stupid and childish. Not even the Baron was omniscient, despite all those that thought contrary. But sometimes, Saguru wanted to believe he was, too, and always suffered his own disappointment.

They’d failed, completely and utterly. The nullifier was gone, lost in the wreckage. All he’d found was an empty case, broken open. The girl was dead, not even a body left to bury.

Tokyo had been saved, not by any of them, but by a sudden, vicious precision strike from above that cared nothing for the terrified little girl it had been sent down to murder.

It was something straight out of his nightmares.

_“In the meantime, there’s teams coming in to collect the Cats. This time, ISHA intends to catch all of them. I need you to secure the remaining nullifiers.”_ 

Saguru could do that. If nothing else, he could still do that.

_“Roger.”_

He knew something was wrong well before he got there, as time passed him by at a snail’s pace. There was chatter on the channels, shouts of alarm, and warnings spreading between teams. The Cats were putting up a fight, but there were some odd proclamations too, of the interference of a numerous but unidentified third party.

Even as he assisted in the capture of a rogue band of Cats, he kept half an ear on the reports.

The third party wasn’t interfering with the rounding up of the terrorists.

No, they were focused on the strange towers the Cats had taken to gathering underneath as they relied on their effect to neutralize any Overseers.

It took too long for Saguru to stumble across one such scene himself; there were scrimmages all across the city and he rushed from one to another chasing claims of silver figures and an armored truck. Half the night seemed to slip away from him, impossibly both too fast and too slow after the hour he’d spent counting the milliseconds before their doom.

But he caught the culprit in the act, eventually.

The nullifier was being dismantled by all too familiar figures: the DOVEs.

Of course, if the permanent dose was lost, KID was prepared to settle for the next best thing.

“You never learn, do you?” KID grinned at him from where he was perched on the edge of the truck his robots were loading.
Saguru glared for all he was worth, and slid easily into his fighting stance.

“You know I do. Which of us is top of the class again?”

It wasn’t often he alluded to KID’s true identity when they faced off like this, but after everything else that had happened that night, Saguru was running low on restraint.

KID was too, he realized, watching the thief fluidly sway back on to his feet with eyes of flint and a grin that promised bloodshed.

But Saguru wasn’t backing down. He’d get that nullifier, even if he had to go through Kuroba Kaito to do it.

And then, just as the tension between them was about to reach its peak, as Saguru’s boot slid over concrete as he started to charge and KID drew his gun—

KID paused, seemingly listening to something he couldn’t hear, his playful smile slipping off his face.

Saguru watched it, a shudder creeping along his spine. KID was always mocking smiles and laughter, even in the worse situations, but in that moment the mask fell off, so easily. What was left behind was a blank look, completely incomprehensible in its slackness.

“I’m afraid,” KID said, haltingly, an unmistakable note of uneasy confusion in his voice, “that we’ll have to cut this short.”

Beyond them, the world had become a cacophony of noise and stench. Shouts rang in his ears from every direction, and the choking scent of smoke filled his nostrils. Underneath it there was so much more—gasoline, gunpowder, blood—so overwhelmingly thick so suddenly that Saguru felt his stomach rolling. He swallowed down bile as the onslaught on his senses only worsened, punctuated by sharp screams and the squeal of tires against concrete.

His powers were starting to come back, he realized, at the worst possible time. Each sensation only got worse by the moment: louder, thicker, harsher. Each shriek pierced through his head like a knife, the sudden assault leaving him reeling on the concrete, gloves clutching at his ears and pulling at his hair uselessly.

The smoke was too much, seeming to choke him even here—no, he was choking—

Coughing and spluttering, Saguru forced his eyes open to find the world had been enveloped in a black haze. Heat prickled at his skin, unforgivingly lava hot against his frayed nerves. The building nearest to them, some kind of office building, was being consumed by red flames, so hot it could singe the hair of his arms even with meters of distance.

Struggling back to his feet, his breaths coming short and painful, Saguru realized there was not a speck of white to be seen. KID himself had vanished, and the nullifier was not far behind him, loaded up in the back of a truck.

“Not so fast!” Saguru rasped, struggling to get his dry tongue to even form the words. But as he stumbled after the androids, he only found himself heaving, hands braced against his trembling knees. The smoke was too much, and Saguru could only tumble away from it, his eyes streaming behind his mask. The truck peeled away into the dark, flames reflecting off its sides as it was swallowed by impenetrable haze.

An ominous wail echoed through the air, as the citywide warning sirens came back on.
It wasn’t just where he was; plumes of black smoke billowed into the sky in every direction Saguru turned, the distant ringing of fire alarms a constant background noise lingering behind the reverberating sirens. The sky was filled with ash and the hazy orange light of fires, but he barely had time to register it before he heard shots, screeching tires, and the heavy *crunch* of metal crumpling.

He ran towards the ruckus, struggling to ignore the burning in his lungs, the way they seemed too small and tight in his chest. As he rounded the final corner, back in more populated section of the city, he found he couldn’t breath at all.

It was just like the Baron had described—

No.

No.

That was impossible. Saguru refused to even consider it.

People were scrambling around him, shoving each other out of the way and yelling in sharp, furious voices. To his left a woman who’d tried to push past a teenager was thrown to the ground, struck across the face.

“Hey—” Saguru tried to yell over the rising cacophony, only to watch with wide eyes as the women shot back to her feet and dug her fingers right into the eyes of her assailant.

He bit his tongue on the word in horror, tasting blood as he watched red stream down pale cheeks. The teen screamed and kicked, and the two were on the ground, tearing at each other. All around him were similar sights as chaos descended upon the panicking crowd: citizens trampling and ripping into one another as they fought to escape, all harshly yelling profanities, their voices rising into something wretched and visceral and completely irrational.

There was madness in their eyes—a familiar madness, one he’d seen on a few sparse occasions before but never failed to leave his blood running cold. But never had he witnessed it on this scale, not even close.

And then Ran was there, her short hair plastered to her neck by sweat and her eyes wide and glassy in her face. She grabbed him by the arm, powerful fingers digging painfully into him as she wrenched him aside.

“What’s going on?” Ran yelled over the chaos, her voice hoarse and ragged, and Saguru could only stare at her. His mouth was opening and closing, his dry tongue shifting in his mouth, but he couldn’t choke out a single sound.

In the distance, he heard more screeching tires, getting too close. His head snapped in that direction, eyes blown wide as he registered the forty thousand kilograms worth of metal thundering down the too narrow street, with no sign of slowing down.

Saguru couldn’t breath, couldn’t think. There was no time, not as Ran shoved against him, effortlessly flinging him over the sidewalk and into the side of the building. He hit it hard, too hard, the impact against rough stone shuddering through him; he’d managed to bring his hands up to protect his head just in time, feeling his knuckles tearing underneath his gloves.

Ran probably hadn’t meant to do that, but she wasn’t looking at his anyway, her attention snapping back to the truck’s path and the countless that weren’t going to get out of the way fast enough.
“Watch out!” Ran screamed, tackling a group of three strangers to the ground with impressive force. The truck missed them by a hair’s breadth, barreling passed them into and over the crowd.

They’d both had heard bones break before, but those moments had nothing on the sound of a human body bursting under the wheels of semi.

The truck’s rampage came to an end when it crashed into a bank’s corner, the front rendered into a crumpled mess of metal and shattered stone. The driver threw open the door with a curse, stumbling out of the blood splattered vehicle.

The crowd descended upon him like a pack of hyenas.

Saguru felt like he might be sick.

He’d seen his fair share of violence, of corpses, of crime scenes. And he could handle it, he had a strong stomach and a stronger ability to compartmentalize.

Saguru could make it clinical.

But this—this was a different sort of monster to face.

“Get off, you bitch!” Someone was shrieking, and distantly, Saguru realized it was one of the men Ran had rescued. He shoved Ran away from him, the stunned heroine going with the force, and revealed an arm that flopped uselessly by his side. “You broke my fucking arm!”

“What’s going on?” Kazuha’s voice was wavering with terror over the line. Saguru didn’t know where she was, but he knew she must have been looking at a similar scene. “Hawk, what do we do?”

“Whatever you do, don’t engage! Stay calm and stay clear!”

“Like hell!” Kazuha’s voice rose sharply, borderline dangerous, and Saguru flinched from the comm in his hand. “No way am I sittin’ here while people try’n kill each other!”

“Don’t!” He yelled, before forcing his volume back down when several furious eyes turned in his direction. “Please, Banshee, listen to me. Please.”

He could feel it himself.

The itch of violence skittering over his skin, prying open his skull and slinking inside. The thoughts that he didn’t want to call his own swiping by in his head, wondering, wondering, wondering—

What would it be like to kill someone?

Fifteen minutes. It lasted fifteen minutes. And then it was over.

When morning came, despite everything, Tokyo was still standing.

And Kudo Shinichi was nowhere to be found.
So.

I know there's gonna be a lot of unanswered questions. I promise everything will make sense. Eventually.

I was thinking of doing a Q+A to celebrate the end of part1, if anyone's interested, that would be posted as an extra. Not for anything that would spoil events in the story, but for anything else. Is that something that would be of interest to any of y'all?

Either way, I'll be seeing you guys soon, in the Interlude!

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