Just a Delinquent

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Just a Delinquent

by LeafyDream

Summary

Naoto hasn't been in Inaba long, but she already has a theory. Yu Narukami was put on this earth to annoy her. He was built to be an arrogant, gross, pervert, and designed to bother her with his constant flirting and smugness. Well, it didn't matter. He was just a delinquent. She was the Detective Prince. *A Naoto/Yu story featuring a slightly different version of Yu Narukami.

Delinquent Yu is not the canon, stoic hero. He's manipulative, arrogant, two faced, and even obnoxious. But given time, he can be just as much a hero as his canon self. A long, epic, romance about Delinquent Yu's growth, Naoto's acceptance of herself, and their journey to solve the Inaba murder mysteries.
Friction

There were few truths to be found in the world. Ironically, this itself was one of those rare truth. What was another one of these truths?

Naoto Shirogane LOATHED Yu Narakami.

Perhaps loath was a strong word for the detective's feeling towards her Senpai. But 'despised,' "abhors,' and 'hated' were all too kind to properly describe the seething rage she had for him.

How did she come to despise this man? How did she come to be a reluctant toy for his amusement? It didn't start when they first met. No, it was their second meeting that made Naoto realize how annoying and obnoxious Yu Narukami was.

Naoto was required to take care of herself due to the Shirogane estate being too far to reasonably stay at while investigating the case in Inaba. This was not a difficult challenge for the Detective Prince. She could follow instructions and cook quick, simple meals for herself without problem.

All the same, going to Junes was still an annoying chore that she found herself doing. It was during her first shopping venture that she truly spoke to Narukami. She heard footsteps behind her, but didn't think anything of it. This was a grocery store after all, other customers were to be expected.

"What were you planning on making?"

But that voice caught her attention. The blue haired detective turned to it and found the speaker standing right behind her. It took another moment to remember where she had seen him before. She calmly greeted him.

"You were the one asking about Tatsumi, correct?"

"I am," he replied. He smiled at her, but she merely nodded in response, her face was as even and stoic as her voice.

"May I help you?"

"Sure. I'm looking for something to make for my little sis. What do you think she'd like?" He suddenly inquired, walking beside her and looking at the items on the shelves in front of them. He analyzed the price of one product and she could hear him mumble to himself. "That much? I need to talk to Yosuke about getting a discount around here..."

Naoto stared at the older boy in confusion, before shaking her head in annoyance. *I don't have time for this.* "I'm afraid I cannot help you with that. I must take my leave. Have a good-" She attempted to walk around the silver haired boy, only for her to stop as she felt a weight being lifted off her head. "My hat!"

"Wow, this is a very well made hat," the thief commented. He gently stroked the edges of the cap with his finger tips, marveling at the feel. "May I ask where you got it?"

"That is NONE of your business!" The detective was ashamed to admit she was in a bit of a panic. Without her hat, she feared her true identity was obvious now. Not to mention she feared for the
condition of her father's hat. "Give that back at once!"

"Hm?" The tall silverette easily held the hat out of Naoto's reach. He stared at her slightly flushed face and he smiled. He gently placed the cap back onto her head. "You're cute without it on. Pretty, a bit girlish." Naoto's face got redder, though she thought it to be just from anger. She tipped her hat and pushed past him, leaving with her bag of groceries.

"I'm sorry. Was it something I said? I was trying to compliment you." He was still following her, though Naoto had to admit she was slightly surprised, perhaps she would have even been impressed if he wasn't so annoying. He was walking backwards, yet still keeping up with her. "I find your androgynous appearance is quite attractive."

"Is there a point to this farce of a conversation?" Naoto mumbled, avoiding meeting his eyes.

"Just making small talk. You know, foreplay, before I try asking you out on a date."

Naoto turned to the grinning stranger. At first, her face was shocked at the bluntness and context of the confession. Naoto was no stranger to love confessions. She had a small pile of shredded love letters from love struck, little girls back home. But confessions from another man were rare, and she knew he did not realize her true gender. "F-foreplay?!"

"Yeah. Foreplay. You know...intercourse before the dirty deed is done? I know its strange, but I enjoy talking it out with the girl or boy before we end up doing it. If they're ready for it, of course. I'm not a monster." His face. It was so easy saying what he said. There wasn't a blush, or a chuckle. It was more like stating a simple fact. "Would you prefer I bought you dinner first?"

"Enough!" She shouted, drawing the attention of other customers. She glared at the stranger, venom in her eyes. Girl, boy, it didn't matter. This man knew NOTHING of her struggles or her true self. Which meant he would get the same treatment as any other. "I have no interest in your games, and I certainly have no interest in YOU. It is absolutely ridiculous to treat someone you just met in this regard. Please, leave me alone."

The stranger blinked, his unique, grey eyes staring at her. Unique, she subconsciously realized, to him and her. Once. Twice. Then he smiled. "Well, why didn't you say so?" He gave a slight, though somehow still exaggerated, bow. He stood back up and continued to grin. "My name is Yu Narukami. Let's be friends...?"

The Detective Prince blinked, flabbergasted at this man. She realized why he paused and sighed, her annoyance and frustration evident. "You don't even know my name?"

"I know you're the most beautiful person I've met. You're brilliant, observant, and your eyes shimmer like the night sky. I find you fascinating, different from everyone else I've met in this small town, and in truth, different from a lot of people I've met in the many towns I've lived in."

"..." Naoto turned and walked away, leaving the (in more ways than one) stranger behind.

"By the end of the year, I hope to win you over, my Navy Sweet."

"Yu Narukami." She repeated the name to herself. She had seen him before. He had asked her about Kanji Tatsumi, not to mention he was seen with a previous disappeared high schooler, Yukiko Amagi. Perhaps it was merely coincidence, but it was worth investigating.

*I hope to win you over, my Navy Sweet.*

"Arrogant ass."
Chapters will alternate between focusing on Naoto to focusing on Yu. First four chapters are Naoto focused.

Hopefully you enjoyed the story. I am aiming for a very different Yu Narukami in this story. He's more of an anti-hero, with some very negative traits as the story goes on: Manipulative, uncaring, even cruel, but a big part of the story is Delinquent Yu growing past this and becoming a better man. I hope you stick with me, my friends.

Have a good day.
Catalyst

Naoto inspected her notepad, silently reading it to herself as she walked out of Marukyu Tofu. She had just finished speaking to Rise Kujikawa, warning her about the danger to her life. Now she simply needed to convince the local law enforcement to help her safeguard the idol. Her train of thought was quickly derailed as a familiar voice was heard.

"Well, fortune smiles on me. Hello, lover." Yu confidently approached the smaller girl, a smile on his face. "How are you, Naoto?"

"You know my name." She clapped her notebook shut, not even glancing at the arrogant man. Her voice held the slightest edge to it as she already began walking away. He followed.

"I heard about the dashing, gifted Detective Prince coming to Inaba due to the recent murders. You're walking around, looking like a character right out of a detective novel. Not to mention you were asking Kanji questions, no doubt thinking he'd be next. I think you can see my train of thought here, yes?"

Detective novel...If it was anyone else, she'd probably feel complimented. But it was Narukami, someone who Naoto was losing more and more patience for. She took a deep breath and exhaled, before facing Yu. "Narukami-"

"Please, Naoto, call me Yu." He smiled at her, which only frustrated her more.

"Fine. Yu-"

"No, you're right. Narukami is more polite."

"Narukami-!"

"No, that makes me seem older than I am. My parents are Narukami. You can call me Yu. Its more intimate."

"I-"

"No, actually." He placed a hand under her chin and lifted her head up, smiling into her blue-grey orbs. "How about 'Darling?'" He teased, seductively. Her nostril flared as she slapped his hand away. She was fuming, it looked. It made his fake smile turn into the arrogant smirk it always was. "Honey? Sweetie? Babe? Or would you prefer I refer to you as my Prince?"

"Why do you insist on this idiotic act?!" She howled, louder than she would have liked. She glared at the taller man, who had thankfully lost that stupid smirk. He exchanged it for what she could only imagine was a mock expression of surprise.

"Act?" The silverette repeated, blankly.

"This..." Naoto recomposed herself, lightly clearing her throat to give herself more time. She wouldn't give this idiot the joy of seeing her mad. She was better than this. She was in control. She wasn't going to throw a tantrum. She wasn't a child. "As I have stated before, I have absolutely no interest in you, Narukami."
"Please call me-

"Naru. Kami." The bluette glared at the taller man, doing her best to put the full weight of her distaste towards him. He stared at her, a face of disappointment and surprise on his face. Good. There was a few moments of brief, blessing silence, before Naoto realized something. "Wait. Why are you even here?"

"Well, I had mentioned wanting to buy you dinner, Darling. This is as good a place as any, wouldn't you agree?"

And there it is.

"A bit early for dinner, I know, but we could-"

She took a step forward, standing closer to him. He was smirking at her again as she lifted a hand up. His smirk vanished as she squeezed his collar in her small hand and, with shocking strength, she pulled him down so she could whisper into his ear. Her voice was controlled, but held an obvious edge to it that made the man's hair stand on end. "Let me make this very clear for you, Narukami. I have no patience for your idiotic, childish game of lust. You will leave me alone, if you ever see me, you will not speak to me. If you even think of saying another word to me, I swear, you'll..." She paused, trying to think of a threat she could keep without breaking any laws. She decided on something vague instead, fearing the loss of her momentum."You'll pay for it. Do I make myself clear?"

Silence. Good.

"I hope this is the last time we speak to one another."

"Are you here because you think Risette is the next to be murdered?"

Naoto had only just started walking when he spoke. She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him, eyes sharp as she gazed at him. "What do you know about the murders?" Yu looked around, making exaggerated glances like something out of the movies. He started walking into a nearby alleyway, motioning for her to follow.

The bluette found herself torn. On the one hand, she didn't think much of the Narukami boy. No, actually it was worse than that. She, more likely than not, hated him. She doubted he had much relevant knowledge to offer. After all, how could he?

But what if he does know something? Could she make that risk? Could she let this slip through her fingertips?

As much as Naoto wanted to deny it, there was a third side. A powerful undertone. A side that wanted to seize this rare moment. A mysterious informant hiding away, giving hints to the dashing, strong ace detective? The danger and melodrama made her feel like the heroes who inspired her. It made her heart race, just the smallest bit. With a deep breath, she followed Yu Narukami into the alley way.

"I ask again. What do you know about the murders?" She stood in the shadows with Yu, her eyes hidden under her hat. She kept her cool, staring at the taller man. To Yu's credit, he kept his arrogant smile as he leaned against a stone wall. It seemed that was his default expression. Figures.

"More than you'd think, less than you'd expect," he joked.

"If you know something, why haven't you informed the proper authorities?"
"Maybe I'm looking for a reward?"

Naoto felt her anger rise once more. Yu Narukami was worse than she thought. He wasn't just a flirtatious, arrogant ass. He lacked basic moral principle. "I'm sure the local law enforcement can--"

"I don't want money, Naoto-kun." Yu was walking away from her, deeper into the alley. She had no choice but to follow, having to move slightly faster to keep up with his long legs. "I want something far more lasting. I want to spend time with the great Naoto Shirogane!"

You have got to be kidding me.

"A few dates, a few lunches, maybe even dinner. During which, I will give you hints and teases for your intellectual mind regarding the case, my Prince. What do you say?" Naoto rolled her eyes as the delinquent's exaggerated posing. He held a hand out to her, one eye frozen in a wink.

"I say, what is stopping me from bringing you in for obstructing law enforcement?"

"Well, I am a very good liar, for one. I'll deny it, and deny it well." The silverette never lost his tone of smugness. "Secondly, I'd imagine you don't want to share credit for this case. Wouldn't you prefer seizing it for yourself? The Great Naoto Shirogane, the Detective Prince, solves murder mystery in small town! Does what no one else could!" He placed one hand on her shoulder and pointed to the sky. "And you don't have to share any credit! It'll be you and you alone who solves this case!"

Either Yu Narukami was smarter than she gave him credit for, or he was simply lucky. If it was the former, she knew he was trying to use her ego and desire for respect to his advantage. If it was the latter, she had all the more reason to hate him. She didn't rely on things as ridiculous as 'good luck or 'fortune.' She worked hard and took genuine risks...

Like this risk, for example.

"Very well. If you truly have information on the case, then I will agree to meet up with you tomorrow. Anything beyond that will be discussed tomorrow."

"Excellent! Its a date!" Yu shouted, causing her to blush. She took a step back, glaring up at him.

"It is not a date!" She quickly argued.

"Calm down, darling! Just an expression. Now then, I'll see you at the Junes' Food Court tomorrow for lunch, after which we can make hot, passionate LOVE," he laughed, enjoying her scarlet face. The silverette was already walking around her by the time she opened her mouth to speak again. "I will see you there, my Cerulean Beauty!" His voice echoed, bouncing off the stone walls and trashcans as she remained.

Naoto was left with her cheeks flushed, standing alone in the alleyway. She took off her hat and rubbed her head, her fingers going through her blue locks. She tried to cool herself down, to calm the flustered cheeks and her pounding heart. She felt regret pumping through her veins, but she stomped it down and swallowed her pride. Arrogant ass.

The Detective Prince let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding and waited a few more moments in the shadows. The last thing she needed was to be seen walking out of an alleyway with him.

This could all be a waste of time.
But what if it isn't?

How could he know anything the police doesn't already?

He would know if he was the murderer.

I'm not that lucky.

She shook her head and felt her face contort into anger. She suppressed it. I need to learn. I need to work harder to solve this case. This is just a lead, one of many to follow on.

She finally started to walk out of the alleyway. Yu Narukami may be an arrogant ass, but there may not be as many lies in his story as I thought. Police reports mentioned Narukami and some other local children finding Tatsumi. If there's even the slightest chance...

"I will see you there, my Cerulean Beauty!"

She fought the urge to clench her hands. She was going to get to the bottom of this mystery, and once she did, she'd wipe that smug smirk off of Narukami's face.
Yu Narukami was not one to sit down, Naoto found out. It seemed every moment of his life was on a schedule. As soon as school started, he'd be busying himself with his schoolwork. He jotted down notes like his pencil was on fire. Whenever the teacher questioned him he would supply the correct answer without hesitation. Naoto also discovered, to her annoyance, whenever one of his friends was asked a question by the teacher he would often supply them with the correct answer.

Naoto wasn't sure whether to commend his sense of camaraderie, or be annoyed with his callous disregard of rules. She eventually chose the latter.

As soon as school was done, Narukami left to do one of several activities afterwards. He would either attend one of two different clubs (Basketball and Music, Naoto noted), go to one of several part time jobs he had (child caretaker seemed to be his usual choice), spend time with his circle of friends (which included recent missing person cases, Yukari Amagi and Kanji Tatsumi), or single one friend out to socialize with.

And that wasn't even touching on the rumors she was beginning to hear about how he could bring anyone anything they wanted. Statues, horns, lamps, the list went on. She wasn't sure where he got the supplies. Perhaps worth investigating.

Back on topic, Naoto came to a realization she couldn't deny. She had almost a healthy respect for Yu Narukami. Top of his class, hard working, always offering his time to others. It was almost like Yu Narukami was somekind of superhero, leaping out of the pages out of the TV.

That respect would quickly vanish after seeing him again.

She sat at Junes food court, awaiting his arrival. With any luck, he would forgo this stupid game and tell her what she wanted to do. But luck had not been on her side as of late.

"Naoto!" The silverette ran to her, grinning ear to ear. He took a seat, forgoing the seat across from her and instead sitting directly beside her. Naoto tipped her hat to hide her flushed cheeks and grumbled as he placed both of his hands on the table. "I'm glad you actually came."

"...You're late."

"Huh? Heh. I guess I am. Sorry. There was just this little girl who lost her twin sister. So I had to help her, I mean, who wouldn't, right? So we were running all around Inaba, looking for her sister. When we found her, she was all upset at her twin. I had to play neutral party to a sibling fight, but eventually I was able to calm both parties down so-"

"Stop. It's bad enough that I have to sit through this farce of a 'date' with you. The least you could
do is not make ridiculous excuses for why you were late. Need I remind you that you've already bribed me into attending this frivolous event?" Naoto's steel blue eyes glared at the young man, who stared back in surprise, before his ever smug smirk formed on his face.

He politely bowed. "As you wish, my Prince. What shall we do instead?"

Arrogant ass, she thought to herself. "You could answer my questions regarding the murders," she suggested. Please, let this torture end quickly. I doubt I can withstand his smugness for long.

Narukami's smile only grew, and that scared Naoto. "Ah, wishing to just skip the foreplay and go right to the climax, my dear Prince? How erotic," he practically moaned afterwards, no doubt attracting the curious stares of several other customers. "Such a hungry, little minx."

"T-that's not what I meant and you know it!" She hissed, shoving an open palm against his chest. He took the hit with a smile. "Ow. My nipple."

"Arrogant ass!" She hissed back, glaring daggers into his eyes. He just winked at her.

"Heh. I'm going to get something for us to eat it, if you don't mind." He stood up from his chair, only for Naoto to stand in his way.

"Wait! I'm not letting you pay for my food," she stated. "We'll split it, fifty/fifty. Understood?" No way am I giving him the satisfaction of actually paying for this meal. Bastard...

"Progressive. I knew there was more to you than just your gorgeous looks and harmonious voice."

"Hrm..." The two walked into line, the grinning, silver haired delinquent standing behind the scowling, famed Detective Prince.

"Personally, I always thought it was rather ridiculous to have the man pay for the girl's meal all the time. A sexist stereotype, really."

Naoto simply frowned more, not wishing for Narukami to know she actually agreed with him on that point. Wait... "Did...did you just call me a girl?" She asked, blushing despite herself. Her eyes scanned the area, darting to and fro in hopes that no one was listening to the two talk. Thankfully, after Narukami's moaning, most people were ignoring the couple...Couple of people, not couple couple!

The delinquent simply stared at his date with a curious smile. "I was mere implying that out of the two of us, you are the girl, my dear Prince. Short, more mature, though certainly not weak. I bet you are quite strong."

"Oh, how I'd love to show you how strong I am..."

"In fact, I'm sure you could pin me down and hold me under you quite easily," he sang, whispering into her ear. A knowing wink made his intentions clear.

"M-must everything be related to sex with you?!

"No...But I'd like it if it was." He laughed to himself as Naoto turned her head away with flushed cheeks.

The rest of the 'date' was mostly uneventful. Narukami flirted with her, constantly referring to her as 'my Prince' and Naoto would roll her eyes and ignore him. Once the food was gone and the
drinks were emptied, the detective placed her hands on the table and glared at the older boy.

"Alright, Narukami. Talk. What do you know about the murders?"

"Yu knows a lot." He chuckled at his pun. She didn't even waste energy rolling her eyes this time, only leaning in closer to glare at him harder. Realizing she wasn't even mad at this point, he sighed. "You are no fun sometimes, hon."

"Enough with the stupid nicknames and terms of affection! I want answers," she growled.

"Heh. Answers are something I'm looking for too...But I think hints are good enough to live off of, for now. A few teases before I bare it all for you," he winked. He leaned in close, which made Naoto lean back. If she hadn't, the two would been far too close for her comfort. "Well...The perp? He isn't really killing anyone."

"What? That's ridiculous!"

"Ah. Let me finish, sweetie. If I dropped you off in the desert, and left you there without water, is that technically murder?" He inquired, brow raised.

"So...He's merely putting them in a position to be killed? So these technically aren't murders..."

Naoto's eyes widened. She never even considered, but...but how could Narukami know this?!

"Semantics. He's still a murdering scumbag, all things considered..." She had never seen that look in his eye before. It wasn't a flirtatious smile or an arrogant grin. It looked angry. Enraged, in fact. She almost wasn't sure it happened... Then it was gone, and he smirked again. "Welp, date's over! Same time tomorrow, my dear Prince?"

"W-wait! How do you know this?! How could you possibly know?!"

"Ah, ah, ah. You'll ruin our game if you try skipping ahead. I like foreplay, Naoto, you know that," he joked. He collected the trash and began to leave, walking right past her. "Piece the clues together, Naoto. Maybe you can make sense of it all." The sound of the garbage entering a trashcan was the last sound she heard before he left.

Naoto was left with a lot of questions and even fewer answers than when she started.

Naoto found the young man waiting for her this time. Well, sort of. He was asleep at the Junes, face pressed against a table. Naoto could just imagine the idiotic snot bubble coming from his nose, like out of the pages of one of her childhood mangas. She considered simply leaving him and skipping the date today...only to feel her lip tilt upward as a better idea formed in her mind.

After all, he wasn't going to tell her anything until the date ended, she knew that rule by now. Fine. Allow me to start our 'date,' Narukami.

She walked around him to fetch their lunch for the day. She paid for all of it herself. Pricey, but worth every bit. She walked back over to the sleeping silverette, placing the drinks on the table before holding the tray of food over it. With a slip of the fingers, the tray and Narukami leapt up from the loud bang.

"Wha-?! I'm up! Huh? Who?! What?!" Yu screamed, looking left and right as he stood up. He shook his head, rubbing his eyes as he mumbled incoherently. "Ah...? Huh...?"
Naoto smiled to herself, tilting her hat down a bit to hide the victorious grin. Was this childish? Yes. But did that change the fact that it felt good to push Narukami back after his constant teasing? Absolutely not. Observing the silverette's shocked face and his hilarious attempts to assess the situation while half awake was enjoyable to watch.

"N- Naoto?" He finally realized, before letting out a loud, slow yawn.

"Good morning, Narukami. Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Couldn't have simply kissed me awake, my Prince?" He countered, smiling a bit, though the usual smirk was ruined by the presence of the bags under his eyes.

Naoto rolled her eyes. And there it is again... she thought to herself. She looked down at the table, ensuring the food hadn't made too much of a mess from its small drop. Nothing too bad, a few fries of Narukami's had fallen on the table. Wait... What's that?

Yu's eyes followed her and his smug smirk returned again. "Ah, looking at my sketch book, my Prince?"

"You draw?"

"Yu does." Yu laughed far too much at his own little joke.

Moron, she thought to herself with a sigh.

"Please, look through it. Tell me what you think?" The older boy smiled as he began to unwrap his burger. She knew it was more of a plea for attention than an offer. "You knew my favorite meal? Awww... This must be love." Yu placed a hand on his cheek as he took in the fresh aroma of the delicious burger in his hands. She swore she saw him tremble in joy at the burger.

"It's the same thing you ordered last time. Don't be so impressed." Naoto quietly saw across from him, ignoring the sounds of his constant chewing, munching, and slurping of his drink as she looked through his sketch book.

"I just started out. I've always been a fan of mangas, and I thought to myself, 'Hey! Why don't I give it a shot?' And so I did."

Narukami went on, but Naoto didn't really listen. She was too distracted by the drawings themselves. She swore under her breath as she found yet another thing Yu 'Mr. Perfect' Narukami was good at. The sketches inside were well done, detailed, even shaded properly. It was unreasonable that such an arrogant, perverted ass could be so good at so many things! One set of pictures made her stop turning pages though.

"Phoenix Rangers? Really? Aren't you a bit old for such a childish show?" Naoto asked, raising one of her brows as she accused the older boy. The Detective Prince mentally kicked herself. She recognized every Ranger he drew, not to mention several of the monsters... Not that she'd let Narukami know that!

"Hey! One: Phoenix Rangers Feathermen R is one of the BEST shows. Ever. Period. Two: The art direction for the show is amazing. Period. Third: I don't care if the show is marketed towards kids, its awesome."

"Men in spandex swinging plastic swords to hit men in-"

"Period."
He grinned. She frowned. "...In rubber monster suits hardly seems like the work of good fiction." Naoto silently scolded herself for recognizing every drawing he did, from the morphers, to the outfits, to the kid-appeal toy characters, not to mention finding the drawing of Feather Swan especially attractive.

"Feather Swan's my favorite. He's awesome! Smart, cool under pressure, and an excellent marksman." Narukami cocked his finger and 'fired' away at Naoto, shamelessly mimicking Feather Swan's in-show mannerisms. On the other side of the table, Naoto was using the sketchbook to hide her face. She was heavy with thought...

Is it possible Narukami's been following me? So he could try appealing to my my youth? Impossible, I've been so careful with watching Featherman R! He couldn't possibly know...Does he simply have the same favorite character as I do? Feather Swan is, obviously, the best of the Rangers, its not so ridiculous to find he has other fans... Damn it, Naoto! Focus. This changes nothing. He probably doesn't even realize you're a fan of the show, and you certainly won't admit it to him...

Regardless, Naoto admired the well done sketches for a few moments longer, before turning the page to Narukami's latest drawing. Her face immediately turned as red as Feather Hawk's suit. The picture was detailed...very detailed. Both bodies were colored and shaded with colored pencils. The smaller person, laying under the second, had blue hair and the other person, the one on top of the blue haired boy, had shiny, silver hair... Both were covered in sweat and slightly flushed. The figures laid on a bed together. While nothing explicit was shown, the blue haired boy's open mouth and dialogue ("N-Narukami! Please, don't tease me!") and both drawings' flushed faces were all she needed to see.

Naoto stared at the erotic picture for what seemed like an eternity. She wanted to turn away, wanted to scream, wanted to take her gun out and shoot Narukami dead. The young man was talking...or maybe he was screaming at her, she couldn't tell. The image was burned into her eyes as she began to sweat. Her eye twitched. She was finally able to look up at the silverette, who looked back at her.

"Naoto? What's wrong? I've been trying to get your attention for minutes here..." He got out of his seat and walked around the table to get closer to her. As he approached her, his eyes saw the erotic picture...and he turned as red as Feather Hawk too. "N-Naoto! I-I can explain! I promise, I wasn't planning on showing you that image!"

Naoto stood up abruptly, shaking, sweaty hands trembling as she held the sketchbook. Yu rubbed the back of his head, chuckling nervously. "I...suppose that's not the actual problem here, huh?" Without another word, Naoto tore the page out of the sketchbook and began to stomp away, her food untouched. "N-Naoto! Honey! My Prince, come back! I'm sorry! For real this time! Come on, my Glimmering Sapphire! N-Naoto, wait up!"

END
Genuine

Chapter Summary

Naoto and Yu go on a date. They end up getting to know about each other.

Genuine

Further digging into Yu's past revealed some unsurprising facts. Naoto had discovered Narukami was something of a delinquent at his previous schools. A few fights, a few pranks, mostly back talk. Unsurprising, she noted to herself. The silverette had no respect for authority, that was obvious.

But it was as if arriving in Inaba changed him. He had only two real offenses to his name since coming here. He had talked back to a teacher, and if witnesses were to be believed, the teacher insulted him first. The other offense was being taken in for his friend, Yosuke Hanamura, swinging fake swords around in a public area. She briefly wondered the context of that event, before brushing it off.

Besides those two incidents, and the first was barely worth thought, Narukami had been nothing less than a gentlemen and good Samaritan to everyone he met. He was kind, donated his time to others, even devoted his free time to help clubs he had no official place in. He, again, looked like a hero straight out a manga, but that was only around others.

When he was alone with her, he was an obnoxious, arrogant, pervert who kept trying to woo her, uncaring about her gender or her vocal declarations of disgust. Why was he only this around her? Why was he different around others? It was obvious he wore a mask, but which was the mask? And why her?

She needed to know more.

Naoto Shirogane took a deep breath and exhaled. She quietly ate her salad, awaiting the arrival of her 'date.' After yesterday, she feared what idiotic pranks or erotic gestures he'd throw at her next. Her face flushed just thinking about it. That accursed picture...she tore it apart and scattered the remains into her trashbin. She tried to do the same thing to her memory of it, but sadly, it seemed engraved into her mind.

"Damn it, Narukami..."

"I just got here and you're already mad at me? That has to be a new record."

Speak of the Devil. "Narukami."

"Hello, my darling Prince." Yu smirked, walking over from behind Naoto. He went to sit beside her, only for her to grab the seat with her free hand and pull it away from him. A silent, steel blue glare said all that needed to be said. The boy sat across from her, sighing. "You're still mad about yesterday, aren't you?"

"..." Naoto gave an audible chomp as she ate her tasteless salad.
"I said I was sorry!" Narukami actually looked upset, Naoto observed.

**Good.** "Sorry you did it, or sorry you were caught?"

"Well, not sorry I did it, I can tell you that much. I mean, did you see it? It was some of my best work yet!" He joked, suddenly changing from upset to smiling. He was met with another intense glare from the Detective Prince, causing him to sigh. "Okay. Maybe it was wrong of me to draw a picture of you and me making love."

"...Maybe?" The Detective Prince growled, impaling a piece of carrot with her fork. "MAYBE it was wrong?" She was practically fuming as she pressed the plastic fork against the container, gouging the poor carrot.

"Okay, it was very, very, very wrong of me! And I'm a shameless pervert! And dumb! Will you please let me try to make it up to you?" He begged, putting his hands together and bowing his head. Again, he actually looked apologetic, with a genuine desire to redeem himself in her eyes.

*Which probably means he's lying through his teeth,* Naoto sighed. "Fine. Whatever will end this mockery of a date sooner, the better..."

"Awesome!" Narukami exclaimed, before grabbing her salad and tossing it into a nearby trashcan. He hadn't even been looking! He then grabbed Naoto's hand and pulled her up, pressing her against his larger body. "Let's go, baby!"

"N-Narukami! What are you doing?! Unhand me! Why did you-ah!" Naoto was interrupted as Yu began to run, tugging her along by her arm. She felt her cheeks heat up as she realized his bare hand was squeezing her own. "Let go of me!"

"Come on, it'll just be easier to show you!"

Despite Naoto's continued protests, Narukami pulled her along. They raced away from Junes and down a street, before making quick turns, even running over a small bridge over a stream. The young detective was starting to get tired. She also briefly considered taking out her gun and threatening to shoot Narukami. After all, he was practically kidnapping her. Her train of thought ended though as she noticed a change in scenery. He had pulled her into the town's park and had came to a stop before the local shrine.

The local, GOLDEN shrine, she realized.

"H-how...when...?" Naoto found the words dying in her throat, partly due to her panting and partly due to the fact that this was uncanny. She had done her research on Inaba before arriving in the small town. It shouldn't have had such a beautiful sight such as this. She had heard nothing of it, no word of it even being planned! And yet here she was, staring at the golden shrine with her own two eyes. She placed a hand on the cool metal, her mind trying to comprehend it.

"Impressive, huh? Helped put it together with a friend. Upgrades finished just a couple of days ago. You and I are the first to really take it all in though."

That broke Naoto out of her stupor. She tipped her hat to cover her eyes as recomposed herself.

"You honestly expect me to think that you had a hand in all of this? Your lies are getting worse and worse, Narukami."

"You'd be surprised what Yu has his hands on...or in." He winked at the blue haired girl, flashing a winning smile at her. She rolled her eyes and averted her flushed face away from him.
"Idiot."

"You know you love it, baby. Now then, you ready for a real lunch?" He pulled her along, though this time she was able to keep up with him better. He led her to a (golden) bench, where a plastic bag sat. He finally released her hand to inspect the bag, looking through it and ensuring that its content were still there.

"You simply left food here? That seems unwise."

"I had a friend looking over it. Now, you ready to have a little bit of Yu Narukami in you?" He grinned wryly, winking at her. She stared back, unamused. The silverette boy sighed and held up his hands, waving away the hostile glare. "Right, right. I'm sorry! Sarcasm and double entendres are like the peanut butter and jelly to the Yu Narukami sandwich. I'll try to stop for the rest of the date, sweetie. Promise." He smiled again, his features looking less crooked.

Though Naoto doubted the young man, she sighed and joined him sitting as far away from him as she could on the bench. She looked at the plastic bag and watched as Narukami pulled out two cans of soda, a bottle of water, and a somewhat large bento box. He took the cover off and smiled at the contents inside. California rolls. Dozens of them, in fact. "Enjoy, my radiant prince!"

She wrinkled her nose at the pet name, before sighing and taking a pair of offered chopsticks. Without another word or even a mumble of gratitude, she casually plucked one of the California rolls and leaned forward to bite into it. She leaned back and chewed it a few times, slowing down as she tasted the small wrap of avocado, crab, and assorted foods.

"So, tell me what you think?" Yu smiled excitedly, eager to hear his date's thoughts. His eyes shined with eager glee, but as the time ticked away he began to worry. This was becoming eerily familiar... "Um, Naoto? Sweetie? Are...are you okay? You're spacing out again, and this time there's no naked drawing of us. I-is there?" He joked, warily. He inspected the inside of the box on the off chance there was something resembling their naked bodies inside, only to witness a blue blur. "Huh?"

Naoto eagerly scarfed down another Californian roll. She took only the shortest moment to clear her throat, before taking in another and devouring it. Yu watched with wide, grey eyes as she ate another one of the rolls, licking her lips to catch the taste of the delicious treat on her tongue. He blushed slightly at her shiny lips as she continued to eat. Rather than interrupt her, he smiled and enjoyed the sight of an honestly smiling Prince.

As for Naoto... the Californian roll was a delicious treat, there was no doubt to that. The avocado was ripe to perfection, the crab meat melted against her tongue, and the sesame seeds danced in her mouth. Another reason for her enjoyment was the simple fact that she had not eaten the best meals of late. Instant ramen and microwave meals were as exciting as she ate got. Part of her missed Yakushiji-san's cooking, but even that paled in comparison to the fireworks in her mouth.

She licked her lips again and quickly devoured another roll. She enjoyed the texture of it in her mouth, taking in the taste, before chomping down and swallowing it. The next roll, she nearly swallowed in one bite, causing her to cough. Narukami handed her some water, which she took to clear her throat, and without even a thanks she returned to emptying out the box.

She had to stop. She told herself to stop. She was acting like a child on a sugar rush! She mentally kicked herself again and again until she stopped, her cheeks flushed as she struggled to pick up her dignity. She wiped her mouth with a napkin, using it as a way to give herself time to recompose herself. She cleared her throat and finally tried meeting the silverette's grey eyes. She saw them, and immediately looked down at the now near empty box. Only a couple of rolls were left. She had
eaten over a half dozen of them in moments...Eaten? More like inhaled. She was absolutely mortified.

She expected some callous remark. Some sexual flirtation. Perhaps even an outright insult.

But all he did was gently dab her cheek with a napkin.

"I'm glad you liked it. I was afraid you wouldn't." He almost sounded genuine...

Naoto merely coughed into her hand, using it as an excuse not to meet his gaze. "You can...have the rest." She turned away, adjusting her hat to hide her scarlet cheeks. She didn't hear him eating. Instead, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see him holding the box out to her.

"Please. If you really like it, and I'm guessing you do, have it."

"N-no. Really. Its fine. I've eaten more than my share." Naoto's stomach hungered for the remains, but she had enough will power to tame it. She tried turning away again, only to feel Narukami prod her with the box.

"Naoto, I'm fine. I promise. A cook's greatest joy is watching other's enjoy the food he made for them. So please. I insist. If you won't eat the rest, I'll just give you the box. I'm not eating them."

She finally met his eyes. He really was being genuine, she realized. He really was sorry for yesterday, it seemed. She turned her body completely and gently took the box from him. She placed it on her lap and was about to return to eating the delicious, delectable rolls. She stopped though and turned her gaze to Narukami.

"Thank you, Narukami." And for the first time since meeting her, Yu Narukami saw the Detective's Prince's honest smile. It was small, like her, and cute. So very, very cute! He was glad she was facing the meal again, because he didn't want her to see him blushing.

The bluette quietly emptied the box, savoring the delicious rolls. Once the container was empty, she placed it aside and thanked Narukami for the drink he offered her. The two drank soda together, neither saying a word as they took in the quiet sounds of Inaba.

Even Naoto had to admit that it was nice. Taking a moment not to care about the murders or disappearances. It was almost as if she wasn't just a Shirogane detective, if only for a moment. She was just...Naoto Shirogane. Naoto Shirogane, sitting in the park, enjoying the serene setting of nature.

"Can you hand me the water bottle?"

Naoto wasn't even annoyed with Narukami for interrupting the moment. It was a simple request, and considering how easily he could have ruined it, she was thankful he was treating the moment with some maturity. She quietly handed it to him and returned to enjoying the atmosphere.

It was a long, peaceful moment. She enjoyed the sense of fullness the meal gave her, not to mention the sweet sounds of the park made a peaceful harmony. Perhaps she'll come out here more often when she had free time? Perhaps once the case was solved?

And in the back of her mind, she wondered another inquiry. I wonder if Narukami would accompany me again?

Before she could fully realize what the thought may have represented, she heard her date's voice. "Hey, beautiful." She opened her eyes to see an open hand held out to her. "Care to go for a walk?"
She walked with him around the shrine, past the trees, and around a small lake they had found together. There were so few people around the area, it was as if they had the whole place to themselves.

They walked apart from one another, Naoto walking on the path as Narukami walked on the grass. He enjoyed unnecessarily risking himself, leaning over the lake and laughing as Naoto actually looked concerned he'd fall in

"Heh. Worried about me, sweetie?"

"More concerned that I'll be dragging your carcass out of that lake, Narukami," she deadpanned, though this time she actually smiled as she spoke.

"Ouch. Tough crowd." She merely shook her head as they continued to walk. "Hey, Naoto?"

"Yes, Narukami?"

"Is blue your favorite color?" He questioned, now choosing to turn around and walk backwards as she walked forward. She realized it was an interesting mirror of their second meeting, at the Junes grocery department.

She raised her brow at his question, though, and quickly answered with a simple answer. "It is."

He gave her a not-so smug smile and he simply nodded, as if the answer was all he needed. "Me too."

"You're an unusual character." She wasn't sure what made her say that out loud. But she had, and she had meant it. Deciding to carry through and speak her mind, she continued. "One minute you're-"

"Charming?"

"Obnoxious," she corrected. "But another, you're calm, intelligent, even intuitive."

"Awww. That's sweet."

"And then another, you're just...strange." Naoto let out a frustrated sigh, not realizing she had so much stress pent up on this matter. "I know you're an excellent student, Narukami. Why bother acting like this with me?"

"What can I say? I'm a man of many personas," he teased, lightly tapping her shoulder. She merely rolled her eyes, stopping to meet his grey orbs. She glared into them, as if trying to pry the secret out of him through them. He just winked and continued to prattle on. "Besides, I said I'd try to cut back on the snark and entendres. Today, you're meeting the just and noble Dr. Jekyll! Tomorrow's date, its back to Mr. Hyde," he chuckled darkly, raising his hands and roaring at her. "Rawr."

"In actuality, Dr. Jekyll wasn't the saint he is often portrayed in adaptations of the book. In fact, his serum meant to create Mr. Hyde was created for a purely selfish purpose," Naoto corrected. She blinked and tipped her hat as she sighed. "Apologies." She had a poor habit of spouting off random facts she knew. It was a habit she had learned to stop, but something about being here, with him, made her defenses loosen. If only a bit.

"No." He took her hand in his. She felt her cheeks flush again and she quickly pulled it out of his grasp. She looked up at him, and was surprised to find a gleam of curiosity in those grey orbs.
"Tell me more? I like hearing you talk about smart stuff."

The two talked and talked, walking along the path and enjoying the quiet sounds and the fresh air. It was peaceful, it was even fun. They talked about books they read, Naoto even telling Narukami about her favorite detective novels. Rather than make fun of her, he simply smiled and thought aloud about reading some of the books she liked. She almost offered loaning him some of her books, only for the words to die in her mouth.

They stayed like that for a while, not realizing time zooming by them. Naoto finally realized how late it was becoming when she noticed how the light seemed to have grown dim. She looked up to see the falling sun, vanishing over the horizon.

_The sun is setting already? How long have we been out?_ Naoto heard Narukami sigh and she returned her attention to him.

"I should probably get home before Uncle worries too much. Man, time sure flies when you're talking about centuries old literature, huh?" He smirked. She simply nodded her head in quiet agreement. "Yeah...Hey, you head straight home, okay, Detective Prince?"

"I will." Naoto nodded her head. "Thank you for the concern."

"Heh, no problem."

Silence. Awkward, awkward, silence.

Neither party looked at the other as they stood there. Both found their shoes more interesting than the other, it seemed. Yu was the first to break the silence though. "Keep an eye on your TV."

"Huh?"

"Your TV. Watch it. It'll help," he spoke plainly and bluntly. So plainly it took the blue haired girl a moment to realize what he was talking about.

He had given her a hint. It wasn't a particularly helpful or new hint, Naoto had considered the link beforehand. This merely confirmed it. She nodded her head again, showing she understood, before the two returned to standing in silence.

"I guess...Um. I'll see you tomorrow, beautiful."

She felt her face turn a scarlet hue. Why? Narukami had said and done worse than simply call her 'beautiful.' Why did it suddenly feel different? She coughed into her hand and steeled herself. Her stoic gaze met his as she nodded., "Goodbye, Narukami."

"Goodbye, my Prince."

The two turned to leave...and remembered that they were both headed in the same direction. They looked at each other and the silverette chuckled at the not-so funny situation. Naoto merely sighed and kept walking, expecting him to keep up. He did.

As they walked, a thought occurred to the Detective Prince. She bit her lower lip, hesitant to ask. Then she scolded herself for showing hesitation. What reason was there to hesitate? She had nothing to fear with simply asking. _It would not hurt to ask_, she reasoned in her mind. "Are we planning on eating at Junes tomorrow?"
The older boy just kept on grinning. "I'll make some more food for tomorrow. Don't worry." He winked at her, but she looked away, ignoring his obvious flirtations.

"Don't bother if it's a hassle. I was merely wondering if we were eating at Junes tomorrow..."

"Nothing is a hassle for you, my Cobalt Cutie."

END
Perspective

Chapter Summary

Naoto and Yu's date from the perspective of the delinquent.

Perspective

There are few truths to be found in the world. Ironically, this itself was one of those rare truths. What was another one of these truths?

Moving sucks.

At least, that was a truth from Yu Narukami's perspective. Another year, another town, this time while his parents left on their own ventures of business and pleasure. It wasn't anything new to him. This time seemed especially dull, what with him ending up in some no-name town.

*Probably boring as hell...*

Yu sighed and shifted in his seat, having failed to get comfortable for the duration of the long train ride. A voice spoke, telling him the train was nearing Yasogami station. *Fantastic. Time to go meet my dead beat uncle.*

His face changed as the train slowed down. His scowl shifted slightly, turning upwards at the ends and his face relaxed. He put on the mask of a polite young man, a mask he had been forging for many years. He grabbed his bags and looked at his window, seeing his reflection. He was smiling warmly, on the outside, but inside he was retching. He hated having to pretend to be some good boy, but his parents would have his ass if he made his uncle's life hell. So he'd wear this mask and tough it out for a year, probably swearing under his breath and rolling his eyes when the bum wasn't looking.

He walked out and found Ryotaro Dojima waiting for him, with a little girl standing behind him, trying to hide herself. *Already worse than the last one.* "Nice to meet you," he greeted, with a smile plastered onto his face.

Yu Narukami couldn't have expected any of this months before his arrival. He didn't expect murders, or disembodied voices, or monsters made of black slime. He didn't expect to suddenly be thrust into the role of leader for a ragtag bunch of misfits. He didn't expect any of it.

He walked with Chie and Yukiko cause he thought they were cute and was considering getting with one of them (or both). He didn't expect he had to save them or that they'd be fighting by his side.

He hung out with Yosuke cause he seemed desperate enough for Yu to manipulate into doing some favors for him. He didn't expect Yosuke to have any more depth to him than a puddle, but lo and behold, his Shadow proved him wrong.

He went with Yosuke into the TV world just to satisfy his curiosity of what it was. He promised himself that if things got bad enough, he'd abandon Yosuke. He didn't expect he'd actually stay by
Yosuke's side, let alone gain superpowers (not that he was entirely complaining about that last one).

He found himself trapped in a role, locked as their leader and everyone expected something great out of him.

Honestly? He was playing the whole thing by ear, not that he'd ever tell the others that. Heaven forbid if they suddenly realized their leader, Mr. Perfect, wasn't as perfect as they all thought.

That's why the time spent with Naoto was so important to him. It gave him the freedom to be his real, selfish, snarky self, without having to worry about what he acted like. Naoto couldn't refuse the dates, because he was driven to solve the murders, meaning he didn't have to hold back.

On their first, real date, he'd say what was on his mind, he'd flirted with Naoto like he used to flirt with every pretty face.

He already loved seeing how flushed and pissed off the Detective Prince looked. It was just like the good ol' days.

The fact that Naoto looked cute as hell, even when he was calm, was just a bonus.

The first date was just what the doctor ordered. Yu Narukami felt like his old self. He was rude, he was flirtatious, he was Yu Narukami, delinquent, not the stoic leader he had to be when around the Investigation Team. It was liberating. Like he had been running with weights on, only to finally throw them off. His wit was sharper, his thoughts were dirtier, and his smugness was smuggier than it ever had been!

It was amazing, and he was practically skipping home after their first 'date.'

Yu loved seeing that blushing face Naoto wore when he spoke. A smile, a bit of smugness, a flirtatious wink, and it was all he needed to watch his cheeks heat up. He loved it. But messing with him had limits, and Yu was worried that a line had been crossed during their second, significantly shorter, date. He honestly didn't mean for him to see the drawing.

He didn't regret drawing it, of course. It was a damn good picture of their naked bodies pressed against one another.

He just regretted getting caught.

So that brought him here. He sat on the other side of the bench, watching with wide eyes as Naoto ate away. Wow. He's really digging in...Guess I should call this an achievement. He loved seeing him mad. It was fun. It was cute. It was even a little arousing, but this? Seeing him so happy? It was alright too. A nice, vanilla break from his life of spice and lies.

He watched the uptight Detective Prince let loose. It was kind of amazing, and he did his best to memorize every little detail. The way Naoto smiled, seeing him close those gorgeous, cobalt eyes. The way his chest gently lifted and fell. He watched him eat roll after roll, his eyes catching his tongue smacking against his lips, the way his jaw moved to take in every bite.

Yu picked up the water bottle and offered it to the bluette. He took it without even a thank you and happily drank from it, before returning to emptying out the box. He finally seemed to hesitate for a moment, in the middle of chewing another California roll.

Yu Narukami made his move.
He took a napkin and gently pressed against the younger boy's cheek. He cleaned it of bits of rice and sauce, before speaking. "I'm glad you liked it. I was afraid you wouldn't." It wasn't a total lie. It sucked he couldn't have eaten own food, but this was working out better than expected!

Naoto coughed, averting his eyes. He tipped his hat as he turned away from the food. "You can...have the rest."

_God, so cute._ Yu considered eating the last few remaining rolls, but instead he chose to eat something else up. "Please. If you really like it, and I'm guessing you do, have it."

"N-no. Really. Its fine. I've eaten more than my share."

He would not be deterred. Naoto was going to finish the box! He gently prodded him with it. "Naoto, I'm fine. I promise. A cook's greatest joy is watching other's enjoy the food he made for them. So please. I insist. If you won't eat the rest, I'll just give you the box. I'm not eating them."

That got him.

"Thank you, Narukami." The detective turned to him, and he finally gave him a smile. He gave it to him, and it pained Yu to admit, but he thought it looked amazing. Naoto looked stunning when he actually smiled...

_He really is beautiful_, Yu thought. _Whoa there, Narukami. Eyes on the prize. You're a playboy. You don't fall for others; others fall for you._ He felt his cheeks flush and he tried to rid his face of it by focusing on something else, anything else. _Hello trees, hello golden shrine, uh- where's Mr. Fox? Not here today? That's cool!_ He continued to distract himself, and before he knew it, Naoto was just...sitting beside him, eyes closed.

He handed him a soda and he thanked him. Again!

_He looks serene. Huh. Nothing like the bubble-headed bimbos I used to date. They'd be blathering up a storm by now..._

Yu tried to do what Naoto was doing. Just sitting down, being quiet, enjoying nature. He got bored in less than a minute. His mind wandered, and it took his eyes with them. They landed on the water bottle and he swore he felt his cheeks flush as a thought occurred to him. Naoto drank from that bottle. His lips were on it.

All he could think about were his lips on the bottle, pressed against it. "Can you hand me the water bottle?" Naoto did, and Yu stared at the lid for what felt like an eternity. He didn't know why he was hesitating, or why he was blushing. He silently damned himself. He was Yu Narukami! He's touched boobs before! He's gotten to third base on the first date! WHY was he suddenly such a pansy ass?!

But another thought silenced those angry ones. He undid the lid and looked at the rim. _Did he really forget he already drank from it? Would he notice if I drank from it too? Would he realize we would be sharing an indirect kiss?_ Yu glanced at Naoto, who was quietly enjoying the scenery. _Huh...Eh. In for a penny._

He took off the lid and pressed the bottle against his mouth. He drank the water, but more importantly, he just enjoyed the knowledge that he and Naoto had just shared their first kiss...

_Is this creepy? Its a little creepy. But also sweet, if looked at from a non-creepy point of view. Hm. Nah, its still kinda creepy. Oh well._ Yu resealed the bottle and dropped it into the bag. He looked at Naoto and he smiled. _Okay, playboy. Wooing time. Decrease snark and outright sexual_
He leaped off of the bench and looked at the radiant, blue haired angel. "Hey, beautiful." He held out an open hand to him and asked, "Care to go for a walk?" Naoto looked at him like he was a deer caught in headlights. Yu grinned behind his gentle mask. *Gotcha.*

The two enjoyed the rest of the day together. They talked and walked down a simple path, enjoying the nature around them. Well, Naoto enjoyed it. Yu got annoyed at a passing bug, but he controlled himself. He silently swore to talk to the Fox about getting some pesticides.

Naoto was loving him, it seemed, well, more like tolerated. It was a victory, all the same, even it did mean he had to bite his tongue a couple of times to avoid flirting with the beautiful boy.

"You're an unusual character," Naoto mumbled. He almost seem surprised that he said it at all. Regardless, he locked eyes with the silvertte and continued. "One minute you're-

"Charming?" Yu hoped.

"Obnoxious," he stated, plainly, a glare shot at him.

*Ouch...*

"But another minute, you're calm, intelligent, even intuitive."

*Wow. I think that's the first real compliment he's given me. I am wearing him down. *Awww. That's sweet,* he smiled, smoothly.

"And then another minute, you're just...strange." Naoto sighed. He sounded really upset, actually. Like all the stress involving the murders were in that sigh. It didn't make him feel better, far as Yu could tell. "I know you're an excellent student, Narukami. Why bother acting like this with me?"

*Wait, what? How does he know that?* Yu was silent for a moment, his cheeks a bit warm. He hadn't expected Naoto to know anything about him. He underestimated the Detective Prince, it seemed. He quickly defended himself with a joke and a shrug. "What can I say? I'm a man of many personas." *Ha! Double meaning.*

The Detective Prince rolled his eyes before glaring at him again. Yu was quick to keep the topic off his academic self and on his present, Casanova self. He gave a quick wink, with a charming smile. "Besides, I said I'd try to cut back on the snark and entendres. Today, you're meeting the just and noble Dr. Jekyll! Tomorrow's date, its back to Mr. Hyde." For added effect, he gave a small monster impersonation and a- "Rawr."

"In actuality, Dr. Jekyll wasn't the saint he is often portrayed in adaptations of the book. In fact, his serum meant to create Mr. Hyde was created for a purely selfish purpose."

Yu blinked, surprised as Naoto quickly stopped himself and hid under his hat. "Apologies."

Seeing an opportunity to learn some fun facts and get the topic off of the nerd side of his life, Yu smiled. "No." He reached for Naoto's hand, silently asking for permission to hold it. His fingers barely touched it before the blue haired detective pulled away. Yu felt a mix of frustration and hurt, before the younger boy smiled. "Tell me more? I like hearing you talk about smart stuff..."

It wasn't a lie.
He soon returned home with an honest grin on his face. It was fun. It was nice to be dating again, and it was even nicer to know Naoto was opening up a bit more. True, it meant having to tone back the Narukami charm, but he'll bring it back in full force tomorrow.


"Hey, shortstuff. You okay?"

"Yeah!" She ran over to hug him and he hugged her back, stroking her tiny head.

"Is uncle out late again?" Yu inquired, scoping out the kitchen and living room. Nanako nodded her head, but instead of the frown or pout he had come to expect, she smiled. "Guess I'll take care of dinner," the young man sighed. Damn it, Dojima. I'm supposed to be a guest! Guests don't work!

"Big bro? Can I help you make dinner?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Why don't you take a minute to think of something? Big bro's kinda tired from walking, so he's gonna head to his room to rest for a bit. You gonna be okay?" Yu smiled.

"Okay! See you in a bit, big bro!" Nanako giggled, running back to watch her show on the TV.

He watched her go, and for a moment the honest smile on his face was for her. He then blinked and mentally kicked himself. Shit, I've been spending way too much time with this little munchkin.

With a shake of his head and silent groan, Yu Narukami walked up the stairs to his room. He kicked the door shut behind him, and he fell onto the couch. He reached behind him without looking and plucked out his sketchbook and pencil. He flipped to the first blank page he could find and started drawing what was on his mind.

A circle here, a square there. Some lines. Yu sighed and dropped the book off the side of the couch. Boring. Time for the special sketchbook! The silverette stepped off of his sofa to lift up one of the cushions. Under it was a small, blue sketchbook. He took it out and dropped the cushion, before laying back down on the couch. With a thoughtful look on his face, he began to draw, careful of every stroke.

Hm. Petite. Small. Hard, edgy eyes.. Nice ass. Where are my colored pencils? I need more blue...

Yu's thoughtful look was slowly traded for a perverted grin- an excited, ear to ear grin. He drew the detective's beautiful face. His flushed cheeks. His angry glare. Skin like moonlight, glimmering, radiant, even in the dark. Eyes of blue steel, sharp as a knife to the heart one moment, then as soothing as a shimmering lake. That hat, THAT hat. How he hides behind it like a barrier between his heart and the passion it wants to feel, but passion seeps through the cracks, falling on the heart like tiny embers...

Yu blinked. He stopped drawing and blinked again. Where the fuck did that come from? He dropped the book and pencil and shook his head. Yeesh. I gotta be...tired or horny or something. Yeah. Deciding he was done drawing for the night, he looked at the time with his phone. Ah, shit. Batteries must have died during the date.

He grabbed his charger and plugged his phone in. While waiting for his phone to boot up, he looked at the discarded, blue sketchbook. His lips twitched slightly as he thought about where his mind had wandered. The hell was that? I'm the wooer, not the wooee. Come on, Narukami. This ain't your first ride on the yaoi train. I've been with guys before! Guys cuter than Naoto!

Yu frowned at the thought and his hand twitched. His lip quivered as well, then his eye followed suit, as if trying to make an expression out of his motionless face. Hm. Whatever... He looked at his
charged phone and his eyes widened. *Shit.*

*Whoa! Eight missed calls?! And a shit ton of messages. Aw crap, what happened now?*?! Rather than listen to the phone calls, Yu decided to simply call back the last number. That caller just so happen to be his self-proclaimed 'partner,' Yosuke Hanamura. He took a moment to compose himself, before calling him.

"Hanamura-kun. Is something the matter?"

"Dude, what the hell?! Where were you?!" Yosuke raged.

*Shit! What happened to him?* Yu thought. "I told you that I had to take care of Nanako today. My phone ran out of battery. Why? What happened?" He took a moment to remember what he and the others were doing today. "Did something happen at Rise's?"

"She's gone, dude! We think she was kidnapped!"

...*Shit.*

END
It was a beautiful day, one that more socially active teenagers would use to hang out with their friends, perhaps spend time with that special someone, or maybe they would spend it with their family and enjoy Inaba's few attractions together. Not Naoto Shirogane though. She wasn't even meant to be here. She lived with her grandfather in another town, where the little dealings of a tiny town like Inaba shouldn't have mattered to her.

But here she was, and the worst part? She wasn't even working on the case. She was sitting at a table and waiting.

Naoto Shirogane waited at their table. She waited as the minutes passed by into hours. She ordered herself a salad and quietly ate alone, absentmindedly eating her bland assortment of vegetables and fruit, wishing it was something else, anything else, as long as it was made by him.

The only constants around her were the passing of people, the excited chatter of this or that. Nothing substantial. Nothing of importance. Just the walls of Junes and the flow of the people.

There was no smug smirk to hate. No wryly grin to dissect. No flirtatious wink to be seen and ignored.

Not a lock of silver hair around her.

It was unlike Narukami to miss their date, though Naoto chastised herself at the near baseless claim. She hardly knew him, what little she did know could have been lies and fabrications. Most likely were lies and fabrications.

Narukami held information she needed, and their inability to see each other meant that the afternoon was wasted. By the time the sun began to set, Naoto was already on her way back to her apartment to study her notes. She did what she did every night before she knew that man. She buried herself in her work, submerging herself in it and focusing only on the papers and information in front of her.

But it wasn't as easy as it used to be. His eyes gazed into her own. His hands stroked hers. His voice danced in her head, echoing through her skull.

That silver haired bastard plagued her thoughts for the duration of the night until she finally fell asleep.

"Why was I not informed about this development?" Naoto demanded.

Ryotaro Dojima sighed and rubbed his forehead with one hand. The blue haired detective had stomped her way over to him and slammed a paper onto his desk. He glanced at it, but all he needed to see was the name on it to know what the paper, and Shirogane's anger, were about.

"Shirogane, we've been through this. The higher ups don't see any basis for your theory that the rash of disappearances has a connection to the murders in April. You were assigned to-"

"Dojima-san, as I have stated previously, I believe there is a connection. The disappearances began mere days after Saki Konishi's own disappearance and ensuing death. Yukiko Amagi, who
attended the same school as Konishi, vanished without a trace, only to be found several days later with self-insisted amnesia and confusion about her whereabouts. Then, after appearing on television, Kanji Tatsumi, another attendee of Konishi's school, vanished as well, only to reappear half a week later. Now-

"Then why are they still alive?" And there lied the immediate riddle Naoto was determined to solve. Dojima rested his elbows on his desk and interlocked his fingers. He glared at Shirogane for a moment, his stare not dulled by age, only sharpened by it.

Naoto would not falter though. She stood her ground and met the stare with her own. "Perhaps if I had more help from the Inaba police force, we could explain this enigma."

"You're here to help us, not the other way around." Naoto was about to throw the statement back at his face, but the older man rested his hands on the table and shook his head as he leaned back. A heavy, exasperated sigh came out of his mouth as he sat. "But I'm starting to think you're right. There might be a connection after all." He took a moment to scan the room. Naoto recognized the dull glimmer in his eyes. It reminded her of her grandfather. Dojima's mind was sharp, and he knew this riddle was built on lies, truths, and half-truths. It made trusting others all the more difficult.

She could relate.

"Not everyone here is so open minded, though. Look, others may disagree about it, Shirogane, but I say follow your gut. If you see a lead here, follow it. I wish you the best of luck, honestly." He spoke with bluntly and plainly, no longer arguing against her. In response, she nodded her thanks. For all of Dojima's rough edges, she found him to be one of the better authority figures Inaba had to offer so far. He was at least willing to give her a chance to see her suspicious through. The old detective rose out of his chair, grabbing his coat and swinging it over his shoulder. "Adachi! Come on, we're heading out!"

"C-coming, sir!" Adachi, on the other hand, was a more confusing case. He ran over, nearly tripping over the smooth, tile floor. "Whoa! I-I'm okay." He walked over to Naoto as Dojima began to head for the exit. "Oh, hey Shirogane-kun!" Her cobalt eyes sharpened, obviously annoyed by the slip of the tongue. "Er, sorry, Shirogane-san. Heh. Whoops. It's just, I'm not really used to referring to someone so young with-

"It is quite alright, Adachi." The bluette turned away and began to leave. She took the paper with her, which Adachi must have noticed.

"Oh, you're looking into Rise Kujikawa's disappearance? You know, its kind of funny, I was there when she got kidnapped!" Naoto came to a halt, she turned to face the young man with a raised brow.

"Oh, well, not funny HAHA!" He scratched the back of his head, awkwardly trying to laugh off the awkward tension. "That came out wrong! Sorry! I mean, I was outside the place when she supposedly vanished. I even arrested this one guy, and I really thought I had the murderer."

"I heard. He was merely a member of the paparazzi, correct?" Naoto questioned.

Adachi sighed while he nodded his head, and his arms fell to his side in a defeated huff. "I really thought I had him too. The kids and I cornered him, and then they all rushed him, and I even got to cuff him and be all, 'We'll hear your story down at the station! I've always wanted to say--"

"Oh, uhh...Just some kids from Yasogami High? Oh! They're Dojima's nephew's friends! Yeah, I was tailing them for Dojima cause they've been asking a lot of questions and even his nephew's been kind of suspi-"

"Adachi! Stop running your mouth and move it!"

"Oh! Shoot! Coming sir! Bye, Shirogane!" Adachi stuttered, before running after the old detective..

Naoto barely registered his leaving though. Her mind was heavy in thought. Why were they there? Dojima asked Adachi to follow them? Asking questions about the case? There was only one likely reason he would have done that. If he believed they and the murders/disappearances were somehow connected. It makes sense, in a way. Her investigation showed Tatsumi and Amagi were commonly seen with Narukami and his friends now, not to mention the group was present at Tatsumi's house before his own disappearance.

Naoto turned on her heel after Dojima and Adachi. As she ran, she noticed the sun's ray shine through a nearby window. She observed that the sun was setting outside...

About now, she and Narukami would have been leaving each other's side, ending their date.

But if Narukami was waiting at their table for her today, he would just have to keep waiting. There was work to be done and she didn't need him to waste her time.

"Huh? When did my nephew get here? Just a few months ago, I think."

"And you picked him up at the station, correct? You didn't meet him in a location in between?"

"Yeah. I saw him get off the train myself."

"And then you went straight home, yes?"

"... What are you imply, Shirogane?"

"I am merely, as you put it, following my gut."

"Follow it all you want. Just stay the hell away from my family."

Naoto scolded herself for replaying the memory over again. She had to confront Dojima-san, she did not apologize for her decision to pursue the truth. She did regret her inability to confront the older man with more tact. Surely the older man had seen the obvious connections linking his nephew to the Inaba murders and missing students, but he must have hesitated confronting his nephew about it. After all, the sacrifices one makes for their family...

Regardless, Naoto was not a detective to make friends. She was a detective to unravel the dark mysteries and riddles the world hid from the public eye. If Yu Narukami was somehow involved in the recent, strange crimes of Inaba, she would find out in due time.

In all honesty, Naoto was hesitant to accuse Narukami of being the murderer, no matter what tiny, immature part of her still wanted that to be possible. No, it was just too unlikely for Narukami to be the killer. True, the deaths started when he arrived, but that was just it. They were too close. How could Narukami have gotten off the train, picked up directly from the station by Dojima, and then kill Mayumi Yamano? Not to mention how he killed her without leaving any marks and carried her body on top of the roof...
Unless Dojima helped him. It would explain-

She killed that thought quickly. Paranoia and caution were separated by a thin line, she reminded herself. She exhaled a breath she hadn't realize she was holding, before continuing the original train of thought.

Yu Narukami was linked to the case. Somehow. She just needed to know how, and to do that, she needed info on the man himself.

So she waited outside of Yasogami High, a reasonable distance away to observe those leaving the school without making her presence obvious. She stood within a nearby restaurant, gazing out the window as her coffee cooled on her table. She absentmindedly stirred her drink as she watched for them. It wasn't difficult to spot the particular group of students. Yukiko Amagi and Chie Satonaka were blatant indicators of the group, to say nothing of Narukami's unusual silver hair tone.

The group was leaving Yasogami in a tightly packed unit, moving with obvious purpose and urgency. The only way they could have stood out more is if they were outright running, yelling at the top of their lungs. Regardless of their lack of subtly, Naoto tailed them, finishing her drink and leaving the exact payment for it on the table.

The group had begun picking up speed as soon as they could. They were now making a quick dash towards their location, occasionally walking around anyone else in their way, or grunting something to the others. Naoto wished she could get closer to hear what they were talking about, but she had to maintain a safe distance to ensure her cover was not blown. Nevertheless, the detective was able to match the group's speed with a near perfect ratio, rarely moving too fast or too slow, always maintaining roughly the same distance.

Where are you going, Narukami? She wondered. You have to be going somewhere. Time is of the essence, why else run? So where? Are you going to meet your accomplice? Perhaps to where Rise Kujikawa is being kept? Or perhaps...The Junes' electronics store? Why? What are you thinking, Narukami? The five entered the store and blue haired detective was quick to pursue them, entering in a few seconds after them. She was now close enough to hear them, though it wasn't perfectly clear. Naoto dashed behind a shelf, hiding her presence from the five. In a rare moment of gratitude, she was glad she was so small. It made hiding all the easier.

"Looks like the close is clear," the... Hanamura(?) boy mumbled.

"Alright, let's get going then! What are we doing just standing here for?!" The loud, angry voice belonged to Kanji Tatsumi, no doubt about that.

"Careful, Kanji-kun. Last time you rushed in you were hurt. You were lucky I was there to treat your wound." The polite and proper voice belonged to Yukiko Amagi, Naoto mentally noted.

"Go easy on him, Yukiko. It was the dude's first time. Probably just excited to pop his cherry," the Hanamura boy joked.

Naoto felt her cheeks flush at the perverted joke. She rolled her eyes in disgust as she thought, No wonder Narukami surrounds himself with these imbeciles.

"Ugh! Gross, Yosuke! Gah, that's worse than the joke you sent me last night!" Obviously feminine, with a sharper and more passionate tone than Amagi's, meaning it was most likely the other girl in the group, Chie Satonaka.

That last one student, Yu Narukami, was unusually silent. Satonaka and Hanamura continued to
bicker with one another, Amagi trying in vain to resolve the petty arguing.

"Calm down, everyone." Wait. That couldn't have been Narukami, at least, it wasn't Narukami she knew of. It was respectable, subdued, even stoic, with an air of charisma and authority. These were all traits that the silverette lacked. But there was no denying this speaker had his voice, but the inflection, the tone, the pitch, everything about his way of speaking seemed off. "We need to work together and keep our cool. There's no room for mistakes or jokes this time."

"R-right, Narukami..."

"Okay, Partner..."

"It's alright, guys. Everything will be okay. Come on. Let's go get Rise."

What? Naoto fought the urge to come out of her hiding place to confront the group. She chose to instead wait and see if they would lead her to the missing idol instead, but to her confusion they didn't make a move. She heard nothing from them, only silence.

They aren't talking, they aren't moving. Why? What are they doing?

Naoto decided to take a risk and peek out from behind her cover, and, to her utter shock, there was no one there. They were gone, without a single trace. She hadn't heard any footsteps or the sound of a door moving, nor did she see anyone else in the store besides herself. They were just gone! The usually reserved detective was utterly baffled as she scanned the electronic's store.

Yu Narukami and his friends had vanished.

The Detective Prince squeezed the bridge of her nose and let out a frustrated sigh. Her breath was heavy with mental and physical exhaustion. Her mind plagued with confusion and hypotheticals. If Narukami had somehow found a way to just... vanish as he and his friends did previously, would that have been how Narukami could have killed the announcer, Miss Yamano? If so, then he could very well have been the murderer. It was the perfect way to evade the police.

But that made no sense! People are not able to just vanish within a blink of an eye!

But she was sure they hadn't left the room. She had taken her eyes off of them, yes, but her hearing was sharp, and yet she had heard nothing! How could they have just vanished like that?! And Rise Kujikawa...

Narukami had been called and informed that she had returned home just moments ago. So did Narukami save her and previous victims? If he was saving them, why withhold information from the police? If he knew where to go, why not stop the disappearances all together?

There were too many damn questions! This case was only becoming more baffling the closer she examined it.

Which was why she was where she was. She stood outside of the Dojima Residence and awaited Narukami's return. She would have answers tonight, come hell or high water.

"Huh? Sweetie?"

About time. "Narukami." The tension and raw emotion behind her voice was evident. The silverette stared at her with a momentary look of surprise, before he masked it with his arrogance.
"Hey, beautiful. Sorry for missing our dates lately. Exams are coming up and-

"Enough lies, Narukami!" She commanded, louder and more passionate than she had intended. She steeled herself and walked forward, purpose guiding every step. The taller man took a step back as she advanced closer and closer. "I have been accepting of your idiocy to a degree, more accepting of your obnoxious personality than I should be. I was guided by a desire to see this case closed and to be respected by my colleagues. That desire was the only reason I tolerated your arrogance and repulsive nature, but now Rise Kujikawa is missing and time is running out. I am done playing games and being fed hints and half-truths. I want answers, Narukami."

"Hey, wait a second, my Prince!" He held up his hands to try and touch the detective's shoulders, probably as some sort of sign of solidarity. Naoto smacked back of his hands away from her and continued to scowl at him. "Rise was found just a few hours ago! She's okay! So, you know... That's good, right, my Little Sapphire?" He smiled at her, but it only made Naoto more irritated.

She pushed her annoyance down, bottling it, controlling it, because there was more important things to note. He had fallen into her trap. "How could you possibly know that? I was only recently notified of Kujikawa being returned home. How could you, a high school student, possibly hear about it sooner than a detective working on the case?"

Narukami, to his credit, seemed to have saw her subtle accusation coming. "I was there when they found her. I saw Chie and Yukiko help her and walk her home."

But Naoto had gone over the supposed truths about Kujikawa's return. She quickly countered with, "Miss Kujikawa, when asked, answered that only Satonaka and Amagi were present when she was awake. There was no one else, but the three of them."

Narukami's face twitched. His mask held, but Naoto could still see the cracks. He hadn't been expecting her to be so thorough. He underestimated her, a common, and final mistake. He didn't say anything for a moment, which gave the detective her opening to continue.

"You obviously know more about this case than the police do, Narukami. Why you insist on keeping it a secret implies you are either under threat to keep the truth hidden, or worse, you are merely selfish." She paused, allowing what she said to sink in. Perhaps to the average person he would have looked calm, but Naoto's senses were trained to notice the tiny micro-expressions he made. She could see the small cracks in his mask. He was avoiding her eyes, looking to the ground, or to the side, and his breathing had become more shallow, if only slightly. He was nervous.

"Or perhaps, you are the one kidnapping these people? Perhaps you are working alongside the murderer?" She wasn't sure if even she believed that or not. Did part of her truly still want Narukami to be a criminal? She scolded herself for her immaturity and focused on the task at hand. The true purpose of the accusation was to see how he reacted, to see if he hid behind another mask or showed his true self.

His eyes finally lost the shine to them, that slight, silver glow of confidence was gone. They became grey and sharp, like steel. "I am not a murderer, and I sure as hell don't kidnap people." He sounded angry. His smile, once wavering, was completely gone. His face was a mirror to her own; serious and quickly approaching furious.

And yet, even that seemed like a mask he hid behind.

"I am tired of the games and I am tired of tolerating your constant pestering, so I will give you an ultimatum. Tell me what is going on or our deal is forfeit. These 'dates' have been nothing more
than a waste of time and time is something I never should have wasted, least of all with you."
Naoto glared directly into Narukami's eyes with every word. She spoke slowly and clearly, not
wanting a single word to be misunderstood or missed.

Her efforts seemed in vain after he had spoken. "So, what? We're just gonna break up unless I tell
you everything I know about a murder mystery?" It almost sounded like a joke. The look on his
face showed that he was deadly serious.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes or glare at him. Instead, she let out an exasperated sigh. "If
that is how you wish to comprehend it, very well." She waited for an answer. He merely stared at
the sidewalk in silence. She once thought the idea of a silent Narukami was a pleasant one. It
wasn't. In the end, she turned and began to walk away. "Very well. Farewell, Narukami."

"The Midnight Channel." She halted her next step, standing with her back to him. He continued.
"There's this thing called the Midnight Channel. Go home, unplug your
TV, and watch it at midnight exactly. Then come to our table tomorrow and meet me. We'll talk
this out, Naoto."

"..."

"Please."

Begging, Narukami? That's not like you.

The blue haired detective continued her walk, soon turning a corner and leaving Yu Narukami
alone.

11:30 PM

*The Midnight Channel?* Naoto had heard the rumors during her investigation. Just an urban legend,
all small towns had them. A baseless rumor, a superstition for children and teens to talk about. It
couldn't have meant anything. It couldn't be real.

Even if it was, which it couldn't have been, why would Narukami want her to watch it? What could
it possibly have anything to do with the cases? These questions wrestled in her mind as she
squeezed the remote in her hand.

*He is merely doing what he does best. Lying. This is merely another pathetic attempt to prologue
our interaction, to try to somehow convince me to stay with him. That idiot! Why was he so pig-
headed to see me again?*

*Maybe he really does care...?* Naoto dropped the remote and felt her cheeks warm slightly. Where
the hell did that come from? *The very idea of Narukami having genuine feelings for me is as
unlikely as it is repulsive. He doesn't know a single thing about me, he is merely looking for
someone to play with. I have no time for dilly-dallying with such callow love affairs!*

11:35 PM

Yu Narukami is, at worst, a selfish, abhorrent man with a lack of morality and delusions of
grandeur. At best, he was merely a liar, but a liar was the worst thing for a seeker of truth, such as
herself, to face.

Whatever his intentions were, whatever game he was playing, whatever role he had in this
mystery, she would find out.
But on her terms. Not by playing with the hand he gave. She would forge her own path.

She left the remote on the floor and left to get ready for bed. Once she had changed, brushed her teeth, and turned off the lights, she laid on her bed with papers in hand.

She fell asleep reviewing the case, her mind focused on solving this riddle on her own.

11:40 PM

END
Emptiness

Chapter Summary

Yu did it. Mitsuo's beaten, the day is won, and now he's free to reap the benefits of his victory. Yet no matter what he does, he keeps hearing the voice of a certain detective... Soon his victory turns into a living nightmare as he slowly loses his mind.

Emptiness

"Senpai, look out!" Kanji warned as he dashed into the way of an attack. The floating bomb exploded in full force in front of him as he summoned his Persona to take some of the blast. The air was knocked out of him as he fell to his knees when the smoke cleared.

Behind him, Yu Narukami watched as the younger boy fell to the ground, blacking out from fatigue and his previous injuries. If he even cared that his ally had fallen, he didn't show it. He ran forward, leaping over Kanji's fallen body. He held his sword in one hand, while a blue card formed in the other as he made his attack.

"Izanagi!" He declared crushing the card in his hand as he soared towards Shadow Mitsuo. "CLEAVE!" He declared, swinging the sword to cut down Shadow Mitsuo. His Persona formed beside him, mimicking the motion with his own mighty blade. The two blades were swung, cutting through the Shadow and ending the case once and for all.

The celebration afterwards was a fun one, even if Yu didn't like the Investigation Team hanging around his house; the food he made was good and Nanako was genuinely charming to have around. They had fulfilled their promise, having caught the killer and tossing him to the cops. Now? Now they celebrated with delicious food and drinks. As the others mingled and talked, Yu thought about what to do now that the murders were over. He looked at a certain idol and hid his true grin behind a mask.

The sliverette sat beside Rise, smiling at her as the red-haired beauty spoke to Nanako about her time in the limelight. "Enjoying yourself, Rise-chan?"

Just a friendly grin was enough to get the girl to blush. She averted her eyes as she nodded her head. "Heh. Y-yeah. It's a lot of fun, and the others are really nice."

"They are a great group, aren't they?" Yu lied, not that she needed to know that. Now that the case was over, the young man saw little reason to have to hide the real him any longer. What did he care if Yosuke and Teddie fell out of his social circle? Kanji was dumb, with a need to have someone accept him, making him an easy and practical 'buddy' to keep around.

As for the girls? Well, now that Yu didn't need to play the stoic hero anymore, he could think of plenty of good lies to tell them.

"Rise, I was wondering if you would do me the honor of going out with me?" He smiled.

He saw her cheeks turn even pinker, and he had to admit, he always knew he was a good liar, but
making an idol swoon for him? It made him realize he was even more amazing than he previously thought. "W-what? Date? You wanna go on a date with me, Senpai?"

Yu's plastic smile shifted, lifting the veil he wore to show his teeth, so to speak. He made his desire for her clear. She would know his perverted intentions, but she wouldn't say no. She couldn't. He was too perfect to say deny. Besides, he wasn't blind. He knew she wanted him. "There's going to be a festival in a couple of weeks. I wanted to know if you would go with me as... Ahem. More than friends?" A fake smile and a practiced blush was all he needed to win over the girl.

"Y-yeah! I'd love to!"

He was making out with Rise Kujikawa. Rise. Kujikawa. Risette! They had gone to the festival together and it didn't take her long to pull him behind some trees and press her lips against his.

She had her arms wrapped around his head, her lips pressed against his and her tongue begging to be let in. She desired him, she craved him, and he loved it. Yu played the fool for a moment, hesitating and just holding her against him. She pulled away all too soon, her face was scarlet as she covered her mouth.

"S-Senpai! I'm so sorry! I just... I thought... I-"

He silenced her by placing his finger on those soft lips of hers. He gazed into her eyes with a smile, and her cheeks burned even hotter, her eyes looking to the floor."Rise-chan. Don't apologize. I liked it, I just... I've never had a girlfriend before," he lied.

"R-really?"

"Yeah, and now here you are, Rise Kujikawa, the most beautiful girl in the world, and I... I... It's all just going by really fast, you know?" He faked a nervous chuckle, before making himself blush. "I'm sorry, you probably want a boy more famous, or cooler than some nobody like me."

"No! Senpai, I want to be with you! I don't want anyone, but you!" She argued.

_Gotcha._ "And I want to be with you, Rise. I'm just... This is all moving so fast, isn't it?" He pretended to be scared, plastering worry on his face. She hugged his arm and he hid his enjoyment. The feeling. Someone holding him, needing him, and an idol at that! It was amazing. Like a rush of energy pumped into his veins. He had her, now all he had to do was make sure she stayed his.

"I know it's unfair of me to ask this of you, but can we keep our relationship a secret? Just between us? I don't know how everyone will react to me dating an idol. Maybe we should probably wait until you fall out of the public eye?" _And then I'll move back home and, well, I'm sure you'll get over me._

"Oh..." Yu saw the look of hesitation in her eye, and for a moment, he feared she would reject him. In the end, Rise proved to be just as gullible as he had hoped. "Okay, Senpai! We'll keep our love a secret for now."

"Thank you, Rise. I really appreciate it."

"But, y'know..." The idol played with her hair as she looked around the festival. "No one can really see us while we're here. Why don't we...?" She was silenced by a kiss. She gasped, but soon melted against him. Rise wasn't the first person Yu had kissed, and like hell she'd be the last. Regardless, all those years kissing people had taught him how to kiss like a master, and soon Rise's hot body was pressed against his, rubbing and moaning under his charms.
"Your 'game' will soon come to an end."

He pulled away from Rise, his eyes open and alert. He scanned the area around them, seeing the usual festivities around him and nothing more. Nothing out of the ordinary. No-

"Senpai? Is something wrong?"

"No," he answered, a little too quickly. "Nothing. It was nothing." They continued to kiss the night away, but Yu couldn't rid himself of some kind of feeling in the pit of his gut.

"I've always kind of liked you, Ayane."

"You're smart, brave, and beautiful as can be. You're perfect, Ai."

"But I've never dated anyone before, Chie, so I'm sorry-"

"-if I'm a bit shy, Yumi."

"Do you mind if we keep this a secret? Just between us, Yukiko?"

It wasn't long before Yu had a small legion of girlfriends, and even a couple of boyfriends (Kou was more open-minded than you'd think) under his belt, all sworn to secrecy. He had manipulated them, won them over through cheap smiles and generic words of kindness, and they had all fallen for him, thinking he was theirs and theirs alone.

Suckers.

But no matter how many hearts he won, no matter how easily he was able to manipulate some poor soul into being his, he kept hearing his voice.

"You don't deny, then, that you have involved yourselves in the matter?"

A relationship built on lies. Yu Narukami knew all too well about those. He had lost count of how many bonds he had forged out of deceptions, but that never bothered him before. Yet now, when he had more lovers than he even knew what to do with, it all felt so empty.

It's his fault. It has to be, he thought. Maybe it was because Naoto was his first choice and he had rejected him? Everyone was just a silver medal after the Detective Prince. Or maybe it was just because no other prey was like him? Or maybe Naoto had just been such a difficult heart to win, everything else just seemed too easy? Naoto was a challenge, a mountain to climb, but rather than play fair and let Yu walk over him, the mountain caused an avalanche and left Narukami's body to rot and die under piles of snow and wood.

He wasn't there. Yu remembered and a true scowl formed on his face. The day after their break up he had gone to their table, waiting for him. He waited and waited, but no one joined him. It was just him alone.

Naoto Shirogane.

Just thinking about him pissed him off. Yu was the great, big hero. Wasn't he entitled to a little
romance? Wasn't he entitled to a reward for his good deed? Shouldn't the universe show some gratitude to him for leading a bunch of ragtag idiots into saving some shitty town?

He rolled a bit, now laying on his other side as he looked at his bedfellow, Rise Kujikawa. The idol was naked, his blanket kept snug around her body, hiding the features he had been enjoying earlier. She had a small, content smile on her face, no doubt pleased by his actions barely an hour ago.

And yet it all felt so hollow and meaningless.

"Shirogane?"

"Yeah. I remember seeing him around town a few times before he just vanished. I was wondering if you knew what happened to him?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He's a detective that's younger than me. You can't blame me for being a little curious about someone like that."

"Hm, suppose that's fair. Shirogane is pretty is unique, but when the case was closed he just up and left. Detectives-

"Rarely handle arrests. I know. Well, thanks anyways, uncle."

Did he leave? Yu wondered to himself as he walked down a crowded sidewalk. It would make sense. What's the point of staying after the case has been solved? Still, would a goodbye have been too much for his favorite silverette?

Yu shook his head, ending his own train of thought. He had gone to Chie's for the chance to enjoy the little tomboy, he liked to think of it as his victory lap after wooing her, but despite all the kisses and moans he couldn't rid himself of this sense of desire. He ended up leaving Chie all by herself as his mind continued to play games with him. Like an itch he couldn't scratch, or even be distracted from, this feeling plagued his mind and left his skin crawling as he walked down the Inaba sidewalk.

"Sorry," he mumbled as someone bumped into him. When the hell did these streets get so crowded?

"Narukami."

Wait. What?

He saw him. He saw him! He had just-

"Naoto!?"

This hollowness inside his head came when Naoto left, and Yu knew why. It was because Naoto was the one who got away. Well, not this time. This time, he wouldn't stop until he made Naoto fall for him like all the other girls and boys of Inaba. Whatever lie it took, whatever deception he had to pull, he would claim the Detective Prince as his own.

He followed him deeper into the crowd that had formed on the street, but no matter how many people he pushed aside and no matter how loud he yelled, the blue haired boy soon vanished from his sight. "Naoto!?" Frustration and anger tore apart his mind as Yu pushed a young woman out of
his way. He looked for a trace of the detective, before he had realized what exactly he had done, and more importantly, who he had done it to.

"Well, no matter. I have no reason to say anything further."

"R-Rise? Rise, I'm so sorry," he apologized, bending down to hold out his hand to the fallen idol. She looked up at the sky, staring just past his head, before standing up on her own. "Huh? Rise? Are... you okay?" The redhaired idol walked past him, the click of her heels louder than he expected as she began to walk away. They were so loud, because suddenly the street had gone quiet.

The sea of people that had crowded around Yu were still moving, but now their footsteps were muffled. Now he was trapped on a small island of isolation, the ocean of people moving around him like a river flowed around a rock. "What?" He walked closer to the people around him, and they stepped away in perfect sync. They walked by, not even glancing at him.

He could see familiar faces walk by, glassy-eyed with dull expressions. "Ai? Naoki? Kou?! Where are you all going?!" Daisuke, Dojima, Adachi, even the dead face of Saki walked by him. None of them acknowledged his existence. "Where are you going?!" He screamed, half begging for an answer, half demanding one.

"You are nothing, therefore they treat you like nothing."

Yu turned his head to see the smiling, blue haired detective. He could hear the sound of thunder as clouds formed above, blotting out the sun's rays. He was shaking. He didn't know why. He told himself that it was the cold as he approached Naoto. Never had he been so happy to see someone stand still. "Naoto? What's happening? What's going on?!"

"You are nothing, therefore I treat you like nothing." He smiled at him, and it sickened him to his core.

"Stop it! Stop playing games with me! What the hell is going on?!" His voice was becoming raspy as he continued to roar and scream. Naoto just laughed as he stood there, panting, beads of cool sweat dripping down his crawling skin. "Naoto! Please, tell me what's going on?!"

"Does it hurt? The emptiness inside?" the detective questioned, that tiny smile still on his face. "I don't see why. It's always been there, hasn't it?"

"Eating away at you, festering within you," Yosuke suddenly spoke. He stood at the outskirts of Yu's isolation, smiling smugly. "Kind of makes you wonder how you could ignore it before?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Chie giggled as she walked out of the crowd. "He just fills himself with lies to try and hide the pain."

"Like a glutton, he gobbles them up and thinks they'll fill the void in his body." Yukiko snorted and covered her face. "I can't take him seriously!"

"Lying? Psh. You ain't a man. Just a perverted, snotnosed brat looking for an asskicking!" Kanji declared, slamming his fist into his open palm.

Each statement stabbed Yu, but he hid his mask. He appeared calm, stoic, and true, the leader that commanded respect. "Everyone, something is obviously wrong. You're being controlled against your will. Fight it! We can beat it if we work together!"

"Ha! Don't you think its a bit late for that cheap trick?" Rise laughed. She covered her mouth with
delicate fingers to try and hide her cute laugh. "Come on, Senpai. We know you're not nearly as cool as you pretend to be. You're just pretending cause you know you're a loser without some kind of mask, right?" She sang, swaying in place. "It's so sad. You pretend to know what you're doing, but you're just faking it most of the time. And what were the words you used to call us in your head?"

"I think he called us," Yosuke mockingly took a moment to think about it. "Oh, I know. Leeches."

"Weaklings," Chie hissed.

"Parasites," Yukiko laughed.

"He's right though. Together, we can beat it. We can beat him," Kanji smirked. "Ya hear that, Narukami?! We don't need you anymore!"

"Stop it!" Yu screamed, covering his ears to try and block out their voices. He squeezed his head, not caring about the pain as long as he could drown out the sounds. The wind was howling and rain was battering the street, and yet he could hear their voices echo through his skull so clearly. The raging wind was nothing compared to the truths being brought before him. The harsh storm was nothing compared to the horrors the truth gave him.

"Sensei?"

"Teddie?" He raised his head up and found himself face to face with the colorful bear. Yes! Teddie! He thought. The bear wasn't like the others. He didn't look angry or sadistically cheerful. He seemed heartbroken, like a puppy that had been tossed away by his owner.

"Sensei, d-do you really not care about us?" He whimpered.

Yu stood up on trembling legs as he put on another mask. He hid his fear with a fatherly smile and he buried the quiver of his voice with faux compassion. He opened his arms as he spoke to Teddie with that same kind voice he had always faked. "Teddie, please. Don't believe it. I know you can beat whatever has control over you. I-" Teddie's clawed hands nearly slashed at his throat. He was saved only by his reflexes, moving just in time so only a few stray, silver hairs fell. Terror had shattered his mask. "T-Teddie?"

"Stop pretending to care about me! You're nothing! Yosuke called me empty, but really, you're the empty one here!"

"You have nothing."

Another voice echoed through his skull.

The rain poured, the wind blew, and he realized he felt none of it. He looked to the sky in confusion. It was raining harder now, thunder clapping as the sky flooded the small town of Inaba. Yet he felt nothing. The wind passed through him. The raindrops fell through him. Nothing. The world couldn't touch him and he couldn't touch it.

"The links you created are hollow, because you are hollow. You felt nothing for those you bonded with, and thus your bonds are nothing."

"Get away from me!" Yu pleaded, standing up as the seven surrounded him. They had him trapped on all sides, their faces molded to fit psychotic grins and smiles. They surrounded him as he looked for an exit. He was a caged animal, screaming for mercy, shaking in terror as a hand touched his.
"Narukami?"

Compared to the others, Naoto had no madness to his smile. He smiled like he had on their date in the park. Genuinely. Honestly. It was the smile Yu had always wanted to see again...

"N-Naoto." He let out a nervous, wheezy laugh as he grabbed the small boy's shoulders. "You have to help me. Please. P-please! I know I'm not a great guy, but I don't deserve this!" He cried. He was crying. He was a child again, alone and shaking in the dark of an empty house. "Please, my, my dear Prince. Help me. My, my uh... My Navy Sweet! My Cerulean Beauty! My-

"You're all alone, as you always have been."

A gunshot silenced him. He fell to the ground, bellowing in agony as his shoulder bled. Naoto giggled like a child would as he played with the gun. "Narukami," he cooed, walking closer to the fallen body. "Put that mask away and show me the real you."

"P-please... I-I don't wanna die," he sobbed. "Please, Naoto. I'm sorry. I'm begging you! I'm sorry!"

"Yeesh, what a crybaby," Rise sighed. "And to think I thought he was cool."

"Come on, dude!" Yosuke laughed. He gently poked Yu's head with his foot as the rain fell through his bleeding body. "Make a joke. Crack a smile. Be your 'true' self. Your boyfriend's watching!"

Yu could only sob in response, his vision now gone from the tears in his eyes.

"Sigh. Figures. Even his 'true' self is just another lie," Chie sighed. "And he thought I was weak?"

A crash of lightning. Yu's uncontrolled sobbing. His executioners stared down at him until all he could see were their insane, wryly smiles, save for Naoto who still wore a copy of that beautiful grin from their date. He had so wanted to see him smile like that again, but this? This was just insult to injury.

Then a familiar whisper broke through the storm.

"I am thou...thou art I."

"W-what?" Yu whimpered. The mad jury looked to the sky as a being descended down upon them. A ray of light shined down on Yu's bleeding body, illuminating the cloudy city street. Izanagi floated over the group, silently staring down at his master.

"I-Izanagi!" Yu cried. He had never been so happy to see his Persona. He struggled to peel himself off of the sidewalk, arms raised to the leather-clad warrior. "I-Izanagi! Please... S-save me. Kill them! H-help me!" He begged.

"Kill us? Wow, Yu, did you ever care for us?" Yosuke laughed.

"Not much better than the murderer, is he?" Yukiko snorted.

"Izanagi!"

The masked warrior spun his staff in his metal fingers. He held the weapon up as he made his move. His spear shot forward, skewering Yu Narukami through his stomach. He couldn't even scream as he felt the blade puncture his insides. The others, his torturers, laughed at him as Naoto continued to smile and stare.
"I am thou, thou art I," Izanagi repeated as he slowly lifted the bloody blade up from the ground, dragging the impaled victim with it. The Persona brought the dying boy face to mask with himself, staring down at him. The human's silver eyes met the Persona's golden ones. "I am nothing, thou art nothing." Izanagi's clawed fingertips gently dashed away the tears on Yu's face, before reaching to the back of his own mask. Izanagi took his mask off, letting it fall to the earth, clanging against the concrete as Yu saw the reflection of his soul.

He saw the face of Izanagi, and there was nothing. Merely two golden orbs in a sea of darkness. Izanagi was him, and he was empty, thus... Yu Narukami was the same.

"You are empty, like me."

"Empty," Yu repeated, mindlessly. "I'm... I'm empty. I am-"

"Yu! Yu!"

"Senpai!"

"Empty..."

"Senpai! Grab my hand!"

"Yu! Over here!"

"I am-"

He felt something grab him. He felt like he was being tugged, pulled off of Izanagi's blade like a chunk of meat off a knife. The last thing he saw were the golden eyes of his Persona staring back at him...

"Gotcha, Partner!"

He was being held by Kanji and Yosuk as they fell through the air. They protected him along the way, carrying him away from a bright light as the world spiraled around him.

"Sensei!"

"Senpai, are you okay?"

"Yu-kun!"

They stopped falling. They were on the ground and he was laid down on the solid dirt floor as he saw Yukiko, Chie, Teddie, and Rise running towards him. He flinched away from them, but was too tired to do much else as his breathing became shallow. Suddenly a warm light washed over him and he felt his breathing slow down, stabilizing. Yukiko aimed a finger at him as her Persona spun around above her. As his body was re-energized his mind returned to him.

They had seen the true murderer, Mitsuo Kubo, on the Midnight Channel. They pursued him into some shitty videogame themed dungeon. They fought him, and... and...

Kanji hadn't pushed him out of the way of the attack. He remembered it, so clearly in his mind. Kanji failed to take the attack for him and because of that, Yu was too injured to dodge Shadow Mitsuo's next attack. He had summoned dozens of cubes around the silverette, trapping him in a prison made of them. That's where he...

"Senpai? Senpai?! Why isn't he saying anything?!" Kanji's voice was shaky, horrified as their
leader stared off into the distance. "Come on, Senpai! I'm sorry! You gotta be okay, you-"

Yu stood up. He walked past his friends as his silver gaze fell upon the whining Shadow hiding atop a small castle of colorful blocks. It stared back at him with its golden eyes as a wryly smirk formed on his face. "Nothing...That's what you called me." He mumbled, his voice as hoarse and gravelly as it had been in that nightmare. His tired voice let out a brief laugh as a blue card descended down towards him. "Persona."

The card was shattered in his hand as the real Izanagi appeared before him. A single look exchanged all that needed to be said.

"I was worried about you."

"Kill him."

Izanagi shot forward like a rocket, leading the charge as the others raced to call their Persona to join the counterattack.

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Yu fell to his knees was the battle was over. He was panting again, his chest heaving, bullets of sweat going down his head as the Shadow faded away. Kanji, Yosuke, and Chie were talking to the now conscious Mitsuo Kubo as the others stood back. He thought he heard voices again, but this time they weren't just in his head. He thought they were trying to ask him if he was okay, but all he could think about was the nightmare.

Empty...? Nothing? Just a husk, or a void. Is that what you think I am?

He almost heard the words repeat themselves in his head, spoken by familiar voices, but he now realized that it hadn't been them. It couldn't have been, and Naoto... He hadn't really been there. Shadow Mitsuo had trapped him in a nightmare, a world where everything was fake, a place of lies! There was no void in his soul, he wasn't a husk, he wasn't empty! He was Yu Narukami! He wasn't empty!

It was his fault! Mitsuo threw him into that damn nightmare world! Now Yu was gonna make him pay.

Yu stood up and dropped his sword. They stared in confusion before he began to walk forward, then he ran. Before anyone could stop him, he tackled the Mitsuo to the ground and he raised his fist. He brought it down, feeling his knuckles dig into the murderer's cheek. He raised his fist and repeated the action. This time, he felt a soft crunch as his fist hit the murderer's nose. The bastard let out a wail. Maybe it was a laugh? Maybe he was trying to plead for mercy?

It didn't matter. He brought his fist down again.

*I'm nothing like you! I'm not you! I'll never be you! I'm stronger than you! I have everything you'll never have! I'm not nothing! I'm not empty!*

"I'm not empty. I'm not. I'm not!" He muttered, holding the bastard with one arm so the other could keep hitting him. His knuckles were in pain, but he kept hitting Mitsuo. He didn't stop. He wouldn't stop.

"Yu! Stop!" Someone grabbed his arm, tried to hold it back.

"Senpai! Cool it, man! He's done!" Another arm.
They pulled him up, but he struggled every inch of the way. They held back his arms, so he kicked Mitsuo's body, kicking dirt onto him and stomping on him.

"Senpai, stop!"

"Sensei!"

"Yu, stop it!"

"Narukami!"

Chie and Kanji pulled Yu away from Mitsuo, holding the silverette as he trembled in their arms. He wasn't fighting them anymore, but he couldn't stop shaking. Yosuke moved forward, placing his hands on his partner's shoulders as he tried to reach him.

"It's okay, dude. It's okay. It's over," Yosuke whispered. Yu could barely hear him.

_I'm not you! I'm nothing like you!_ His mind screamed, but his mouth was quiet. He ground his teeth against one another as he took in deep, harsh breaths. His knuckles hurt. There was blood on them. His and Mitsuo's. Kanji and Chie slowly released the young man as he struggled to breathe.

"Narukami? Are... are you okay?" Chie asked.

_No. That bastard's still breathing..._ "I-I'm okay," he panted. He held his head, wiping away sweat as he exhaled. "I'm okay."

"Senpai. I-I've never seen you go off like that," Kanji muttered. "What happened in that cube thing?"

"He..." Yu's face returned to the leader facade they all knew so well. He steeled himself, then hid behind another mask. He buried his fear and anger until his face was stoic once more. "He showed me all of you, injured and beaten. You were dying. Seeing you all hurt was awful, I couldn't stand the idea of it. When you and Yosuke saved me from that nightmare, I was so scared he was going to make good on that vision, I just... snapped."

"Senpai," Rise whispered.

"Yu..." Yosuke squeezed the silverette's shoulders with a look of pity on his face.

"I'm okay, guys... Really."

_I'm not lying. I'm not. We won. The case is over._ Yu looked at Mitsuo's groaning body. "Yukiko, can you heal him?"

"I think so," she replied, hesitantly.

"I think so," she replied, hesitantly.

"Please, do so. We need to bring him to the proper authorities.

That was it. The case was over. They saved the day. _Cue the fanfare and parade_, he thought.

Everyone had begun to move, but Yu noticed that Kanji wasn't budging. He was staring at the ground, looking melancholic. "Is something wrong, Kanji-kun?" He asked.

"I'm sorry, Senpai." The young man's fingers into the palms of his hands as he shook. "If I had been faster, or stronger, I could have saved you and you never would have been trapped in that thing! I'm sorry, Senpai. This is all my fault."
The idea of punching Kanji briefly crossed Yu's mind. But beating the crap out of Mitsuo didn't make him feel better, so he doubted kicking Kanji's ass would have. So instead, he plastered a smile on his face and held the younger boy's shoulder with a comforting hand. "Its okay, Kanji. You did your best. Don't beat yourself up for things that aren't your fault. Don't hate yourself for what you couldn't do, be proud of what you have done. Need I remind you that you and Yosuke saved me from that prison, and you helped stopped a murderer from ever hurting anyone else again?

"Senpai..." The blonde teen stared at the senior boy for a moment with wide eyes, before he smiled and nodded his head. "Thanks, Senpai. You're right. We kicked some serious ass, huh?!

"Your mother would be proud of the man you are, Kanji. As would your father." Yu knew what to say to comfort others. It was a talent he had that went along well with winning over hearts. He felt little towards the words he said, he wasn't even sure if they were earnest, but he knew they would make Kanji happy, and he was right. The younger boy's face lit with joy as he nodded.

"Yeah. Thanks again, Senpai."

"Anytime, Kanji."

The two walked after the others. The smile never left Kanji's face as he slowly pulled ahead of the team's leader. Yu walked behind him, deep in thought. He should have been smiling, should have been grinning, drunk off of his victory. Not only that, but he had survived that awful prison of lies. He knew he wasn't really empty, nor did he really miss Naoto. They were just lies that the Shadow had made him believe.

But he didn't feel good. He didn't feel triumphant. He felt humiliated and empty inside.

His mind remembered seeing Naoto for the first time since their breakup. He walked out of Rise's home and he looked at Yu with disdain. Yu's mask held, but he couldn't deny the yearning he felt seeing Naoto like that. The pain. The sense of loss. Like a hole had formed in his gut.

Then when he came to their 'special headquarters,' he looked right at Yu. Their eyes gazed into one another, but Yu didn't see any remorse or regret. Just contempt. His voice was calm, but his stare was sharp.

"And we never harbor any special emotions regarding a case, either."

No special emotions, huh? Huh... Yu walked after the others, but his mind couldn't have been further away from them. He denied everything the Shadow had accused him of. He rejected the nightmare he lived through. He denied everything and he'd deny them all tomorrow too, and forever after he would deny them. He didn't feel empty, he didn't miss Naoto, and he wasn't trying to fill his life with lies to try and make himself feel better.

He couldn't be.

END
Reality

Chapter Summary

Reality hardly matches our dreams.

Reality

The young man held up his hand, blocking the bright light from stinging his eyes. When it finally vanished, he looked at the card that floated before him. It shimmered like a diamond, speaking to him and him alone. "Welcome to the team, Gdon." He watched as the card vanished, before looking at the long nosed man who had helped him. "Thank you, Igor." The finely dressed man replied with that persistent smile of his and a casual nod. The silverette then looked at the other guest in the room and smiled at her. "One Gdon that knows Rampage, as you wished."

"I see. You have successfully completed the request," the older woman stated, nodding her head. Margaret gazed as the card formed before her, and Yu could almost see her smile as she watched the hovering card turn. "Do you know why I asked you to bring me such a beast?" Yu shook his head, signaling Margaret to explain. She spoke, but her words went through one ear and out the other.

He found his thoughts wandering to the nightmare he had experienced weeks ago. The nightmare was nothing but lies, he understood that now, but there was one thing the nightmare was able to accurately predict, to his annoyance. There had been absolutely no signs of a certain blue haired sleuth anywhere in Inaba. You'd think he'd stand out pretty well. Like a sore, tiny, blue thumb.

His distracted mind was interrupted when the platinum blonde spoke slightly louder. "Distracted, Yu Narukami?" Margaret asked, this time with a knowing, if faint, smile on her ruby lips. "Perhaps, distracted by a young boy?"

"Huh?" Yu blinked. "How do you know about Naoto?" He questioned, leaning forward with surprise in his eyes.

"You told me, just now." The woman seemed to silently laugh at him as the card vanished. The silverette smiled and laughed with her, but inside he frowned. The last thing he had patience for were mind games. "Infatuations such as the one you have for this 'Naoto' are quite interesting, are they not? The subject of many famed love stories." Before Yu could say anything, Margaret's golden eyes shot into his soul. "Love is truly an amazing thing. Sometimes it drives men and women to madness, other times it brings out the best in both. I wish you the best of luck in finding which path love takes you, Yu Narukami."

"What we had was not love, and what we have now is even less so," Yu responded, his mask cracking slightly as a breath of rage slipped out. He quickly composed himself and his face became calm once more. "You were going to tell me why you wanted Gdon?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, and she smiled again as if she knew something he didn't. "Yes. I wanted to ride him."

"Oh. I see." Yu's calm mask hid the laughter of his mind. If you want someone to ride, I could help
"with that. "Will you be?"

"No, I'm afraid Gdon's pelt is far too hot to be used practically as a steed. Regardless, he is a majestic beast, is he not?" The silver haired teenager nodded as she raised up her hand, bidding him goodbye. "I will inform you of my next request when you return, Yu Narukami. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Margaret. Goodbye, Igor." The long nosed man merely nodded again.

"Oh, and Yu Narukami?"

"Why does she always say my name like that? "Yes, Margaret?"

"I feel it is important to notify you of this now so you do not get your hopes up. The link between us is made of purely platonic feelings. You will receive nothing you seek from me. You will have to fill yourself with someone else's infatuation." Her golden eyes seemed to glimmer, shining in the light like a knife to the throat, yet her scarlet lips still had that small, wryly smile. It left Yu unnerved and even a bit frightened.

"I-I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean," he lied.

"Then you do understand? Good. Goodbye, Yu Narukami."

Yu Narukami walked towards Yasogami High School with his classmates by his side. Chie and Yosuke were arguing about this or that, while Yukiko tried in vain to referee the two. Yu fought the urge to roll his eyes as the two made a racket, instead he voiced his thoughts in the privacy of his mind. Man, those two are either going to kill each other or fuck each other, and I don't know which I'd rather see happen.

"Yu? Yu? Narukami, are you okay?"

"Huh?" The tall, young man looked over his shoulder at Yukiko. She looked concern, so he quickly formed a faux smile on his face. "I'm sorry, Amagi-san. May I help you?"

"You don't have to call me that, Yu. We're friends now. " Yukiko blushed and Yu laughed at how easy she was. It didn't last though as she focused on him, staring at him with concerned eyes. "But are you okay? You've seemed rather out of it recently."

"Thank you for the concern, Yukiko, but I am fine. I've just had a lot on my mind lately. It's just difficult processing it all." Ugh. Buzz off, Yukiko. I'm really not in the mood for you playing therapist!"

"Huh? You wanna talk about it, dude?"

Oh, good. Now Yosuke and Chie are joining in, Yu bitterly thought.

"You have seemed kinda..." Yosuke stopped for a moment to think of the right word. "Empty, lately."

"Empty?" Yu repeated, with slight surprise. He hadn't been expecting for him to say that, and it pissed the silverette off. Just hearing that word pissed him off. He was so sick of that word. It was a load of crap, just like the last guy who called him that. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Yosuke."

"You just haven't seemed as focused lately," Yukiko clarified. "Like something is bothering you."
"Yeah! You hardly said anything whenever we visited, or even at the watermelon party! You know you can talk to us, Yu," Chie added, joining the the other two in giving him concerned looks.

Yu, sadly, did not appreciate their put up a good facade, but the three were quickly getting on his nerves."It's nothing, really. Just some stuff regarding my part time jobs. Now that the case is closed, we won't be needing as many funds anymore, so I'm debating which one I should drop," he explained.

"Oh yeah. I forgot, you were practically funding the whole operation," Yosuke commented.

Yeah. No thanks to any of you.

"Man, is there anything you can't do, partner?"

"I just try to do my best to help my friends."

"But that's just it, Yu. We're your friends too. If there's anything we can do to help, we want to."

Yukiko placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a comforting squeeze. He turned to face her and stared into her obsidian eyes. It didn't take long for her to turn away, cheeks flushed under his charisma and charm.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind, Yukiko." Hm. I was going to try going after Rise first, but maybe Yukiko would be fun to play with first. Hm. Nah.

The group continued their walk in relative silence. Yukiko would glance at their brave, stoic leader with a faint blush as Chie and Yosuke returned to their argument. As always, the 'hero's' face hid his thoughts well.

He angrily damned his three compatriots in his head. His mind had been wrestling with that nightmare since they closed the case, and the three had unintentionally brought back those horrible memories. He could still hear the voices of his 'friends' taunting him. He could still feel the blade stabbing him through the chest. Izanagi's golden eyes...

Yu's lips twitched slightly, his mask almost cracking under the frustration and sense of revulsion to the memory. He had planned on wooing Rise over summer break and scoring himself an ex-idol girlfriend, but instead he just continued playing the passive 'nice guy.' He tried telling himself it was him being careful, but he knew there was more to it than that. He was scared, or maybe he just knew Rise wasn't going to be as good a toy as Naoto was.

Speaking of, his mind was still plagued by that blue haired bastard. He hadn't seen him since the nightmare, nor had anyone else, it seemed. The silverette's mask held, but he let out another frustrated sigh in his head. He'd been doing that a lot lately, almost like he was depressed. Not that he was, obviously. He was Yu Narukami. He was probably just getting tired of his so-called friends' antics. That or horny. Probably both.

The thought came to an end as the silver haired leader of the group halted, the others stopping by his side with confused stares. His grey eyes widened as he saw a familiar face walk towards them. You have got to be kidding me.

"Good morning," the blue haired boy greeted. Naoto had his hand on his hip and he leaned to his side slightly in a pose that the perverted delinquent thought looked like a weird mix between sexy and cute. Yu tried not to stare at the younger boy's lithe form, but how long ago had it been since he'd seen the real Detective Prince? He threw his self-control (what little control he had in that regard) aside, and happily drank at the sight of the Detective Prince, savoring the moment.
God, did he get hotter over summer break? That shirt really fits him well and those pants look tight on him. That cute butt of his must be- wait. That shirt. Those pants. That was a Yasogami High outfit. Naoto even had a briefcase. You have got to be kidding me, he repeated.

"Y-you...?! You're that, uh... pint sized detective!" Yosuke gasped.

Yu hid his laughter with a small cough. He had to admit. The look on Naoto's face was hilarious.

"I beg your pardon? My name is Naoto. Please, don't give people bizarre nicknames you make up on the spot."

"Um... You know this is a high school, right?" Yukiko inquired.

Yu saw the hint of annoyance to the question behind Naoto's eyes, but he hid it well. He kept his eyes on the Prince, never lifting them for a second.

In return, he barely even looked at him as he answered, "My cooperation with the police has come to an end. However, there are aspects of the case with which I remain unconvinced. There are some family issues as well, so I've decided to stay here for the present. From today forth, I'll be a first-year at your high school." And without even a real goodbye, the young boy turned to walk away.

The four second-year students were left speechless and astonished. Yu was the only one to real have a thought on the matter. His eyes tilted down, slightly, and stared at Naoto's ass. I hate it when he leaves, but I love watching him go... What the fuck am I saying?! What the hell just happened?! Yu thought, his head a mass of confusion.

Naoto suddenly stopped and turned to the four again. He looked at Yu Narukami for a moment, and the silver haired teen swore the younger student was glaring at him for a moment, before he spoke. Yu recognized the tone, oddly enough. It was polite, but felt wooden. Practiced amiability. He had spoken like that plenty of times to know when others used it.

"And I felt that I should at least introduce myself to you all. I trust our relationship will be cordial, Senpai." Once again, the blue haired boy turned around and left the four.

"Senpai...?" Chie repeated. "That detective boy's... our underclassmen?"

My ex-boyfriend now goes to the same school as me... Shit.

Yu grabbed the bag of food and dashed out of class during lunch. He told the other that he was going to share lunch with one of his other friends at the school. They bid him farewell as he walked out of the door. As soon as the door closed behind him, he quickly dashed towards the stairs. As he moved he ran by a familiar musician, who waved at him.

"Good morning, Senpai," Ayane smiled.

He considered just giving the younger girl a quick greeting and running past her, but he worried that that'd be out of character. Instead, he stopped and returned her smile. "Good morning, Ayane." His tone was sweet and friendly, expertly practiced and rehearsed. Practiced amiability.

"Are you going to eat lunch now?" She asked, looking at the bag in his hand.

No, Ayane, I just like carrying food with me. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Yu realized that his inner thoughts were extra agitated today. He hid it well, of course, but he could still feel that he had little patience for today's problems. He wasn't going to apologize if he did seem rude,
obviously; it wasn't his fault that everyone was stepping on his last nerve. "I am indeed, Ayane."
An awkward silence as the meek Ayane nodded and shifted slightly in place. *Damn it...* "Would you like to join me for lunch?"

Ayane was practically beaming as she nodded her head. "I'd love to!"

"Great!" Great... "I just need to go check on something and then we can eat together on the roof." Ayane nodded and skipped off, leaving Yu to roll his eyes and return to walking down the stairs. Great. Whatever, I've had three way lunches with Kou and Daisuke, I can have one with Ayane and Naoto. Speaking off... He saw the bluette standing in the hall, all alone, ripe for the picking. He donned a new mask and called out to the blue haired sleuth. "Naoto! How's the snipe hunt going?"

The boy didn't turn to look at him. No matter, Yu would just keep talking with a smug little smirk on his face. "Did you like what I did there? Snipe hunt? I know things too, ya know."

No response.

Okay, fine, be direct. "Since this is your first day, I thought we could eat lunch together?" He held up the bag of food and gave it a shake. "Grilled fish, heated to perfection!" Naoto still didn't respond, instead he just started walking away from the silverette. "Huh?" Yu quickly intercepted him, standing in front of the younger boy now. "Come on. I promise I have no ulterior motives. Just a friendly lunch between exs. Sounds nice, right?"

Naoto stepped around him and kept on moving. "Huh? Are you really saying no, my Cerulean Prince? It'll be just like old times, my Sapphire Beauty!" He thought the nicknames would elicit some kind of response. They didn't, and he was left crestfallen. "Naoto? Are... are you really just not going to say anything to me?"

"I apologize, Senpai, but I feel there is little else to say." He didn't even turn around when he spoke. He just kept walking away, leaving the silver haired man alone in the hall, with only the occasional passerby as his company. Yu's face broke for a moment as he stared, mouth open, eyes wide at his rejection.

He tried to call out to the Detective Prince, but all he could say was- "Senpai?" He didn't like the sound of Naoto calling him that. It felt wrong. It felt very, very wrong.

Lunch with Ayane was dull. She obviously enjoyed it, but Yu was far less amused. He faked a smile and laughed like he always did, giving the girl practiced, generic answers to her generic questions. The end of lunch was a blessing. He said goodbye to the girl and returned to class.

Class was not better.

He couldn't get the rejection out of his mind. This was the second time Naoto had pushed him away, and his current feelings brought up the buried ones with them.

He remembered the first time well. What a shit night that had been. He found the detective waiting for him, and suddenly they were talking about the case. The Detective Prince demanded answers and every attempt to lie his way out of the situation only resulted in the him digging deeper and harder. Naoto was able to see right through his masks, and that both angered and impressed Yu.

"Please."

He had actually meant it. That was the part that annoyed him most. He had been so desperate, so scared of seeing Naoto leave and never come back, that he had actually meant it when he said
'please.' Lot of good it did.

You know what? Fuck this. Naoto wants to avoid me, he can avoid me. I don't need him. In fact, I'm going to rub it into his face how much I don't need him!

When class ended for the day, Yosuke and the girls just saw a blur. Yu ran out of the room and practically jumped down the stairs. He stopped in front of the door and nearly ripped it open. He had made a lucky guess, and it was proved right. Rise and Naoto shared a homeroom and both of them were packing things up to leave. Kanji was there too, not that Yu really cared.

The silver haired youth quickly composed himself and walked over to the red haired idol. It was perfect. Her seat wasn't too far from Naoto's, meaning the sleuth could hear every word they said to one another. "Rise-chan! May I speak to you about something?"

The idol looked at him, slightly curious about his panting and messy hair, but happy to see him, regardless. "Sure thing, Senpai. What's up?"

Yu's eyes darted to Naoto, who was taking a moment to look over his notes before packing them up. Perfect. "I was wondering if you'd go to Aiya's with me after school?"

The red haired beauty beamed at him and nodded her head. "Yeah, I'd love to!"

"Excellent. It's a date." HA! Take that, Naoto! Yu's eyes darted to the side again, watching Naoto pick up his briefcase and start walking towards the exit. He didn't look bothered, despite Yu's hopes of seeing him heartbroken.

"D-date?" Rise repeated, stepping back, bumping into her desk.

"Huh? Yes. A date. I thought that with the case over, you and I could become more than friends," Yu explained, remaining calm as he wondered what her problem was. Considering how you practically throw yourself at me half the time, I don't see what the hesitation is about.

"I-I appreciate that, Senpai, but I... I mean, I just don't think I'm ready for a boyfriend right now. I mean, I'm just not looking for one right now."

"I'm... I'm sorry?" What the fuck!?

"I just got out of the idol business a couple of months ago, and- and while I really do like you, I just don't really feel comfortable with dating right now. I mean, what if paparazzi see and they take your picture? Then you're suddenly in a big tabloid paper, and- I mean..." Rise grew quiet. The reasoning was flimsy. Her face was flushed. She was obviously lying, and that pissed Yu off.

She was rejecting him, and she wasn't even going to give a real reason? "Oh. I see." His voice was flat and dull. He swore he saw Naoto walk by with a smirk on his stupid, pretty face.

"Do... do you still want to go to Aiya's or..." Rise slowly lifted her head to look at his eyes, only to look back down. "Y-yeah. Probably not."

"Yeah. Probably not."

"... I am sorry, Senpai. I don't want you to think I don't like you, but- I just... I'm not really ready for a relationship."

Could have fooled me... "It's fine." It isn't. "Goodbye, Rise-chan." What the fuck is happening?
Without another word, Yu turned to leave the room. He walked out just in time to see Naoto turning the corner and leaving. He was pretty fuckin' sure the detective was smiling at the rejection. He saw his three friends walk down the stairs, waving at him.

"Hey, partner! We were thinking about going to Junes and-"

"Can't. Busy today." Without another word or even a glance, Yu kept on walking. He headed straight home.

That night, the Dojimas and Yu ate dinner with a special guest. Adachi happily munched away at the food on the table, talking in between each swallow.

"Oh, man, this food is delicious!" He grinned, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Narukami-kun, you're an amazing cook!"

"Thanks." Yu quietly continued to eat.

"Hey, Adachi, do me a favor. Go to the fridge and check to see if there's anymore milk," Dojima declared.

"You got it, sir." Adachi left the table and happily walked to the fridge. Nanako was talking about this or that, which Yu just nodded in response to. He didn't really care, but he didn't even have anything on his mind to distract him. He just felt- "Sorry, sir. It looks empty."

Yeah.

Yu swore his eye was twitching for the next few minutes. Nanako watched as her big bro placed his bowl and chopsticks down and wiped his mouth. "Big Bro?"

"Uncle Dojima, I think I'm full. May I be excuse to work on some homework upstairs? They are starting the season off rather heavily, unfortunately." It was the most he had since he had gotten home. His voice was calm and polite, as he had practiced, and it made Yu sick to his stomach just hearing himself. Like eating way too much candy in one night, he'd been forced to put on the same sweet, nice guy mask for nearly the whole day. It was awful.

"Sure thing, Yu. Good night."

"Good night, Narukami-kun!"

"Good night, Big Bro!"

"Goodnight everyone."

As Yu walked upstairs, he could hear Adachi talking to Dojima. "Man, Narukami's so polite."

"Polite, smart, and he takes care of Nanako. Honestly, him staying here is a blessing."

For once, hearing the compliments didn't stroke Yu's ego or make him feel proud of himself. They just made him feel sick.

He kicked the door closed behind him and fell onto his futon without even a grunt. He hadn't even bothered turning on the light. He just stared up at the ceiling in utter silence. The room was a reflection of his mind, as strange as that sounded. Quiet and dark.

It wasn't the rejection itself that bothered him, it wasn't Naoto ignoring him, and it sure as hell
wasn't the nightmare anymore. He was over that, he told himself. Still, he just felt so... dull. So out of it.

"Empty."

His brow furrowed at the memory. He could still hear that bastard's voice, beating him into a pulp hadn't helped there. Yu cursed under his breath as his fingers dug into his palms. "Damn it." He glared daggers into the ceiling as he laid there. Eventually, he just drifted off to sleep.

END
Chapter Summary

King's Game takes a passionate turn.


Yu Narukami.

That name had been pestering Naoto for far too long. Almost as soon as she had arrived in Inaba did the silver haired delinquent hound at her. At first, his antics were merely annoying. The Detective Prince was no stranger to the forlorn flirtations, and childish attempts at enticing her were something she had dealt with before, either from lonely schoolgirls who believed Naoto was their prince or even from men who believed she was what they desired.

Yet none of them were able to worm their way into her mind like Narukami had. He barged into her thoughts despite all of her barriers and he proved himself to be far more than just an annoyance. He was an intrusive animal in the calm, controlled sanctum of her mind, and he didn't even need to be physically beside her to affect her.

There had been sleepless nights where she would remember his foolery and idiocy all too well. How his eyes would look over her body with desire and how her cheeks would flare up when she caught his long glances. How he would give her that damned smile whenever they spoke.

He was a liar. She knew that now. Whatever truths he knew, whatever feelings that might have been or could have been, they were culled by that simple truth. He was a liar. He wasn't a kidnapper or a murderer, but he was a liar. He was manipulative and he hid his intentions behind his arrogant smile and gleaming eyes.

There it was again. She caught herself thinking about his eyes this time. She nipped the thought before it could grow, but she couldn't keep having this problem. He was continuing to hinder her, plaguing her mind and thoughts. It needed to stop.

This stupid infatuation was merely the byproduct of hormones, pheromones, and general physical attraction. Easy enough to control for the famed detective, but the sooner this case was closed and she was allowed to leave Inaba, the better. She needed distance between herself and the silver tongued devil.

Naoto finished her drink and gently placed it back on the table. The taste was incredibly sweet, but was still rather pleasant. She wondered what exactly it was as she quietly smacked her lips together. She let out a warm sigh and found her breath now tasted like the drink. Interesting.

She quietly and nonchalantly scanned the room. Tatsumi was on the floor, pinned down by an individual she did not recognize from any of the kidnappings. They were kissing. The mysterious blonde didn't resemble anyone from Yasogami High. She made a mental note to inspect his background when she had the chance.
Amagi-senpai and Kujikawa were seemingly inebriated. Seemingly being the key word in that statement. Naoto had done her research. This establishment did not serve alcohol, nor would any upstanding establishment allow minors to purchase any intoxicating substances. It was likely the two were merely under the Placebo effect. They believed they were drunk, and thus they acted accordingly. A self fulfilling prophecy of sorts.

Hanamura-senpai and Satonaka-senpai were arguing with one another. Unsurprising. Their hostility towards one another was more likely than not a childish attempt to disguise their physical attraction for one another. Naoto fought the urge to roll her eyes at their immaturity. Such juvenile antics were exactly the kind she had always aimed to avoid. Such frivolity was nothing more than melodrama that distracted one from their objective.

Speaking of distracting melodramatics, her steel blue eyes fell upon Yu Narukami. The silver haired man sat away from her, staring at a scarlet pair of chopsticks in his hand. Her eyes narrowed as she glared at him. She remembered his attempts to converse with her back at Yasogami High. Rather than give him any sort of satisfaction, she kept quiet and ignored him, treating him like any other member of his little group. A stranger. She intended to keep this relationship as such. As far as she was concerned, he was just a lead to be studied, followed, and then closed along with the case when the time came.

"I-I really don't know who or what to pick," Narukami mumbled, his cheeks slightly flushed.

"Well, ya gotta make it dirty!" Amagi laughed, her cheeks practically crimson. "Make someone hug you!"

"Oooh! Oooh! Sit... Sit on your lap! Make someone do that," Kujikawa laughed.

"I would really rather not," Narukami sighed. Naoto felt her jaw clench at the statement. He was lying again. No one else saw it, but she saw plainly. She had been studying the subtle movements of his face since day one. She caught the micro-expressions he made when he lied, though she had to admit, he had obvious experience with deception. Nothing compared to her skills as a detective, but passable against a room of high schoolers.

_He is the Moriarty to my Holmes._ She smiled at the thought for a moment. Like the infamous rivals, she would leave her foe crushed underneath her booted heel. She would watch him fall with great...

No.

Something is wrong. Her mind raced as her brow furrowed. She grabbed a nearby cup and placed it under her nose.

"Hey! That's mine," Hanamura whined.

Just as she thought. These drinks actually were alcoholic. But how?! She had done her research! The establishment no longer sold alcoholic beverages, nor would they sell them to minors! Would they?

"Lap! Lap! Lap!" Her train of thought was ruined as Kujikawa and Amagi chanted, stomping their feet against the ground.

"Alright, alright!" Narukami let out a sigh and waved the red chopsticks around as he recited the first number to come to mind. "Number five, sit on my lap."

There was silence. Naoto felt her stomach churn as dread filled her intoxicated mind. She slowly
tilted her head down to look at the chopsticks she had. She was number five. "I-I... What?!" She mentally kicked herself as soon as she heard her own voice. She had been so shocked, Naoto had forgotten to control it. Damn it! She had sounded like a teenage girl before the group!

Thankfully, none of them seemed to have caught it. Amagi giggled and pointed at the blue haired detective. "Teehee! He's so shocked his voice cracked!"

"Aww come on, Naoto-kun! Don't be such a prude! Don't get bent out of shape!" Kujikawa added, before snorting and laughing at her own joke.

"Bent! Heehee! I get it! Like- like Naoto will go all gay from sitting on Yu's lap! Good one, Rise-chan!" The two laughed, standing up to give each other a high five. They missed, but instead chose to rub each other's noses with the palms of their hands. This seemed to work just as well for them.

Narukami's already tinted face flared as he looked at the detective. "Whoa! Um... I-I am so sorry, Naoto-kun! Y-you don't have to if you don't want to! Really, it's okay! I'll just pick something else or-

"Booo!" Rise groaned.

"Yeah! Boo!"

"Do it!"

"Sit on his lap!"

"Do it!"

"Yeah, do it, you nerds!" Yukiko demanded.

"Yeesh. Never knew you two were such mean drunks," Chie grumbled.

"Girls, please! If Naoto doesn't want to, he doesn't have to! There's nothing wrong with it! Naoto, don't worry about them. It's fine." Narukami looked at the Detective Prince and she watched as he donned a comforting smile. She saw the almost plastic-like grin on his face as he lied to her.

Liar. "No. No, it is perfectly fine. I will sit on Narukami's lap."

Everyone reacted similarly to the declaration."... What?"

"I will sit on Narukami's lap," she repeated. Naoto walked forward without another word and quickly planted herself on him. The room became so silent a falling needle would have been deafening. Even the music outside seemed dampened, almost as if the pure tension in the air frightened it.

Naoto could hear Narukami's gasp, and to her surprise it actually sounded authentic, or as close to authentic as the liar would show. Hearing him so surprised felt... good. No doubt he expected her to blush and falter against the perverted dare, but instead she rose to the occasion and shocked him into submission. She rather liked the feeling of silencing Narukami with so easy an action.

"Shall we continue the game?" She teased, a smile forming on her flushed face.

The game continued, and as luck would have it, the next few dares were passe compared to the first two. Satonaka demanded Hanamura to remove his shirt. He did so with great embarrassment and to the small athlete's drunken applause. Tatsumi was forced to stand on the table and do a
dance by Amagi. She took great enjoyment at his humiliation. Finally, Kujikawa was commanded to admit an embarrassing secret. As it turned out, Risette fancied fries dipped in ice cream.

As for Naoto? She was rather proud of herself. She sat on Narukami's lap, even leaning back onto his chest when he had began to accept their positions. She kept him uncomfortable and she was glad of it. The way he reacted, the honest feelings of embarrassment and fear she felt off of him when she moved against him... It felt good. It felt like revenge for his constant teasing and his insipid come-ons.

It felt like Naoto now held power over the silverette and it actually felt exhilarating. She almost smiled, but she quickly hid it behind a mask of her own. The fact that she didn't look affected by her placement on Narukami's lap just made his own embarrassment all the more enjoyable.

All the same, she should soon return to her primary objective. She wasn't about to waste this prime opportunity to learn more about Narukami's involvement with the case on a simple power trip and well deserved justice. Perhaps after Amagi's turn she would have her chance to ask-

"Naoto! I want you to give Yu a kissy kiss on the L-I-P-S LIPS!"

What?!

As soon as the words slipped out of Yukiko's lips, she laughed. Cackled was probably more accurate, as she was no doubt finding the situation absolutely hilarious. She didn't seem to be the only one.

"Whoo! Boy love!" Kujikawa cheered.

"Whoa! No way! Are they seriously gonna-" Hanamura was silenced by Satonaka's hand covered his lips. The blushing girl motioned for him to be silent, before returning her attention to their leader and the young 'boy' sitting on his lap.

"Hey, don't you gotta say a numb-"

"Shut up, Kanji!"

Naoto's face turned a blazing crimson, all self control momentarily obliterated, as she looked at Narukami. To his credit, the fool was pretending to be as embarrassed as she was, a look of utter shock on his face. The detective had no doubt that inside he was beaming at the command.

He stuttered to speak at first, leaning as far back into his seat as he could to avoid the blue haired girl's stare."Naoto-kun, I am so sorry about Yukiko's behavior! Please, ignore her. You don't have to do anything you don't want to," he apologized.

"I'm already sitting on your lap, Narukami. I did not want to do that," she mumbled, averting her eyes. She scolded herself for acting like some embarrassed doe, but how could she not? Her discipline had been eroded by the alcohol and now her enjoyment of sitting on Narukami's lap paled in comparison to the enjoyment he was probably feeling now.

She forced herself to look at him and read what he thinking. He offered a sympathetic smile and his eyes appeared gentle. They didn't yell at her, they didn't force her, they simply offered quiet support to her. It was nice. It wasn't what Narukami really wanted, but it was nice. He was playing the gentlemen. He was giving her a chance to just deny the challenge. She was very tempted to accept the offer.

And maybe, just maybe, this night was going to end without any more embarrassment...
But then Narukami ruined it. It was his fault it happened. That was what Naoto would tell herself tomorrow, and in the weeks to come. If he had done nothing and the two simply parted ways, that could have been the end of this horrid night. But he didn't, and Naoto cursed him for it. His gentle smile turned into a wryly grin. A smirk she had become so accustomed to, the same one she saw in her dreams, the same one that plagued so many of her thoughts since she had met him. He looked smug, as if he was saying something without even moving his lips.

*I guess you're not as brave as a real detective.*

*I knew you didn't have it in you.*

*It's just a kiss, Beautiful.*

His lips didn't say anything, but they didn't have to. His eyes and that damn grin did it all for them. The words bounced around in her head, each ricochet causing their echo to grow louder and louder until all she could think about was Narukami and that damn smirk and his lips and kissing them and beating him at his own game!

He was challenging her. He was daring her to try and kiss him, and if she didn't, she knew he would consider it a personal victory. He was mocking her with that damn smile and he knew she wouldn't do anything in retaliation against him. He looked so proud, so damn high and mighty over her...

"Fine." One word was all it took to silence the world again. It was as if the air itself halted, as if the light drumming of music and dance outside went dead. She turned around, planting her knees at his side. Her hands grabbed his collar, crushing the cloth between her fingers. She etched the look of shock into her mind, embracing the sense of victory. She claimed it, and Narukami's lips, as she pulled him towards her.

They were kissing. She was kissing Narukami. Yu Narukami. She was kissing him.

There was nothing gentle about the kiss. It was hard, mostly due to inexperience. It was as crushing as it was harsh. More like two trains slamming into one another. It wasn't like it was in the books she read. It wasn't raining, and she wasn't kissing some young woman who was being hunted by thieves and murderers. She was in a club, before a group of suspects and strangers, kissing her hated enemy.

She wasn't going to stay like this for long. Naoto had planned on pulling back after just a moment, but she found herself unable to pull away. First, it was because she felt a dangerous spark when their lips touched. Like a spark that started a forest fire and left everything ruined because of it. It consumed her. The feeling of their lips pressed together. His desire and hers intertwined as their lips moved against one another's.

Then Narukami had his hands on her arms. He squeezed them, holding the lithe limbs. He pressed his lips back against hers. She could hear him, feel him taking in her scent as he took a deep breath. Then he kissed her with full force, wrapping his arms around her. One arm stroked the small, soft area of her back, moving up and down in a gentle, massaging manner. The other hand gently reached her head and played with her blue locks. He pulled her closer as his lips moved against hers, gently nibbling on her lower lip.

It was like nothing she had ever felt before.

Naoto felt her body stiffen as she gave a muffled gasp. Her toes curled in her shoes. Her heart raced a mile a minute, the loud beat echoing through her ribs. Her hands went limp, slowly falling from
his collar and going down his muscular chest. She wanted to scold herself for feeling his sturdy frame, his firm stomach, every curve and every dip, and every meeting of soft skin and hard muscle. Her hands struggled to find something to hold onto as the earth moved under her. Her hands merely rested against his robust chest as she felt his tongue stroke her lips.

She gasped again, and he took this moment to gain passage. His tongue invaded her mouth. His tongue was touching her own tongue. His tongue licked at her teeth and against her gums. His tongue. She tried batting it away with her own. That was a mistake. The electricity she felt before came back, stronger. Now there was a storm. Lightning set the forest of her soul and mind ablaze in moments.

When the two wet tongues fought each other, when they touched, they made her already warm body turn blazing hot. Their tongues coiled and smacked against one another as her arms felt new life. They wrapped themselves around his neck and pulled him closer. She challenged him. She was not going to lay in his arms and melt like some Hollywood starlet. She would meet him on the playing field and she would fight back.

She challenged him to kiss her more.

He met the challenge with gusto.

There was so much in the kiss. A physical attraction, yes, maybe even the remains of a more genuine attraction for each other, but certain aspects felt especially prevalent in the wet lip lock. They both felt it, in their hearts and in their minds. The drive to win. The urge to be victorious. The desire to see the other melt against the victor, seeing them turn into some lovestruck doe! To have power over them, to own them.

Naoto wanted to beat Narukami. She wanted to see him bend to her whim. No.

She just wanted hi-

"H-hey! You guys can stop now," Yukiko declared, all resemblance of intoxication sucked out of her voice. She was just as flabbergasted as the others, watching with wide eyes. "It's been a few minutes."

Naoto's eyes widened. She slammed her fist into Narukami's chest, pushing herself away from him. She fell back, her tongue slipping out of his mouth. A glimmering trail of saliva connected them momentarily before it fell apart. She fell to the carpeted floor with her face hot and her mouth tasting of...

Her trembling body laid on the ground. Her hat had fallen to the ground beside her, but she gave it no thought. Her attention was focused on the silverette. Narukami stared back at her with utter bewilderment. His face was red. She didn't have the strength in her to analyze it this time. She just stared at him as the full weight of her actions fell upon her.

Some childish part of her actually lamented the loss of her first kiss.

She stomped it down and picked up her hat. The detective stood up and, without another word, stormed out of the room.

Yu was left on his seat, heart racing, face red, and with the taste of the Detective Prince still fresh on his lips. Without saying anything, he stood up and chased after the detective, leaving his friends astonished and confused.
Damn it! What was I thinking?! I have made a complete fool of myself! Damn it!

Naoto was fuming as she made for the exit. She was outraged, fuming with anger at Narukami, of course, but she was more more enraged at herself. She should have seen this coming. Narukami was a degenerate and a perverse cretin, there was no doubt in her mind to that. She shouldn't have, she couldn't expect anything less than his worst with every interaction. She had first hand experience with him and his silver tongue, and yet she had fallen for his trap, right here and now!

She viciously ground her arm against her lips, trying in vain to burn the taste of his lips and saliva off of them. She shuddered at the fresh memory. His tongue against hers, his lips rubbing against her own. She was stupid! How could she have let her defenses down like that?! How could she had played right into his hands?!

The humiliated detective scolded herself for acting in such a way, and for being kissed like innocent maiden. The way he held her, the way he touched her, and the way he kissed her was like how other girls would want to be kissed. The same girls that left letters in Naoto's locker or who pined for the attention of the delinquents and troublemakers. She should have been better! She shouldn't have acted like them, she wasn't them and she never would be them!

She wasn't some love struck teen who swooned at a simple kiss! She was above the damsels who threw themselves at grinning, powerful men. But the silver tongued devil had lured her in and he got what he had wanted from her and she hated herself for it!

Naoto spat on the ground and dug her fingernails into her scalp, scratching at it as she let out a furious groan. Her parents would be ashamed of their only daughter, the inheritor of their once great legacy! They would have looked at her with disappointment! Utterly ashamed of how easily their daughter had fallen for some womanizer's ploy!

How could she, the last holder of the Shirogane name, be so easily caught by such amateur deception?!

She had been so stupid! She only held herself responsible for the mistake this night had become.

"Naoto! Wait!"

Herself and him...

Her jaw clenched as she tore her hands from her head. There were actual tears in her eyes, glistening in the light. She wouldn't let him see them. Her vision was blurred, but she didn't care. She ran down the empty sidewalk. The cold night air bit at her uncovered arms and face, but she didn't let it slow her down. She ran, and he followed.

Damn him... She was tearing herself apart inside, she didn't need a reminder of her stupidity and foolishness to follow her. They ran and ran, but no matter how far or how hard she ran, he followed. Eventually, her body couldn't keep it up anymore and she came to a stop, panting, lungs crushing as she wiped at her eyes. Stupid. I've been so stupid! A child! A stupid, little girl!

"N-Naoto... Come on, let's talk about-"

She spoke, but her voice was trembling, barely controlled. Her rage was fueled by regret, humiliation, and self loathing. It fought to escape, it demanded a target and it craved an outlet. "Don't bother. This was a mistake." She felt ready to explode as the silverette approached her. She placed her hand on some closed shop's walls as he took each step closer. Simple footsteps had never sounded so loud...
"Which part? The coming here? The meeting me? Or that make out session we just had?"

She felt herself shaking, and it wasn't just because of the cold. She turned to face him with rage filled eyes. Her voice was hoarse, but showed her feelings well enough. "Stay away from me, Narukami!" She turned back away, facing the ground and continued panting from the run. He didn't stay away. She looked at him again, and all she could see was that damn smile plastered onto his face.

That damn smile...
Thunder

Chapter Summary

"You never had me."

Thunder

"Mom and dad are gone and I got the house to myself. Must be a day that ends in y." Yu muttered as he opened his fridge and scanned the inside of it. Expired food, some leftovers, and microwave junk. "Guess I got to go grocery shopping too," the boy sighed. His eyes paused as they spotted one of several cans of beer laid out. His father's.

"Don't know why he even bothers buying the stuff. He always go out to drink," Yu mumbled to himself. It was a habit he had picked up when he was home alone. The quiet bothered him. Hearing anything, even the sound of his own voice, was a welcomed change. "Hm. What he doesn't know won't hurt me," he muttered as he grabbed a can and popped it open. He gulped the alcohol, immediately gagging and coughing at the burning taste.

"Fuck! G-God damn it..." He coughed, feeling his face heat up as he gagged at the taste. "How does dad stomach this cheap stuff?" The sixteen year old silverette sighed and held the can up as he spoke. "Cheers, dad." He tried the drink again and was at least able to keep it down this time. He let out a quiet sigh as he walked the empty halls of his home.

Yu Narukami was not okay. He hadn't been okay for a while, honestly. He felt like crap. Even his masks were starting to crack. His smiles weren't as charming, his eyes lost that sparkle, and his voice was so damn weak. Everyone could tell something was wrong, and they all offered to help. He would then lie to avoid the problem, which just made him feel crappier. It was a vicious cycle, but no matter how bad it got, he just couldn't muster up the energy to do something about it.

It wasn't like he could talk to anyone. He didn't have any actual friends. Just morons who thought he was their friend. It wasn't like he could drown his sorrows in pleasure. He didn't have anyone to fuck, and he just couldn't muster up the energy to woo some poor fool. That would have involved lying, and lying was a taste he was tired of.

He just felt like crap. He couldn't move away soon enough. He needed to get out of this town. He needed distance. He needed to stop seeing Naoto.

Naoto... What was it about the pint sized detective that had brought all of this out of Yu? From the day Yu saw him, he felt his curiosity pique. At first, it was the attitude that caught his attention. The look of moderate disinterest, yet laser focused determination. It was the look of someone who didn't care about anything more than their goal. They just wanted to accomplish their mission and leave.

It was exactly the kind of attitude Yu loved getting in the way of. Naoto's shapely body was just a bonus. He wanted to beat him. To break down his walls and tangle his perversion into his brilliant mind. Was that a terrible thing? Yes. It was. But it wasn't like he cared. He had done it before to
plenty of other girls and boys in the past. Yu Narukami left a mountain of broken hearts behind him.

He just never imagined it all to backfire so horribly on him. Naoto was the one who crawled into his head. Naoto was the one who wormed his way into the silverette's thoughts and dreams. He hated it, but there was no way he could lie about it now. Ever since he and Naoto talked, really talked, things had been different.

The nightmare. The haunting, all consuming feeling of emptiness within him. His lack of energy. His inability to do... just about any of the things he used to do... It all had something to do with Naoto. Either he was the catalyst to the trouble, or a key part of it. Either way, he couldn't get that detective out of his mind...

That pint sized detective...

He couldn't stop thinking about him, nor could he stop the feeling of depression consuming him...

"I'm really glad you decided to come along, dude," Yosuke smiled. "Partying at a club with Risette? This is gonna be awesome!"

"Mm." Yu just nodded in response as he followed the flow of the group into the club.

He didn't mention how he didn't have much choice in going or not. He obviously didn't want to go with the group on their little 'Port Island Adventure Tour,' but he had been avoiding them so much lately, ducking out of this would have just made things worse. As in, they would have stayed by his side and tried to cheer him up. Yu nearly shuddered at the thought. At least here he could get lost in the music and lights. He'd been doing a lot of zoning out recently, come to think of it...

His eyes saw some movement out of the corner of their vision, but he didn't react to it. "Senpai? You okay?" Rise asked, reaching for his shoulder.

"Yeah. I'm okay," he muttered, avoiding her touch with a step to the side. He tried to sound happier, tried to fake it like always, but it just didn't sound right. He couldn't muster up the energy to lie well and he hated it. Just like he hated being here. "I'm okay," he repeated. He tried sounding more convincing. Judging by the look in Rise's eyes, it didn't work. Oh well. She walked away from him, her idol brain probably lured by some shiny keys or something.

Yosuke's loud, sudden whining caught his attention and he slowly glanced over to the person he was talking to. Suddenly, the music and lights weren't so eye-catching anymore. No, now he was looking at something far more intriguing. Naoto? Yosuke was talking to the bluette, as were Rise and Yukiko. They were asking the Detective Prince to hang out with them.

And Naoto said yes!

"..." For the first time in what felt like a long time, Yu gave an honest grin. He felt a surge of energy enter him as an idea popped into his head. Yosuke was right. This was going to be awesome...

"Hey there," Yu smiled, greeting the bartender.

"Hey there, kid. What'll it be?" The bartender smiled back, standing behind the purple counter with a friendly grin. He was a large fellow, but he seemed friendly enough. Of course, friendly wasn't what Yu was hoping for. He needed to know how gullible he was.
"I'm part of the group in the VIP room," the silverette explained. "Rise sent me down to change her order for our room?" It felt weird to lie again. It wasn't as fun as it used to be, he realized. Honestly, it was rather exasperating, but he hoped it would be worth it. He wanted tonight to be fun, he wanted to reclaim the former fun he had with Naoto, and if that required a bit of social lubricant? He could live with that.

"You're friends with Risette? Damn, you are one lucky son of a gun," the bartender laughed. "What can I do you for, kid?"

"Luck has nothing to do with it, but thank you," Yu replied, playing it cool and smooth. "Risette wants something extra in the drinks, if at all possible."

"Extra? Like... lime?"

Yu's resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "No, something a bit more 'adult,' if you catch my drift."

"Adult? Kid, we don't serve alcohol anymore, and we certainly don't sell it to minors." The bartender's friendly smile was replaced with a very disappointed frown. Yu had to really resist that urge now.

"I understand you, I do, but Risette? Not so much. She's a hardcore, fine-dining type, you know?" Yu lied. "She wants something that tingles going down and melts the stress away. You know idols, right? If she doesn't get what she wants, well... She might say some not so nice things about this place next time she's interviewed." Yu gave a sympathetic smile, but that didn't change the frown on the bartender's face.

"Are you threatening me, kid?"

"I'm not doing anything! I'm just a messenger!" Yu quickly argued, holding up his hands and pretending to be scared. "I'm totally on your side! But Risette..."

"Yeah, yeah... I get it. Fine," the man growled, slamming the glass he was cleaning onto the counter. "I'll get your group something strong, but this stays quiet, got it?!"

"Got it."

As Yu turned to leave, he could hear the man's grumbles. "To think I actually respected Risette... Threatening hardworking types and underage drinking? Thought she was better than that..."

The silverette frowned at the words. He had probably just made Rise's next visit to very difficult if she ever came back to Club Escapade. He actually felt kind of bad for lying to that degree, but he quickly stomped down any bit of guilt he felt. It wasn't like Rise was going back into show business and she probably wasn't be coming back here anytime soon...

"It's fine," he mumbled to himself.

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Yu watched as Teddie and Kanji made out on the ground. On the outside, he looked calm and stoic, but inside he was cackling almost as bad as Yukiko. *Freakin' idiots. This is great!* He thought as he sipped his drink. *Whoa! This is a lot stronger than I thought it'd be. Tastes pretty good though. I wonder how the others are taking it?*

Yukiko and Rise were just gone. The two could not, in any way, hold their liquor. They were laughing and high fiving each other, only to miss and rub each other's scarlet faces with their hands. Yosuke and Chie were pretty much the same. Bitching each other out, arguing about something
and Teddie were still on the floor, making out. He had to remember to try and take a picture of that in case he wanted to blackmail Kanji...

And finally, there was Naoto. The blue haired detective drank from his cup with such grace and control. If the alcohol was affecting him, he didn't show it. Yu would have stared at the cerulean beauty longer if he hadn't been careful and controlled himself. Just some fun, Naoto. That's all I'm looking for... What's the worse that could happen?


Yu Narukami had been with a lot of people, sexually speaking. He did a lot of things that a young man his age should not have done. Sexual things that only two people in a deep, real relationship should do.

Shit.

On one occasion, he got with the principal's daughter and made out with her while her father was home. That was fun.

Oh man.

There was even a time where the class president of one of his many past schools had tried to explain that his behavior was 'unsavory.' Yu left that young man dazed, with sore lips, questioning his sexuality.

Oh my God.

And yet, all of his past games paled to the here and now. Naoto was sitting on his lap. The Detective Prince was sitting on his lap, and he looked comfortable. The detective turned his head to look at the older boy, flashing a teasing smile. There was something in that smile. In Naoto's cobalt eyes. In his whole, petite, yet sexy frame.

Something that made Yu bite his lip and fidget in his seat. Naoto would fidget back, making himself comfortable, which had the side effect of making Yu VERY uncomfortable. Even after a few minutes, when Yu had finally begun to calm down, the Detective Prince leaned back and rested himself against his chest, as if the silver-haired boy was his throne.

Holy shit. This is a dream. This is a sexy, sexy, sexy dream. Please, God, do not wake me up.

Yu was very aroused, to say the least. He cheeks were flushed, his face was hot, and he couldn't help but pant a little bit. He had it bad for the Detective Prince, and the alcohol in his system was not calming him down. It only got worse when Yukiko commanded the two to kiss.

I don't think I can take this much longer. I've had my fun. Abort, abort! His weary mind pleaded. Yu had never felt this way about anyone before. He had never been reduced to such a gibbering pile of embarrassment before. It was amazing, but horrifying, but so fucking hot, but also really, really new and terrifying. His eyes glanced down to Naoto's firm butt on his lap and he bit his tongue as Naoto shifted slightly. The detective had finally joined him on the blushing boat. Guess you draw your line at kissing, huh, Gorgeous?

Just call it off. Yu. Play nice. Be a gentlemen! "Naoto-kun, I am so sorry about Yukiko's behavior! Please, ignore her. You don't have to do anything you don't want to." Yes. Good. Yes.

Naoto mumbled a response as he looked at the older student. He was obviously uncomfortable with
the drunk innkeeper's commands. That was fine with Yu, this whole drunken adventure was too much excitement for his intoxicated brain. He wasn't quite sure how to process it. Naoto looked ready to get off his lap and end this farce when something ticked in the silverette's head.

Why stop?

"..."

I mean, we've come this far. Why stop? Naoto Shirogane, the one that got away, the hottest piece of ass I've ever seen is sitting on my lap, literally being ordered to kiss me. Am I really going to deny myself, or him, this pleasure?

"..."

In for a penny.

Yu put on his favorite mask and smiled at the detective. His sharp eyes caught it and stared at it for the longest moment in Yu's life. The smile was arrogant, more a smirk that a simple smile. Naoto saw it clearly and he knew it would drive the bluette wild. It was a challenge. It was a smug tease. It was Yu goading him, baiting him into his web.

He took the bait with gusto.

"Fine." The ace detective turned around and grabbed his collar and wordlessly pulled his face close.

The kiss was sudden and crushing. He slammed his lips against Yu's, but he was clumsy in his movements. Inexperienced. Naoto... your first kiss? I stole...? He actually felt guilty for stealing it, if only for a moment, but passion and lust washed over that feeling. There was electricity to the kiss. Sparks. They made Yu's lips tingle and his fried his brain into a burnt out mess. With his brain toasted, the heart and body took control.

Yu grabbed Naoto's hands and stroked the slender limbs. They were so delicate. So perfect. His body trembled at feeling the soft skin. He took in the detective's scent. It wasn't like the cheap perfumes or colognes he had smelled on his previous victories. Naoto smelled differently. It was good, that was the first word that came to mind. Generic, simple, but so very, very true. Naoto smelled good. Like vanilla. Warm, sexy vanilla.

He shuddered at the smell. He took it in and let his brain drown in it.

Yu's hands traveled up his arms and coiled around that lithe frame. He kept the inexperienced kisser close, one hand on his back, massaging and stroking the thin shirt. A moan from Naoto's mouth showed approval. The other hand went to his blue locks, gently knocking the iconic hat he wore to the ground. Yu caressed the gorgeous locks, finding the head of hair to be both soft and silky.

He nibbled on his lower lip. The young boy shook, but didn't pull away. The Detective Prince kissed back and his opponent returned the favor. Naoto's hands fell from Yu's collar. They drifted down, stroking his muscular frame. They stayed there for a while as the silverette's tongue gained passage to the detective's mouth. Their tongues met and lightning struck them both.

The electricity revived Naoto's arms, because they suddenly wrapped around Yu's head and pulled him even deeper into the kiss. He was suprised, but willing. They stayed like that for what felt like hours, trapped in a struggle that neither of them had expected. Their tongues wrestled against one another as their arms squeezed the other's body.
It was easily the greatest kiss of Yu Narukami's life. It was passionate. It was hot. It was wild. Never before had a kiss left Yu with such a craving, such a fire in his soul. Before, whoever he kissed would have pulled away or melted from pure awe right about now. Not Naoto. No, Naoto was special... Naoto fought back. Naoto took as hard as he gave and Yu loved it.

He loved-

"H-hey! You guys can stop now." Silver and blue eyes both opened to stare at one another.

He had ran out of the room. Yu tried giving chase. Why? He wasn't sure, honestly. He just followed the blue haired boy out of Club Escapade and down the sidewalk. Naoto didn't seem in the mood to talk, Yu realized, when he ran from the silver haired youth. He gave chase, of course.

The chase didn't last long. Naoto, while in no way unfit, just wasn't trained for long distance running. Yu Narukami, who was on the basketball team and regularly trained with Chie, was.

He still wasn't sure why he followed. He had hoped he would have thought of a reason by now, but no such luck. So his inebriated mind decided to put on a smile and tried to act charming.

"N-Naoto... Come on, let's talk about-

"Don't bother. This was a mistake." He was trying to catch his breath. His voice sounded shaky, even cracking a bit. What Yu should have done was offer a sympathetic smile and offered to help his underclassmen.

Instead he made a dumb joke. "Which part? The coming here? The meeting me? Or that make out session we just had?" He kicked himself for it, but the damage was done.

"Stay away fro me, Narukami!" He demanded. Yu had never seen his so angry, so enraged... and it was all at him.

The look in his eyes hurt. It actually hurt to be looked at with those eyes. He should apologize. He should have just walked away. He should have just left Naoto alone, but instead he gave him that stupid grin and smiled. "Come on, Naoto. What's a kiss between friends?"

And with those words, the night was sealed.

"We are not friends!" Naoto's hands turned into fists as he trembled. He dramatically moved his arms through the air as he howled in rage. "You are an egotistical sycophant! You are nothing more than a liar who offers nothing but deceptions in exchange for someone stroking your pitiful ego! I can only imagine you hide behind your masks because you realize that beyond them you have absolutely nothing to offer to others!"

"Nothing?" Yu's face twitched, but he slammed the feeling in his gut down and smirked at the younger boy. "Come on, my Prince, don't be like that. That's hurtful. Tell me how you really feel." He winked and gave a faux, but teasing smile. It was a mistake.

"How I really feel? You wish to know how I really feel about you?" There was a tremble to his voice, his voice cracking under the pressure of his rage. He walked on shaking legs as Yu raised his brow. He stared, perplexed by the small boy who stood in front of him. "How I really feel about you, Narukami..." he whispered the words so quietly, he wasn't sure if he really heard it.

"Naoto?"
Before he could have reacted, he watched Naoto’s fist pull back. It slammed into his gut fast and hard, knocking the air from his lungs and making him step back in pain. "Motherfu...!" He swayed in place, holding his stomach and groaning in pain. "Fuck!"

"You are a parasitic husk of a human being. You gorge yourself on others, pretending to care for them, only to abandon them when their use is over!"

"H-heh... It's cute how you keep that 'proper' tone even when you're so pissed off," Yu bitterly coughed. His voice was shaky now too, much like the pint sized, and infuriated, detective.

"Everything is a game to you! Can you not be serious for one, single, moment?!" Naoto screamed, pressing his hand against his head in frustration.

"Serious? You... you wanna see me be serious?" Something in Yu snapped, or maybe it had snapped a while ago. He rose up to his full height and he cast aside his masks. He surprised Naoto by grabbing his collar and staring daggers right back at him, pulling him close. "Here's me being serious. Fuck you, Naoto. You've been throwing insults at me since Day 1."

"Because you deserve each and every last one of them!"

"I deserve getting punched in the gut?! I deserve being insulted literally everytime we talk to each other?! Fuck. You. Naoto," he bitterly growled.

"Really? You act as though you are the victim?! You have done nothing but antagonize me from the moment you saw me! You are a pest, a leech that won't let go no matter how hard I pull on you! An insufferable chauvinistic sex-crazed child that expects me to bend over because you smile at me! I am not your prey or a trophy for you to win! I am a Detective of the Shirogane line with a mission! I have a responsibility and a duty to fulfill! Did you honestly think you could distract me from it with your childish flirtations and lies? Are you really that egotistical?!" He growled.

Yu released Naoto's collar and held his arms out, as if he was presenting himself to the shorter boy. "Well, congratulations, Detective Prince! You just discovered what my last six ex-girlfriends took weeks to figure out. Yu Narukami is an asshole! I'm a bad guy! I'm a liar, and a cheater, and I do it all for shits and giggles! Guess you really are an ace detective!"

"Don't you dare mock me!"

"But you know what?!!" Yu retorted hastily, ignoring the anger on the bluette's face. "Just because I'm a bad guy that doesn't make you a saint, Mr. High and Mighty. You're selfish, cold, rude as all hell, and, as I've recently learned, a teasing bitch!"

One insult stood out above the rest. "Selfish?! How am I selfish?!"

"Is that really all you took from that?!" He shouted, slamming the palm of his hand against his head. He let out an exasperated sigh. "If you wanted to, you could have done something to bring me in! My uncle already suspects I'm connected to the murders, hell, I know he knows something is up, the only reason he doesn't confront me about is because we're family! But you! If you told him half the stuff we've talked about together, he could bring me in and finally get some work done on the case. Instead, you kept your mouth shut and LIED and planned on using me as a stepping stone to solving this case single-handily! Yeah, I'm a scumbag, and yeah, you really are a better person than me, but that ain't saying a lot!"

"How dare you accuse me of being anything like you!" The younger boy screamed, his voice losing any resemblance of control. Yu didn't know it, but for the first time he was hearing Naoto's
real voice. A shame it was like this... "You are a liar! A deceiving, con artist without any sort of moral fiber in your entire body! I am a detective! An officer of the law! I seek the truth while you foster deception! There is no similarity between the two of us! Absolutely none!"

"Again, you lied to your fellow officers, Mr. Detective. You lied to their face! You kept a possible source of information all to yourself! In fact, you practically came to my house pleading for information!"

"That is hyperbole!"

"And you know what?!!" Yu shouted back, ignoring the interruption. "I actually agreed! I begged you to listen to me, but what did you do?! You left everything we had behind and vanished for over a month! You didn't even have the balls on you to say to my face that it was over, you just vanished and left me wondering what the hell went wrong!"

"We never had anything to start with!" Naoto screamed. "Get it through your thick skull! We are not friends. We certainly aren't lovers. I may have once tolerated your stupidity, but that is over, Narukami!"

"I actually cared about you, Naoto! I didn't want any of this!" Yu screamed. He was panting, his voice tired from all of the shouting. For a moment, he had clarity. He wasn't angry, he was scared. He looked at Naoto with glistening eyes. He held out an opened hand to the blue-haired boy. "Please... Let's just talk about this. I don't want to lose you..."

"You never had me." Naoto didn't give him another word. He turned and began to leave the silverette behind. "I pray I never see you again." The words tore a hole through Yu's chest. Naoto hoped that they would.

Yu stood there on the empty street for what felt like hours. The full weight of his action came crashing down on him. He was destroyed what little chance he had to fix things with Naoto for a night of stupid fun. He had drove the detective away and made him hope the two never saw each other again. Rage melted away as guilt and regret replaced it.

After what felt like hours of standing there alone, he turned around and began to walk. Not back to Club Escapade, not after Naoto, just... walking. He aimlessly wandered until his legs grew tired. His phone was constantly ringing. He didn't have the energy to answer it, he didn't even have the energy to silence it. He just let it keep ringing until the batteries died.

He fell onto a bench in the middle of some park and just stared off into the distance. He thought about Naoto. He thought about how everything in his life had changed since he saw the blue-haired detective. Nothing like this had ever happened before. His mind had never been so consumed by a single person. He had thought he could have won Naoto, treated him like he had treated all of his previous conquests.

A smile here. A lie there. Let them fall for the mask he wore and then leave them behind.

But Naoto was different. He saw the masks and he hated them. He rejected them, and him.

Maybe if he had been different... Maybe if he hadn't been such a manipulative bastard things could have worked out. There was no way of knowing, but his mind wondered all the same. What if? What if he had actually been worthy of Naoto's affection? What if he had been different?

"Yu Narukami is an asshole! I'm a bad guy! I'm a liar, and a cheater, and I do it all for shits and giggles!"
"I really am an asshole," he bitterly laughed, trembling as the chilly, midnight wind assaulted him. His stomach groaned in hunger, but he didn't care. His body swayed back and forth as his exhausted mind begged for rest. Yu laid down on the cold, metal bench and starred at the starry sky. He thought about Naoto as his vision turned black. He thought about the Detective Prince.

Those beautiful, steel blue eyes. That gorgeous body. His sapphire locks. That smile. The real one, the one he saw on their date...

And he came to a revelation.

And he laughed.

And as exhaustion and fatigue carried him to a dreamless sleep, he thought...

*God has one hell of a sense of humor. Making a liar fall in love with a detective...*
Yu awoke to the sound of yelling. He groaned in pain, slightly hungover from last night. He was woozy and the racket was not helping. He was surprised to find that the person who awoke him was Yosuke. The brunette was talking about how worried he and the others were and how they had called him practically a hundred times in an attempt to find him. When the new day came the Investigation Team had split up and scoured all over the city for their silver haired leader.

Yu struggled to lie his way out of the situation. His whole body ached and his head wasn't much better. He tried to tell Yosuke that nothing happened last night and that he had just gotten lost, but all he could do was give some half hearted apology. Eventually Yosuke stopped talking and helped Yu back to the hotel the gang was staying at so he could get some proper rest.

All Yu could do was follow along, his body moving without him really feeling or caring. He was a tiny pebble caught in a raging river and he accepted that. His body was on autopilot for the duration of the trip.

While the others tried to convince him to come eat with them at some restaurant, he lied and told them he had to study. In truth, all he did was lay on his bed in the dark. When they came back, Yosuke and the others suggested getting a gift for Nanako, but it fell on deaf ears. They found his stuff was already packed by the time they returned.

When he came home, he ignored his self-proclaimed 'little sis' and crawled up the stairs to his room. He kicked the door shut behind him and left his luggage strewn about his room before falling onto his bed and just... staying there.

He didn't have any snide remarks. He didn't have any jokes. Nothing. All of his masks were left shattered on the ground, destroyed by the boy he had foolishly fallen for. The only person smart enough to destroy them.

*Funny how we end up loving the same thing that hurt us most.*

Yu was sad that Naoto hated him. He was finally willing to admit that. Naoto hating him made him feel guilty, it made him feel wrong, like he had something good and it was taken away from him, but it was taken away because he didn't deserve it. He knew that. He understood how badly he had messed it all up.

He had found someone beautiful in body and sharp in mind. Naoto was special, he realized that now. The blue haired detective was strong willed, unbreakable, and his opposite in nearly every way. That was what drew Yu to him. They were magnets aimed at each other. Yu couldn't help but be attracted to his counterpart...

But all he accomplished was repelling Naoto away.
The first day of school since the field trip came and Yu dragged himself out of bed and off to school. His didn't bother fixing his hair, brushing his teeth, or even eating breakfast. He went to school with an empty gaze and some dried up drool clinging onto his cheek.

"Hey, Senpai! What's up?" A certain, beautiful idol giggled as she skipped beside the older boy. He didn't look at her, nor did he even seem to notice she was there. His eyes just kept their gaze forward, slowly blinking every few seconds. Despite this, Rise kept on smiling. "I was wondering if you wanted to hang out after school today? We could go to Okina City and catch a movie! I-

"No thanks." His voice sounded weak, like he had been barely using it lately. Rise's smile faltered as she looked closer. He had bags under his eyes and the usually bright, silver irises looked so much duller.

"But-

Yu picked up speed and Rise watched him try to outpace her, only for him to barely stay ahead of her. His legs carried an obvious fatigue to them and she swore she saw him nearly fall over twice already.

"Yo, Yu!" Yosuke's turn. He ran past Rise and quickly tried striking up a conversation with his best friend. "Dude, you free today after school? Junes is understaffed right now and it'd be awesome if you could come over and help out! I promise to pay you back for your time! What do you say?" He grinned, placing a brotherly hand on the silverette's shoulder.

"No thanks." Yu yanked his shoulder away from the caramel-haired boy. Yosuke stayed behind as Yu once again tried to walk faster. He watched with frustration as his friend nearly tripped over his own two feet.

"He's been like this since the field trip," the young man sighed. He scratched at his brown locks with an exaggerated growl. "Damn! What the hell happened between him and Naoto?"

Rise didn't know how to answer. All she could do was watch the silverette trek towards their school. She simply let out an exasperated breath and tried to look positive. "Come on. Maybe Chie-senpai or Yukiko-senpai can get through to him."

But she already knew they wouldn't. She knew any attempt to talk to Yu would fall on deaf ears. He wouldn't let them in, and if he wouldn't let them in, how could any of them help him?

Tuesday started a lot like Monday for Yu Narukami and his friends. Rise and the others found their leader staggering towards school with that same glossy eyed look in his eyes. He didn't say anything to them, of course. He barely acknowledged them.

"S-so... Hey! Did you see the show on TV last night? Naoto-kun was on!" Chie commented.

This time, Yosuke was the one to elbow her. He glared at the girl, disapprovingly, silently scolding her for mentioning the detective around Yu.

"Ow! A-all I'm saying is that it was surprising! He doesn't seem like the type to go after the spotlight!" Chie grumbled, looking towards the asphalt surface as they walked. She lifted her head to look at the dejected silverette. "I'm sorry, Yu-kun..."

"..." The man just took in a slow breath and exhaled. "It's fine."
"Um... Guys?" Chie looked up and stopped as the others did the same. Yu was the only one to keep walking, mostly due to a lack of awareness of his surroundings. Rise grabbed his hand, forcing him to stop as Naoto stood before the group.

"Good morning," Naoto greeted, an air of professionalism and authority in her voice and posture. Unlike their fearless leader, Naoto seemed perfectly normal. If their confrontation had left the detective distant and crestfallen, he hid it well. "I've been waiting for you all. There's something I needed to discuss with you regarding the case."

Rise looked at Yu and found his face contorting slightly. It was the most real movement she had seen from his face since the field trip. He didn't look scared, but it was obvious to the idol that he hadn't expected to see Naoto again, at least not like this. This wasn't the shyness Kanji would usually experience when around Naoto. This looked like Yu was a mix of fright and fury, but not at Naoto. Someone else.

"Discuss? Dude, we'll be late if we talk too long," Yosuke responded, before he realized what Naoto was wearing, or rather, what he wasn't wearing. "Hey, where's your uniform?"

"Could you please indulge my current theory on the matter?" inquired Naoto, walking closer. Rise squeezed Yu's hand in an attempt to comfort her friend. His unnaturally cold hand remained as unresponsive as before. Neither noticed the detective's glare at their linked hands.

"What is it?" Yosuke asked, raising his brow.

Naoto turned away from the group, gazing into the distance as he began to speak. "First, as regards commonalities between the victims, all of them were kidnapped before they were murdered. The victims were all locals who had been the focus of recent media attention, becoming suddenly well-known. That is the most likely scenario. I don't believe there's anything intrinsically unique about the victims themselves." Naoto paused to turn towards the group and approach them again. "Haven't you all come to the same conclusion?" His eyes gazed over each of them.

Rise saw his gaze turn especially sharp when it landed on Yu. Not many people ever consider the kind of knowledge Rise had picked up in her time in the spotlight. No, she wasn't a scientist or a detective, but all of her time practicing acting had helped her catch certain emotional cues. Little things that people do when they're mad or happy. Rise had only studied it because her agent wanted her to start really getting into the big, dramatic shows. She never thought she'd be using it read a detective.

She had seen Naoto's cobalt eyes turn into a glare when he looked at Yui. She noticed the look of scorn behind that steely blue sight. Naoto wasn't just angry, he was pissed off. There was more to his rage than that stolen kiss, she just had no idea what...

"Um... M-maybe?" Yosuke retorted when no one else in the group did.

The anger was gone, as if it was never there. Rise realized it couldn't have lasted long, probably just a moment's breath. She silently wondered if her Persona helped make her more aware in the real world as Naoto continued.

"Then, allow me to state my point. Will you admit that a number of you fit these identical circumstances? There was a long interval between the second and third deaths in this case. But after I applied the aforementioned criteria, I discovered several similar disappearances had taken place. Yukiko Amagi. Kanji Tatsumi. Rise Kujikawa. All of you disappeared shortly after being shown on TV. Either you escaped death somehow, or you faked your own disappearances in order to divert attention from yourselves. Since some of you had ties to the victims, there came a point..."
where I suspected one of you must be the culprit."

He was looking at all of them again, Rise noticed, but again there was just the tiniest hint of more. His gaze may have pierced through everyone there, but the last person he looked at was Yu. Naoto's eyes stayed on him again, if only for a moment longer. The tall silverette suddenly looked very small as he seemed to shirk away from the Detective Prince's glare.

"You thought one of us was the killer!? You can't be serious!" Chie argued. She and Yosuke seemed ready to chew the bluette out, but the younger boy maintained his calm disposition.

"This was a prior theory, since discarded." That seemed to calm down the offended teens. "Putting together everything I've learned until this moment, I believe exactly the opposite. You aren't the culprits. You may, in fact, be the only ones with the means to pursue the true perpetrator." Naoto shifted slightly in place, holding out a hand to motion towards everyone there. "Seen as a joining of forces between the rescued, everything falls into place."

Naoto turned away from the group again. This was starting to remind Rise of old school mystery films now. The brainiac detective, wearing a trenchcoat and a pipe in his mouth, was explaining to his sidekick, love interest, and the other suspects about what was happening, who did it, and why. Rise was gaining a new sympathy for those characters. As Naoto continued to monologue, she was just getting more confused.

"Of course, this is all speculation. There is in fact a flaw in the theory. It doesn't account for the third incident. Mr. Morooka's murder. He has never been broadcast on television, and neither did he ever disappear. We must also consider the condition of his corpse. The first two victims are still listed with an unknown cause of death. But Mr. Morooka died of an easily identifiable blunt force trauma to the occipital cranium. The police have not satisfactorily resolved this discrepancy, yet they are desperate to close the case. Further action will be necessary to obtain some sort of decisive evidence."

Yu seemed to actually react to what was being said, showing he was at least listening. Rise felt his hand twitch as he looked up, mumbling to himself. The idol leaned in closer, barely catching the words he said. "Occipital cranium? But that's..."

"Senpai?" Rise whispered, gently prodding his arm. It was too late. He closed up again and his gaze fell to the sidewalk beneath them.

No one else noticed. No one else was looking. Chie, Yosuke, and Yukiko were standing in front of the two, between them and Naoto. Chie tilted her head and spoke, ignorant of what was going on behind her. "Further action...? What do you mean?"

Naoto face the team and she looked directly at the five of them. "Well, whatever the outcome... the evidence should come to light." The stoic face Naoto wore changed for a half second. The others didn't catch it, but Rise did. Naoto looked... forlorn? Was that the word? He looked kinda sad, or he was missing something. Whatever the emotion was, it didn't last. "You said something interesting to me not long ago."

The Detective Prince began to walk forward, and the group parted aside for him. "Hey, where are you going?" Yosuke questioned.

"This is not a game for me either..." And without another word or a chance for the five to ask her what he meant, Naoto began walking away.

"Naoto-kun..." Yukiko whispered, obviously concerned for the young boy.
"... What was that about?" Yosuke turned to the others with a brow raised.

Chie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Man, he figured everything out though..."

"Do you think we should go after him?" Yukiko inquired.

"School's gonna start soon, so probably not. We'll just keep an ear out and see what we can find from there," the brunette male sighed.

As the three talked, Rise looked at Yu with an anxious frown. She waited for her Senpai to go after Naoto, or to at least say something. He didn't do anything though. He just stood there, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the world. Seeing the friend she cared about so much, seeing their usually steel faced leader so depressed, it tore Rise up inside. She couldn't let him stay like this.

Okay... Okay. I can do this. "Oh no!" She suddenly gasped, putting her acting lessons to a new use. The others turned to her with surprised faces. "My report on the field trip! I left it at home!"

"What?"

"Oh no!"

"Oh crap, do you have time to go get it, Rise-chan?"

"I hope so... Senpai, come with me!" She tugged on Yu's arm, pulling him forward. He lifted his head to look at her, tilting it slightly. He looked confused, as well as a little annoyed. "Pleas~e!" begged Rise, holding the last syllable. "You're faster than me! Please! Please!" The older boy just looked at her, staring into her desperate, pleading eyes. Rise wondered if he knew the real reason she was desperate.

"... Fine." Yu slowly nodded his head, now following the girl, forcing himself to run beside her.

"Awesome! We'll see you at school! Bye, everyone!" She chirped, waving goodbye to the others.

The two ran until Rise was sure Yosuke and the others couldn't see them. Once that was accomplished, she came to a stop, leaning her body against a tall tree and panting as Yu watched her. She wasn't much of a physical athlete so the short sprint left her rather winded. The older boy, on the other hand, seemed just fine. Well, as fine as a silent, depressed, near catatonic teenager could be.

He continued to stare at her, forcing Rise to speak first. "I didn't forget my homework."

"...?" Yu didn't really move, but at least she knew he was looking at her now.

"Senpai, what does occipital cranium mean? You said it earlier, what does it mean?"

He was silent for another few seconds, before replying. "Back of the head. It means King Moron got hit in the back of the head. He died from it," he muttered.

It was the most he'd said since the field trip, meaning Rise was making progress. She allowed herself to smile proudly, before she realized the implications of what she just heard. "Wait. So Mitsuo killed King Moron before...?" Yu nodded. "But... but that doesn't make sense. Why would-"

"He didn't kill them. He didn't kill Saki or Mayumi. He only killed King Moron." He blinked, as if surprised by his own revelation. Rise swore she saw that familiar glimmer in his eyes for a
moment. She saw the shift difference between a dull grey and a shimmering silver in those orbs. "He took credit for their murders. The killer, the real one, is still out there, still out here..."

"Oh my God..." A tidal wave of dread and horror coursed through Rise's veins. It only got worse as she brought another fact to light. "Naoto-kun was on TV recently! He must have known the real killer would see it and... Oh God, Senpai's he's using himself as bait!" Rise cried, grabbing his arm and shaking him. "You have to go talk to him!"

"M-me...?" He blinked and then slowly moved his head side to side. "No. Not me. Not... not me."

Rise glared at Yu, her jaw clenching as she grabbed his shoulders. She shook him back and forth as she yelled, "Senpai, snap out of it! I know you like Naoto! You can't honestly tell me you'd rather Naoto die than get mad at you for talking to him!"

"You... you know?" He mumbled, his eyes widening slightly.

"I may not remember much from that night, but I know you don't kiss someone like you kissed Naoto without liking them a little bit!" Yu looked away, but the idol shook him again, forcing him to look at her. "I don't know what you and Naoto talked about that night, but I know that whatever he said really affected you. You don't want to tell us? Then fine... But what about him? He could die."

Yu was silent. He wanted to look away, but Rise held his head in her feminine hands and made him look at her.

"Go talk to him."

"..."

"Go. Talk to him." She released him and walked around, gently pushed against his back. He stumbled forward. "If you hurry, you can probably catch him. Now go!"

"Why... Why are you helping me?" He didn't turn around, but she could hear his confusion.

She just smiled at the back of his head. "You helped me, Senpai. Besides, how could I ever leave a friend to suffer?"

"I'm not who you think I am..."

"So? I'm not the girl all of Japan thinks I am." Rise shrugged. "Now go."

Yu stood there for a long moment, and the younger girl began to fear he'd never move. She was about to say something, when he suddenly took off in a rapid swift forward. She had a small grin on her soft lips as she whispered, "Good luck, Senpai..."

What just happened? Rise...? I'm going to have to figure that out later. Apparently she's a lot smarter than I thought she was. Guess she isn't as much of a bimbo as I thought... Focus. Naoto. Murderer. Gonna get himself killed! There!

Yu ran like the wind after the Detective Prince. He called out to him as soon as he spotted the blue of his synonymous hat, "Naoto!" He heard him, but he didn't stop walking. It looked like he was trying to do the silent treatment on him again. Not this time, beautiful. This time, I'm speaking plain and true and you will listen!
Yu Narukami had been feeling, for a lack of a better word, empty, lately. He had been feeling empty, void of any emotion, fake or otherwise. Rise had been able to shake him out of it, even for just a little bit. Now Yu felt something, deep in his gut. It was a simple emotion, one of the cornerstones of feeling. It was good ole anger.

"Are you fucking dumb?!" Yep. That got his attention... As well as several other bystanders. Whatever. Focus. "Naoto, I know what it is you're planning!" Yu came to a skidding stop, before he stood in front of Naoto, standing right in his way.

The detective was avoiding his gaze, tipping his hat slightly as he retorted, "I have nothing to say to you, Narukami." He tried to go around, only for Yu to move in his way.

"That's fine. Don't talk. Listen." The silverette leaned down slightly and he spoke with a harsh bluntness. Despite his bluntness, his words were sharp and articulate, and thankfully for the both of them, relatively quiet. "The killer is still out there. Point to you for being right. Before you start riding that high horse though, look where it is you're going. You think it's a brilliant idea, hooking yourself up and acting as bait?"

Naoto said nothing.

"You could die, Naoto. You could just be another body hanging in the air by the end of the week. Do you think that's what your parents would want?" The bluette finally looked up at him, and his eyes crackled with the fire of rage. That struck a nerve. "Don't do this Naoto. Don't put yourself at risk like this!"

"A detective's life is one of risk," he responded. His voice was calm, but Yu could hear a slight quiver to it. No doubt Naoto was angry at him confronting the younger boy over his half brained plan.

"There's a line in the sand called 'acceptable risk.' You're not even in the same country as that line. That's how far you've passed it!" Yu sighed and traced his hair with his fingers. "Naoto, don't do this. I'm begging you. Give up this crazy plan. You could die..." He shook his head side to side, struggling to put his feelings into the right words. "I don't want you to do this."

The look in Naoto's eyes told Yu he would not yield. "My parents never gave up on a case until it was solved. My grandparents never gave up until the guilty faced justice. My great-grandparents reached out to the truth, even when their lives were at risk. I will not quit, nor will I be bullied into submission by a liar."

"God damn, Naoto!" Yu grumbled, putting his hands to his head as he tried to control his temper. "You are so incredibly stubborn! The hell is wrong with you?!" The two stood there, glaring at one another for the next few moments. Yu's gaze didn't remain angry for long, though. His anger melted away. Maybe Naoto would have seen that if he wasn't blinded by his own anger and pride. "I don't want you to die, Naoto."

"I won't be killed. You..." He didn't finish the sentence, but both of them knew what he really meant. Narukami and his band of merry misfits were going to save Naoto.

This didn't go far in comforting the older man. "And what if we fail? The rescues? They're getting harder and harder. Not to mention, what if we die trying to save you? What if we fail? There could only be eight corpses strung up in one night!" He warned. He reached for Naoto's shoulder, only for the detective to step back.

"Your actions forced me to play this hand."
"It's my fault?" Yu repeated, his anger rising again. "I... You..." He stopped and let out a long, deep sigh. He was scared, yet a smile for forming on his lips as he shook his head. "D-damn it, Naoto. I... I just don't want you risking your life. If you died-"

"I will not. I know your 'team' will rescue me. Your ego wouldn't allow you to fail," Naoto commented, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Trust me, Naoto, when I say that I'm not doing this just for jerking off my own ego," Yu replied. He shook his head as he laughed bitterly. "This is so fucked..."

"If you're done bothering me Narukami, I-"

"Have a dumb plan to enact?! Go be bait?" Yu let out another exasperated and tired sigh. "Damn it, Naoto, I can't even begin to explain to you how bad of an idea this is!"

"You had your chance to explain."

"You had your chance to listen to me so I could explain!"

"What did you want me to do, Narukami?! Believe in an urban legend? Or believe in a self-proclaimed liar?"

"If that's the case, why even come to me at all?!"

"I wanted to give you a chance to explain yourself. Nothing more."

"But you weren't even there when I tried to explain it to you!"

"Enough!" Naoto shook his head, obviously irritated by the circle the two were running in. He tried to walk around the silverette, and this time Yu made no effort to stop him. "I am fulfilling my duty as a Shirogane by taking whatever means necessary to solving this case. You can't stop me. You won't."

"Naoto..." Yu turned to the boy as he began to walk away. He wore no masks this time. Not that they mattered. Naoto could always read him all too well. A melancholic smile formed on the silverette's lips as he watched the Detective Prince go. "Look, I really am a bad guy. I lie and manipulate and I hide behind masks to deal with people..."

His words were enough to at least make the bluette pause. He faced the older boy, eyebrow raised, obviously confused by the confession. Yu continued, looking at the detective's eyes with that same forlorn smile. "But then there's you, The Detective Prince. You see right through my bullshit and call me out on it. Damn, Naoto. I've never met anyone like you before..." To Naoto's surprise, he turned away and began to walk in the direction he came. "I wish you didn't do this, Naoto. I don't want you risking your life, but I won't stop you. We'll save you. I'll save you. Maybe it's your turn for a wake-up call..."

The Detective Prince watched the older boy walk away. He stood there for a few more moments, before turning towards the opposite direction and walking.

"You couldn't stop Naoto?" Rise asked. She let out a sigh, quietly eating her lunch as she and Yu-senpai sat on the roof of the school. "This is all my fault... I never should have accused him of treating this like a game. I-"

"Don't." Yu stood up from his place on the ground and looked to the sky. Beautiful day... Hadn't
realized... "This is not your fault, I promise you that, Rise. Besides, this could be a blessing in disguise. Naoto is an ace detective. Having him join our folds could be beneficial to finding the true culprit."

"That's if we save him."

"We will. I know we will." We have to.

Rise watched him speak and she tilted her head slightly. He was acting off. Strange. It was like he was back to his same 'stoic leader' role, but it felt so unnatural and artificial this time. Maybe it was just weird after seeing him so depressed, or maybe... "Senpai?"

"Yes, Rise-chan?"

"Whatever happened between you two, I'm sure you can work it out."

Her words seemed to have had an effect on him. His stoic mask broke to reveal a smile on his lips. It was a loss and bittersweet smile, one that someone would wear after accepting a tragedy. Rise wondered what was going through his mind, but she didn't pry any deeper. "I hope so, Rise-chan."

"Are... are you going to talk to the others?"

"There's no need to concern them with it. Let's keep this between ourselves for now." Rise blinked, shocked by the answer. Yu looked at her and tried to give her one of his charming, charismatic smiles, but all he gave was a pale imitation.

"They're really worried about you, Senpai..."

"Hm. I'm fine."

Rise looked at her food, quietly playing with it as Yu stared into the distance. His eyes had their glimmer back, but he still seemed so lost. Senpai... I wish you talked to the others about what was wrong. I don't know how else to help...

As the two ate in silence, Yu's mind thought of his star-crossed lover. Naoto... You changed a lot of things in my life by showing up. I guess, in a way, I should thank you. I mean, I never thought I was a good person, but at least I thought I had some good qualities. Really, I just thought I was better than people. Heh.

But you, Naoto? I'm going to save you, Naoto. Not because I want you to feel like you owe your life to me, honestly, I don't know if you'll ever not hate me, but because I don't want to see you get hurt. This rescue is out of the goodness of my heart.

Unless that's just another lie I'm feeding myself. Heh. I don't know. I've been lying so long, I've started to buy my own material.

I promise... I promise, we'll save you. Then maybe you can solve this case and maybe, just maybe, you could love... Heh. Nah. That's just a pipe dream.

END
Yu faces off against Shadow Naoto and makes a declaration.

Yu led the group forward, healing them all with Saki Mitama's Medirama ability. Yosuke looked at his partner with an appreciative grin. "Thanks, Yu." The silverette nodded back, his face a static expression of seriousness and determination. The others followed his lead, respectful and loyal to their stoic leader. Of course, the truth was their leader was having an emotional thunderstorm in his head.

"Stupid blue-haired dummy! Gonna get himself killed! God, I should have just kidnapped him myself when I had the chance! Instead, I sit back and twiddle my thumbs! I'm such a dumbass..."

"Rise, status report." His voice was as firm and even as his face was. He watched as the idol summoned her Persona and scanned the underground facility. As she did, he couldn't help but admire a tapestry on the wall. To the others, it was just a bird symbol, probably there to help fit with the supervillain lair motif. To him, an avid fan of tokusatsu material, he recognized it as the symbol of SHOCKER from the hit TV show 'Kamen Rider.'

Yosuke was right. The pint sized detective was a bit more childish than he was willing to admit, it seemed. There was no way could deny the subtle flutter his heart felt when he realized they both enjoyed tokusatsu shows. Damn it, Naoto. Body, brains, and a love of good television? You are- He killed that thought. He really didn't need another reason to regret his choices right now. Instead, he looked at Rise, who finally seemed to have a good idea of how much further they needed to go.

"Well, looks like someone's determined," Yosuke chuckled, before following after the blonde boy.

"Whee! We're off to save the Detective Prince!" sang Teddie, skipping after the others with the ladies behind him.

Yu didn't follow after at first. His mask cracked as he gnashed his teeth and dug his nails into the palms of his hands. He wanted to kick the wall and scream out some curse words, but all he did was clam up and follow. He closed his eyes and bottled up that feeling of resentment deep inside his stomach, before opening them again. He looked calm and tranquil once more.

He found the group already in the middle of their next fight. A pack of Shadows attacked them, and in his stead, Kanji was the one leading them. He swung the metal object around, shattering skulls and breaking bones with the shield. "Get out of my freakin' way!"
Yu observed the fuming teenager, watching as he lashed out at the Shadows with torrents of electricity and wild swings of his shield. His moves were powerful, but sloppy and impractical. Out of the corner of his eye, the leader noticed several Shadows approaching him with hostile intent.

*Perfect,* thought Yu. He manipulated his wrathful 'friend' to serve his needs. He intentionally led the Shadows towards Kanji, putting up a superficial fight against the dark creatures, before watching the raging young man destroy them with one of his wild attacks. It was a great way to conserve energy, but it made him feel off. Unlike before, where he felt pride in his mischievous ways, this time left a bad taste in his mouth.

*Naoto's fault, I'm sure...*

It wasn't helping Kanji either, obviously. The young man was tiring himself out far too quickly to keep this pace up. He paid for it dearly when the final Shadow dodged his lightning bolts and raced towards his exhausted body, eager to attack. Yu considered letting the Shadow strike the young man, after all, Kanji would easily return the favor as soon as he could counterattack.

*Consider this my first good deed of the week, Kanji.* The older boy dashed in the way and with one mighty swing of his sword, bisected the Shadow and spared his younger compatriot some momentary pain. "You okay, Kanji?" asked Narukami, offering a hand to help the panting boy up. He took it and was hoisted up to his feet before answering.

"Y-yeah. I'm alright. Thanks, Senpai."

The idea of slamming his fist into Kanji's face briefly crossed Yu's mind. Just an easy swing of the face, right into his dumb, Naoto-loving face. It would have been the simplest thing. Instead, the senior just nodded his head and turned towards the closed, metal doors in front of them. "Naoto's in there, Rise?" *I know how I feel. Even though Naoto hates me, I've fall in love with him. I get that.*

"That's what it looks like, Senpai," Rise answered.

*And I'd have to be as dumb as Kanji to not see he likes Naoto too. As in, almost as much as I do. Just admitting it was enough to make Yu sick to his stomach. And considering Naoto, again, hates me, that could lead to him ending up with Kanji. The idea of them holding hands, going on dates, KISSING... Fuck, it actually makes me mad and gross inside. Mad and... Is this what jealousy feels like? It freakin' sucks..."

"Senpai? You okay?" asked Kanji. Yu's mind snapped out of his trance and he gave a reflexive nod. Without another word, he started walking towards the door. The others followed, and soon the doors slid open with a low hiss.

"Naoto!" Kanji shouted as they ran inside. Yu would have been annoyed at his pining, had he not been distracted by the Detective Prince and his clone standing before them.

"Ah. It's about time you arrived. Dealing with this child has been quite a pain," the real Naoto sighed, unceremoniously walked away from her Shadow and towards the group.

"Ah. It's about time you arrived. Dealing with this child has been quite a pain," the real Naoto sighed, unceremoniously walked away from her Shadow and towards the group.

Yu was floored by his callous behavior, before everyone was distracted by the doppelganger. He recalled his first look at Naoto's Shadow just a couple of days ago. The 'true self' appeared on the Midnight Channel, announcing something called the 'Genome Project' and talking like a supervillain from Neo-Feathermen. Now that he was facing the copy in the flesh, he realized his worst fears were true.

*He looks really hot in that lab coat. Like, seriously. Really hot. God, the fact that his arms don't*
even reach the sleeves should make it less hot, but they don't. They just him look hotter. God help me, my life is struggle.

Then, the copy spoke. "No! No, no, don't go!" He sobbed, and Narukami felt a knife impaled his heart. That sight was as baffling as it was heartbreaking, neither feelings Yu was accustomed to. Naoto looked so small in that lab coat, so weak, like he needed to be saved, as if calling for help. He looked like a crying child, tears streaming down his face as he pleaded for the real thing to stay.

The genuine Naoto turned to stare his copy down, replying formally and maturely, like a parent scolding a child. "It's useless speaking with you. I need to go back now...

"Why? Why're you leaving me here!? Why am I always left alone!?" The Shadow wrapped his arms around himself, and for the first time Yu felt pity for the poor thing. Never before had he felt pity at these self-proclaimed 'true selves.' They were annoying enemies, threats to his life, or hilariously stupid manifestations of insecurity, but Naoto's Shadow, much like the real thing, was so different from everything he was used to. Again, the rules of life changed and it was all because of the Detective Prince. "It's so lonely... I don't wanna be alone!"

"N-Naoto...?" He couldn't stop his voice. He just wanted to hug the sobbing bluette and promise him he wouldn't leave again. God damn it, Naoto! What is it about you that makes me fall apart?! Even your Shadow wormed his way into my head... He had abandoned Naoto. This sobbing Shadow was a manifestation of a life of abandonment, and he was just another link in that chain.

And he hated himself for it.

To his credit, Naoto was as calm as ever. The way he spoke, even the way he just stood there, it showed poise and maturity. If the Shadow's words were affecting him, he hid it well. "You wear the same face as me," he observed. "It's as if you're implying we're one and the same, but the difference between me and you is-"

"These childish gestures are no mere affectation... They're the truth!" And just like that, a coin was flipped. Gone was the sobbing of a scared infant, gone were the pleading for companionship and friendship. Suddenly, the Shadow's face contorted and shifted into an unsettling glare. It was as if a mask melted off of his face, or maybe, this face was the mask..

"The fools all say it, don't they...? 'You're only a child,' 'Keep out of our business, kid,' and so forth! No matter how many cases you spend hours cogitating over, no matter how many crimes you solve, you're a child in their eyes." Naoto wore a mask of maturity, but if the Shadow was speaking the truth, and they always did, he had learned, then Naoto wore it like a mask, wanting to appear mature and confident against those who would disregard him for his age.

Guess, we both have our masks, thought Yu.

The Shadow continued, and despite not even facing the Investigation Team, they could all see the words were leaving cuts. Every sentence seemed to end with a slash at the real Naoto's skin, making him flinch and recoil, until he was shaking where he stood. "It's your brain they're interested in. The grey matter locked up in that skull. As long as they need it, you're an ace detective! But once you're done, it's back to the playpen with you. You haven't the means to deal with society's two-faced nature... You're just a lonely child!"

"Naoto..." Yu repeated, stepping forward. If Naoto had noticed him, he didn't show it. Neither of them did. The Shadow just changed masks again and began to cry, breaking Yu's heart again. The sight of even Shadow Naoto tearing up was enough to make him feel guilt stab at his heart and
soul. He winced at the sight of the poor bluette, his mask cracking. "I wanna be a grown up... I wanna be a big boy right now... Then they'll see who I am," he whimpered, wiping the glistening teardrops from his golden eyes. Yu hated seeing him like that, so sad and lost. He pleaded to himself, begged himself to just walk forward and embrace the sobbing bluette. His body held firmly in place, deaf to his commands. "I... I want a reason for me to stay!"

Stay... A reason to stay? Naoto, I'm so sorry... Whether you liked me or not, I doubt my presence in your life made it any easier. I doubt it gave you any reason to stay...

"That's enough. I can find my own reason for living," retorted Naoto, but the statement didn't hold the same iron control it used to. He was wavering.

"Hah... I'm telling you that's impossible. You are but a child. How can you change that essential truth?" The clone stepped forward.

"S-stop it!" Naoto stepped back, trembling.

"At your core, you admire the sort of "strong" and "cool" men who populate detective fiction. But in trying to emulate them, you must know that in truth, you're nothing of the sort - you're a child. There's no avoiding first principles... Admit that you're a child, and admit that there's nothing you can do about it!" The replica dramatically declared, pointing at the Detective Prince.

Naoto...

"Now then! Our analysis is complete. Let us begin the body alteration procedure. You have no objections, do you... "'Naoto' Shirogane?" The way he said that name... It had a secret. Yu's brow furrowed as he watched the real Naoto freak out, seemingly terrified of whatever secret the Shadow knew.

"Stop it!" screamed Naoto, pleading, demanding for the copy to stop this.

He did not. "'Naoto...' Such a cool, manly name! But a name doesn't change the truth. It doesn't let you cross the barrier between the sexes. How could you become an ideal man, when you were never male to begin with?"

...Huh? Yosuke and Kanji were saying something. Honestly, Yu wasn't really paying attention. He felt his mouth stretch open slightly, before he closed it and swallowed spit up. His mind tried to process this, tried to understand just what had been said. Never male? Naoto's a girl? He's been lying this whole time... He's... He wore a mask? Like... me?

I... Shit... Yu took a moment to examine himself. He thought about his feelings for Naoto, his love and admiration for the Detective Prince. He thought about their time together. Their dates and that kiss. That wonderful, passionate kiss...

He felt a tinge of anger. Not at the betrayal or the lying. That would have simply been hypocritical of him. After all, how many times had he lied to others in his life? An immeasurable amount. No, he was mad at the fact that his love for Naoto Shirogane was still there. He still loved Naoto Shirogane. Actually, if it was possible? He was even more in love with hi- er... Her.

She had lied, she had pretended to be something she wasn't. What it wrong to look at her like a kindred spirit now? Was it wrong to want to know more about the 'real' Naoto? If it was, he didn't want to be right. All he wanted was to be with Naoto...

Damn it, I have it bad. I've never felt this way about anyone before, but freakin' Naoto... I've only
known her a few months and she changes everything... It was an epiphany he had again and again, but it didn't change the simple fact that Naoto Shirogane made him feel things he never had before. It was amazing.

Yu was knocked out of his contemplation by a new voice yelling. No, it wasn't new. It was Naoto's real voice. She... she sounded like a girl. A cute, young woman. She screamed at her reflection, her hands balled into fists, as all sense of control she thought she had, both on the situation and on herself, was destroyed.

"That's not true!"

 Yep. That'll do it...

A blue flame engrossed the Shadow, consuming her body as she cackled. The others were talking, but Yu didn't pay attention to them. Instead, he looked at his sword and then at the fainting detective. The grip on the hilt tightened as he dashed in front of his group.

"I will face her myself."

"Wait, what?!"

"Senpai?!"

"Dude?"

"I will face her myself," Yu repeated. He wanted to come up with some kind of lie or reasoning for why he wanted to do this. Honestly, he wasn't even sure himself. It just felt like... like the right thing to do. "Kanji." Good ol' Kanji. Dumb and loyal. Don't fail me now, stupid. "Make sure no one helps me. I need to do this myself."

His silver eyes met Kanji's aqua ones. For a moment, he feared the idiot could see the fear and anxiety in his soul. Instead, the younger boy just nodded his head with a frown on his face. "I don't really get why you wanna do this, Senpai, but... okay."

"What?! Have you guys lost it?!" Yosuke exclaimed, glaring at the two.

"This is Senpai's choice. I don't really know why, but we should respect him." Kanji crossed his arms and nodded solemnly. "Go get her, Senpai."

Never gonna hear that again, the silverette thought before he turned to the laughing Shadow.

"The sycophant wishes to fight me? How utterly anomalous! I would never think he could bring himself to do anything for others! But I accept your boon, deceiver!" The blue fire turned into an obsidian flame as she laughed. The darkness held her, only releasing her after she had transformed into her new form. One that left Yu with mixed feelings.

Holy shit. That's fucking Kikaider. Wow. Naoto really does like tokusatsu stuff. That was his first thought. The second was, is it wrong to be a little attracted to her as a robot? I mean, robots are cool and... Focus, damn it!

"Come, sycophant. Allow me to begin your body altercation process. I shall transmogrify you into a corpse!" The robot's gears and cogs whizzed and hummed as she flexed her robotic limbs, flying into the air thanks to her jetpack.

Charming. "Persona!" Yu announced, crushing a card in his fingers as Izanagi formed above him.
"Go!" Izanagi shot forward, assaulting the Shadow with a powerful tackle. The two flew back crashing into the back wall as Yu ran after his Persona. "All of you, stay here! Do not help me!" he demanded, sounding angrier than any of them had ever heard. "Change! Kin-ki!" Ha. Kinky...

Focus, Yu!

The masked Persona suddenly vanished, allowing Shadow Naoto a moment to recompose herself. It was ended when a golden fist shot for head metal head, actually shattering the steel wall behind her and sending her body falling into the next room. Yu ran through the hole that was made and looked down at the stunned Shadow. A quick scan of the room revealed it also resembled a laboratory, with beeping consoles and flashing lights decorating the walls. Besides that, it was a mostly empty room, perfect for their fight. "Keep up the assault, Kin-ki!"

The golden Persona obeyed, dashing forward to punch her again, only for the robot to suddenly fly out of the way, dodging the attack and maneuvering behind Kin-ki. "Reprehensible cur!" The loud hum of her laser guns filled the air, before unleashing a powerful energy blast, knocking Kin-Ki into the wall. Yu nearly fell to the ground in pain as his back burned, as though he had been hit by the same blast.

"D-damn it... Change! Black Frost!" The golden Persona vanished, and was replaced by a small, black skinned imp-like creature. "Agidyne!" The imp laughed, before unleashing a blast of fire from his hands. The Shadow dodged it though, zooming over and around the small imp with amazing speed. Yu saw her pull her leg back, before swinging it forward, kicking Black Frost like a soccer ball.

"Ahh!" Yu fell onto his knee as he struggled to compose his breathing, hand on his rib. "S-shit... You're tough!"

"You are just like the adults. Using me as a tool, a means to further your own selfish needs! I will no longer be used and cast aside like some arbitrary whim! Laser Beam!" Shadow Naoto's eyes glowed brightly, turning a bright green as she glared at Yu.

"Shit, shit, shit! Black Frost!" The silverette summoned his Persona once more and commanded it as the mech opened fire. The green beam shot forward as the imp cast his own spell.

"You believed your own lies when you thought you could beat me, Narukami... What the-?! Inconceivable!" She saw her attack go forward, but it suddenly stopped as steam filled the large room. The beam was seemingly cut apart, with random partial beams firing all throughout the room. Some even hit her, knocking her against the wall. "But how?! Wait... Of course!"

The steam cleared, revealing a smiling Yu Narukami and his shield. A large crystal of ice sat in front of him, nearly completely melted now. "Pretty clever, huh? Using Black Frost's ice powers, I made a crystal to refract the laser around the room! Leaving myself unscathed." Yu posed a bit, allowing himself a bit of swagger. "Admit it, babe. You're impressed, huh?"

"More repulsed than anything else. Even now you hide behind bravado and that pompous mask! You are a living lie, much like myself. You conceal yourself behind a wall of affectations and facades, lying to yourself, trying to be what you could never be, just like I! Your words and actions, your very voice, hold a level of pretension that betray your true self. Ostentation! You display intellect and wisdom when you nary have enough for yourself, fool!"

Her words crushed Yu under their weight, piling on top of each other more and more. He ground his teeth as he looked to the ground. The robotic menace expected he would soon begin shouting, arguing against her and denying the accusations. Instead, he mumbled something under his breath as a card was crushed in his hands.
"What did you say, sycophant?"

"I said, bufula." Black Frost appeared between the two, giggling wildly as he danced. Suddenly, a powerful gust of cold air and snow bashed the robot against wall again. Icicles and frozen particles clung to her metal form, sticking her against the wall despite her struggling. Her entire body, save for her head, was covered in ice and stuck to the wall. Both of them knew the ice wouldn't hold for long, so Yu ran forward. "Give me a lift!" He commanded, and Black Frost bent down, allowing himself to become a platform for Yu to jump off of.

He landed on the icy wall, fingers and shoes digging into the icy frost. It stung his hands and it chilled his skin, but he needed to do this. He needed to look Naoto, even if it was just her Shadow, in the eyes for this. He leaned closer, the sound of ice cracking already echoing through his ears. Their faces were inches apart.

"What are you-"

"Naoto! I'm sorry!" He shouted. He flinched slightly at the sound of his voice, but continued in a more controlled, yet panicking voice. "I'm sorry. You're completely fucking right. I am a liar. I do fake being brave and wise and-and all of that shit. You're completely fucking right!" He cried, glaring into Naoto's optics. He released the ice covered walls and placed his hands on her large, robotic head. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs as he continued his confession. "And I love you. I'm not fucking lying when I say that." He was shaking. It wasn't from the cold.

If Naoto had any reaction to his words, her smooth, detail-less face hid it all. She merely stared at him as he trembled. The only sign of her reaction was the silence that took the room. She wasn't fighting to break out for the moment.

"I love you. I've fallen for you, and I can't stop thinking about you. I'm in love with you, because for the first time in my life, someone isn't happy with the mask I wear. You can see right through me. You can tell I'm lying and... and that scares me, because you're not like anyone I've ever met before! But that's why I love you! Because you're... you. You made me fall in love with you, you stupid, idiot and... and... You're not even going to remember this, but I had to tell you, but I couldn't because I'm scared. I'm terrified to tell the real you. I don't fear girls, I never did, but you are different. I love you..."

Without another word, he leaned forward and pressed his dry lips against the smooth metal of her face. He kissed the Shadow, eyes closed, lips sealed, kiss fleeting. It barely lasted a second, but it felt like all the time in the world. Naoto, the Shadow, her true self, gave a quiet hum. Her arm suddenly shattered the ice prison, gun raised to the air.

It hummed with energy.

_Izanagi... Ziodyne._

Izanagi obeyed.

---

Yu Narukami sat alone in his room. The lights were on as he silently stared at his phone. He stared at the contact on it, the name and number highlighted as he contemplated his next move.

He closed his eyes as his finger hovered over the call button. He was unaccustomed to hesitation, but now it was just another new feeling Naoto had indirectly forced him to get used to. He gently raised his head up, before dropping it onto his pillow in frustration. He let out a heavy sigh and swore to himself, before pressing down on the button.
It rang. Once. Twice.

_Come on, bimbo, pick up..._

"Hello?"

"Rise." He didn't sound happy. He tried to, he really did, but all he could let out was frustration and anger. "Can we talk tomorrow? I need some... advice."

_God damn it..._
Chapter Summary

Rise meets the Real Yu.

Rise Kujikawa stared at the screaming masses outside. Their adoration roared throughout the night, enhanced by the rainbow lights and the music of the opening band. She closed her eyes, allowing the full wave of music and screams to drown her. Drowning... That was the perfect word for it. Their voices were a raging storm, a massive tidal wave that slammed her deeper into the inky abyss. She was lost in their sea of chanting, hearing her name again and again.

"RI~SETTE! RI~SETTE! RI~SETTE! RI~SETTE!"

Except... It wasn't really her name they were chanting.

It was the name of the girl on all the posters outside. The girl who was about to run on stage and sing some cliche, generic pop song to the teen demographic. It wasn't her. Not a single person out there cared for Rise Kujikawa. They came here for the diva, the idol, the 'perfect' girl of their fantasies. They came for...

"R~SETTE! RI~SETTE! RI~SETTE!"

Her fingers coiled and squeezed the microphone. She held it tighter and tighter, feeling the pressure inside of her. She felt her soul raging, crying out with every chant of that stupid, fake name. It was coming to a boiling point. She tried putting a lid on the resentment and frustration, like so many times before, but it wasn't going to hold. It didn't stop her from exploding.

"I quit." Then she put on her mask and ran out, waving and beaming to the crowd. "Here I go!"

"Senpai? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just wanted a second opinion."

"Alright... I'm free tomorrow, around noon?"

"Cool. Meet me at the shrine in the shopping district."

"Right."

"..."

"..."

"Uhh... B-bye..."

"Right! B-bye, Senpai."
It wasn't like Yu-Senpai to be so nervous. It wasn't like him to ask for advice either, though. *We all usually rely on him,* Rise thought. *Then again, it's not like he's been acting like himself recently...*

The depression. The lifelessness. The emptiness. The way his eyes lacked that glimmer of life. After that kiss with Naoto, he seemed completely different. It was like there was this huge story being told, and she was just getting brief glimmers of it. Rise let out a heavy sigh and shook her head as she walked towards the shrine. "Okay, think Rise. Focus. What do you know...?"

*Senpai loves Naoto. That much is obvious. He loves him, er- her. Whenever she's around, he acts different. Really different. He's sad, he's angry, and...I don't know...*

She still wasn't sure what to think of the encounter between the Investigation Team and Naoto's Shadow.

Rise couldn't believe their silver-haired leader. Yu Narukami challenged the Shadow all by himself. It was stupid! It was suicide! She wanted to argue and yell and grab him, but one look from those silver eyes told her all she needed to hear.

'I need to do this. Please, give me this chance.'

It was still stupid, still suicidal, but he just looked so desperate. He needed this. He needed to face her. Rise didn't really understand it, but when did she ever? So she just sat back, mouth agape like a deer in the way of a car. No. She was on the sidelines, watching a deer walk towards a speeding car, facing it head on.

He shouted at them not to help. He sounded so angry. She'd never heard him sound so angry. Never seen him with such a fire in his eyes. He was always so stoic. Sometimes, he'd rarely even say a word, but whenever Naoto was involved, he was just... different.

It was an awful feeling, watching him fight and knowing she couldn't help. Not that she ever did help. All she did was watch from the background, stating the obvious and acting as the group's cheerleader while they risked their lives. Just a girl who couldn't fight, a damsel waiting to be saved.

The feeling melded with her own self-loathing, and together they sat at the bottom of her gut. Together they twisted and writhed inside of her, robbing her face of warmth and color. She saw the two fight, saw them leave the room as they yelled at each other. Naoto, her Shadow, kept calling Yu a sycophant... Whatever that meant.

"Himiko up!" Rise commanded. She needed to do something. She wasn't going to just sit back and hope for the best. At the very least, this way she could see how the fight was going. She tried telling the others, describing the battle. She didn't say a word about what was said between the two lovers.

Shadow Naoto was fast. It was able to outmaneuver Yu's Personas, and it gave just as hard as it was given. Whether or not her Senpai would win the fight was not the biggest mystery on her mind, though. No, it was the way he acted.

Yu Narukami was stoic. A leader who led with only a few words. No nonsense. The most expressive he had ever gotten was a small, friendly smile. Yet here, with Naoto's Shadow, he was different. He swore. He shouted. Hell, if Rise didn't know better, it was like he was openly flirting with the robot.

Suddenly, there was steam everywhere. The others could see the traces of it, but Rise was the only...
one to see the truth beyond it. She bit her lip, that same feeling in her gut returning. This was insane. They should all be there! They should have been helping him! Not standing here!

"More repulsed than anything else. Even now you hide behind bravado and that pompous mask! You are a living lie, much like my myself. You conceal yourself behind a wall of affectations and facades, lying to yourself, trying to be what you could never be, just like I! Your words and actions, your very voice, hold a level of pretension that betray your true self. Ostentation! You display intellect and wisdom when you nary have enough for yourself, fool!"

What was Naoto talking about? Rise didn't even know what some of those words meant. The craziest thing was how Yu reacted. He moved so fast. He froze the robotic Shadow to the wall and jumped onto her. He looked her dead in the eyes, not knowing of his silent audience. The things he said to Naoto... They changed everything Rise knew about the silverette.

"Naoto! I'm sorry...! You're completely fucking right! I am a liar... I love you..."

He kissed her. He kissed the lipless Shadow, and Rise could see the yearning in his eyes. The desire. The hatred for the mask he made himself. It felt familiar. Like, for a moment she and the silver-haired leader were the same. Then he summoned his Persona and electrocuted them both at once.

"Senpai!" Rise screamed, her voice drowned out by the clap of thunder. She was the first to move, running towards the rumble. The others followed.

They found Naoto's Shadow fading away in a blue fire, shrinking back down to the bipolar child in an overgrown labcoat. They found Yu on the ground, badly burned and unconscious. The Shadow stared at his still body, her face was unreadable, a strange mix of pity and hate... She then turned away and walked past the group, back towards her copy.

Rise sighed again. She was almost at the shrine. Senpai was probably waiting for her. *Sure took my sweet time getting here...*

And she knew exactly why she did. The truth was she wasn't sure what she was getting into. What had Naoto meant by him being a liar? And Yu even confessed to it! So he was a liar? He wasn't as brave or wise as he pretended to be? What exactly did it all mean? Was he just not as smart as he acted? Somehow Rise thought this went a lot deeper than that...

There were so many questions on the tip of her tongue, she wasn't sure how she was going to talk to the silverette now.

So she did what she always did when she was afraid. She put on her 'idol face' and walked with a confident and alluring wave of her hip. "Senpai! Hey!" Rise found the boy sitting on a bench and waved to him. He saw her and smiled, waving right back. She used to see that smile as comforting and charming, the kind that a knight would give the damsel in distress.

Now, all she could think was: *are you faking that smile, Senpai?*

"Hello, Rise-chan." His voice sounded just like it always did. Kind, friendly, and soft.

*It does sound kind of forced. Has it always been like that?*

She waited for him to tell her why she was here. He waited for her to ask. They stared at one another. An awkward silence filled the air as they just gave each other a plastic grin. In the end, Rise was the one who made the first move.
"Senpai?" He tilted his head to the side, staring at her quizzically. He still had that fake smile on his face. "When you asked me out, and I said no... I... I sort of lied when I told you why I didn't say yes..." He didn't say anything. He just kept on faking a smile. It was starting to just come off unnerving now. "Do you remember when you saved me?"

Chocolate eyes met silver ones. Arms, strong and warm, held her. A smile, like Prince Charming gave Sleeping Beauty, greeted her as she stirred awake. "H-huh...? What happened?"

"Are you okay, Rise-chan?"

"H-huh?"

"It's okay. We're here to save you. Everything is going to be okay." His voice was so kind. He sounded like a knight in shining armor, someone she could trust, someone she felt safe being around. "Can you stand?"

"Y-yeah..." He helped her stand. She stumbled, but he caught her. He held her in his arms, shielding her from the bright lights around them.

"Easy... I got you."

Her cheeks turned redder, and for a moment, she wanted to stay there forever.

Yu's face lost that charismatic smile. He was still smiling, but Rise couldn't help but think it looked... different. Like it wasn't a real smile anymore, or maybe it never was and Rise was just now starting to realize it. It looked more like a parody of a smile. A satirical joke on everyone who bought it.

"S-Senpai... When I first met you, I thought... I thought I really, really liked you, and- and I still do! But I think I started noticing things about you..." He wasn't looking at her. He was looking in her direction, but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were unfocused, like they couldn't meet Rise's. Is... Is Senpai scared? "You were like me. You were hiding behind a mask. Like how I would pretend to be Risette... I think that's why I said no. Because I was scared, because I saw too much of me in you. I was scared and... and I just panicked."

Yu let out a quiet breath. It sounded dismissive. He kept on smiling, but she could see the twitch in his lips. "Rise, I... I don't really know what you're talking about. What you see is what you get." He looked away. He stared at a tree, finding the bark suddenly very captivating. "I should get going, actually. I just remembered I promised Nanako-"

"No!" Rise shocked herself with the sound of her voice. She gulped and walked closer, planting herself down beside the older boy. She sat beside him, noticing him shuffle a few inches away from her. He glanced at her, before darting his eyes away again as he took in a deep, shaky breath. She lifted her hand to touch his shoulder, and she watched him flinch again. She hesitated, before dropping her hand back to her side. "You called me here to talk. So let's talk."

"I was just going to make sure you were okay. I-"

"Senpai, are you... Are you scared?"

"I'm not. I'm fine." His voice was quivering. "I need to go."

"Please. Senpai, stay. Yu... You're my friend." She placed her small, dainty hand on his. He pulled
away and muttered something as he balled his hand into a fist.

"...on't..."

"Huh?"

"Don't."

"Yu? Please, you can talk to me. What's wro-?"

"Don't call me your friend."

He stood up. Actually, it was more like he shot up like a rocket. That sardonic smile was gone. He was scowling at Rise, glaring at her with such anger. The glimmer in his eyes changed. It was the difference between a knight's armor, and the sword he used to skewer his enemies. It just shined differently. His hands were squeezed into shaking fists. "Fuck..."

"S-Senpai?"

"Shut up." His voice wasn't kind, nor was it gentle. It was low, almost snarling. She had never heard him sound like that. "This was a big fucking mistake. Just forget I even asked..." He tried to walk away. He turned his body, he took one step, and all Rise could do was watch him go. She felt paralyzed. Her body was stiff as he took another step.

"Wait!" She pleaded for him to stop. He didn't. She pleaded again, harder this time. She stumbled off of the bench and grabbed the bottom of his shirt, tugging him back with all her strength. He stopped, and faced her with a sullen look in his eyes. She stared back. She swore she could see her own reflection in his eyes. She looked scared. Desperate.

She looked away, towards the ground. "I saw everything." He didn't say anything. She took in a deep breath, and exhaled, calming her racing heart. "I saw you and Naoto's Shadow." She looked at him, and in her heart she knew, she was looking at the real Yu. His lips opened, but no words came out. His eyes widened, but they didn't look away. He stared at her with shaky, steady breaths.

"Y-you saw?"

"And heard."

"..." Yu grabbed her hand. She gasped slightly, before crying out in pain as he forced her to let go, squeezing her wrist. "God damn it..." He held her hand in his iron grip.

"S-Senpai, you're hurting me..."

"..." Yu released her and turned to face her completely. He swallowed spit up and bit the inside of his cheek. He looked at the ground and kept chewing on it. He couldn't look her in the eyes.

"You said... You admitted that you were a liar. What did you mean by that?" Silence. "Naoto sees the real you... Who... Who is the real you?" No answer. "Senpai, please. Talk to me! You called me here to talk, and I'm not leaving until I help you!"

"Fine. You want to help?" He stepped closer. She stood her ground. "You want answers? Here you fucking go. The truth, Miss Rise Kujikawa, is that I'm a fucking scumbag!" She flinched from his sudden shouting, watching with wide eyes as she saw a side of Yu she never knew existed. "You want to know who the real Yu Narukami is?! The real Yu Narukami is a scumbag who cheated on everyone he's ever dated! I don't give a shit about you!" He jabbed a finger into her shoulder,
making her wince. "And I don't give a shit about this stupid, fucking town! All I wanted was to have some fun and fuck an idol!"

Rise was shocked by the sudden and crude declaration. She had no idea what secrets Yu was hiding, but never had she thought he was so... so... She closed her eyes, holding back tears as his words cut like a knife.

He stared at her and a crooked grin formed on his face. "Yeah. I know. Here he is, the hero of your dreams, and it turns out he's just another perverted asshole who just wants to get with an idol. Get over it." He tried to walk away again, only to stop as he felt a familiar tug on his shirt. "Seriously? What the hell do you want?" He twisted his neck, glaring at her fingers. They were holding onto him, desperately. "Let go, Rise."

"No." It was quiet, but firm.

"Are you deaf or just stupid?" Yu grabbed his shirt and pulled it out of her hands. "I-

"What about Naoto?"

"Excuse you?" growled Yu.

"You said you loved her. You admitted what you did was wrong. You weren't faking it then. If you can apologize and mean it, you can't be as bad as you say you."

"You really are some air-headed bimbo."

The words stung, and this whole thing was just insane. She was scared, her heart was racing, but Rise wasn't just going to back down. She knew where she was. She watched the road before her split into two different paths. She could let his words hit her, let them tear her down and she'd just walk away. They'd pretend this never happened. They'd wear their masks and nothing more would come out of it.

"I don't love Naoto. I just... I'm leaving." He tried walking away again. His voice trembled. He lashed out at her just moments ago, but now... Now he was scared.

Was the anger a mask? Like Risette was hers?

I am so tired of masks...! They sucked, they were awful, and this was all crap! She looked at the first path and she knew it wasn't an option. So she walked down the other path and spoke from her heart. "Stop lying!" She grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, making him face her. His eyes were wide with shock once more as she began to scold him. He could only watch as she flailed her arms and shouted at him. "You're scared! That's why you're so angry! That's why you're so mean! Cause you're terrified of admitting the truth! That you're scared of everything Naoto did to you! That's what you said!"

He opened his mouth to lash out at her again. She spoke faster, stomping her foot in retaliation. He actually stopped and stepped back as she yelled. "No! Shut up! Don't try acting like an asshole unless you actually mean it this time! I want to help you! You may not think I'm your friend, but I think you're mine! So just shut up and tell me everything!"

Yu opened his mouth. He then closed it. His face was a textbook definition of utterly dumbfounded. He opened it again and let out a stutter. "H-huh?"

It took Rise a moment to realize her paradox and she sighed, slapping her forehead. I am not good at this... "Tell me... Tell me everything. Tell me when you fell for Naoto. Why? How? Tell me
everything, so I can help you..."

"..." Yu stood with his feet firmly planted to the ground. All anger faded away as he just looked... depressed. He rubbed his head, feeling the hot burn of his blush touch his fingertips. "F-fuck... Fine. F-fine. We'll talk." He sat down on the bench and she sat beside him. He closed his eyes and continued to rub his warm cheeks, unused to the sensation. "It started before you got here..."

Rise watched the silverette with attentive eyes as he began to regale her with his story. Not just about him and Naoto, but who he was. Who he really was. She did her best to remain focused and unbiased, but she couldn't help but let her mind wander a bit. There was so much she hadn't realized about the detective and Yu's relationship. She knew even less about her Senpai himself... He wasn't the hero she thought he was, even he had admitted that.

"I'm selfish. I used to win girls, and guys, over and then break their hearts and I never did care. Hell, like I said, I planned on doing the same to you, Chie, Yukiko, and anyone else dumb enough to fall for me." Yu shrugged, neither smiling, nor frowning, simply stating a fact. "It was just a fun game. Making idiots fall for you, then kicking them to the curb... But Naoto..."

"She's different... She sees the real you..."

"Who is a scumbag. Don't buy the act, babe," laughed Yu, his voice bitter and dry. "The 'stoic leader' bit is just a role I play to look cool. Truth is, I'm an awful person. Like, just straight up awful." He shook his head. "The kind of guy Naoto would never fall for. How's that for irony, huh? I can literally win anyone I want, except for the one I actually do want." He laughed again. It was as fake as the smile on his face...

"So... That's it?" questioned Rise.

"What did you expect? A happily ever after?" He shrugged. "Bad guys don't get happy endings..."

She faced him and she stared at him. His steel gaze fell flat, monotone and blank. His anger was gone, replaced with bitterness, but that was just a mask over the reality Yu faced. He was depressed, no, he was heartbroken. "Come on." Rise stood up, dusting her clothes off and ridding her cute outfit of wrinkles.

"Huh?"

"We're going to get something to eat. It's lunchtime and I skipped breakfast today."

"Are... are you serious?" Yu asked.

"And if you don't mind, I think you should pay," she added, looking at him. She wasn't glaring at him, but there was an obvious insistence behind her words. Yu looked back at her, before letting out a heavy breath.

"That's fair, I guess..."

"So... What the hell are we doing?"

The two sat at Aiya's, two bowls of noodles sitting on their table. Rise broken her chopsticks apart and quietly dug in, before taking a sip of her diet soda. Yu's patience, contrary to his mask, was short and he loudly banged his glass against the table. "Hey! You mind explaining to me the sudden shift in location? Why the hell are we out eating, Miss Let's-Talk!?"
"I was hungry," she answered. Yu's confounded expression became even more confused as she continued. "Besides, you gave me a lot to go over. I needed some food in my stomach to help me think."

"Well, yeah. I guess with you not being an idol anymore, you can just let your weight go," muttered Yu. He kicked himself when he realized he had mumbled that too loudly. He glanced at Rise, who glared at him.

"You know, you called me here. You asked for my help! The least you can do is not be such a jerk..."

Yu opened his mouth to give a mean-spirited retort, but all that came out was a long sigh. "Yeah, yeah... That's true." He broke his own chopsticks apart and began to eat. "I'm sorry," he grumbled, through a mouthful of noodles. She accepted his apology with a smile, nodding her head. The two quietly ate, well, as quietly as the sound of other customers, the clatter of pans, and Yu's loud munching could be.

"I think you should go after her."

"Hrm?" He looked up at her with surprised eyes. He loudly slurped up some more food, before wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt. He looked at her, motioning for her to go on as a single brow rose.

Wow... Yu doesn't really care about manners...

"I think you should go after Naoto. You love her, you go after her. That's how it works in the movies."

"Yeah, you must be mistaking me for some good-looking, dashing hero. I'm actually the sexy, abusive ex-boyfriend," Yu joked, with that same tone of bitterness.

"You just apologized to me for being rude."

"... Yeah? So?"

"That means you have some idea of when you do something wrong. " Rise shrugged. She wasn't an expert on consoling others or personal issues. She could hardly figure out her own problems with herself, but here she was. Trying her best. "You love Naoto, right?" Yu looked away. "Senpai... Yu... Say it. You need to be able to admit it if you're going to have any kind of chance with the real her..."

"..." He dropped his chopsticks and gave a solemn nod. "Y-yeah, okay... That's... Yeah." He nodded again, as if it would help make it easier. It didn't. He looked Rise in the eyes. "I love Naoto Shirogane. I... I love her more than anything or anyone else."

"Then you need to try and be someone worthy of her love. I'm not saying, change everything about you-"

"But it is a good start," joked Yu.

"But even you know you're kind of... mean. So tone it down. Be nicer. Apologize. Be better for her!" Rise explained. She was smiling now. She felt like she had hit the nail on the head. "You said, the bad guy doesn't get a happy ending! But what if you really are the hero of this movie? You just need to go through some character development!"

"What, you honestly think it's that easy? Just... try to be nicer to people and that'll get Naoto to fall for me?"
"No. I mean, maybe it isn't that easy. Maybe... Maybe she won't ever like you like you like her."
The truth hurt to admit, and it was harder to hear, but Rise didn't let it break her spirit. She beamed as she reached into her pocket. "But do you really want to just stay like this? Lashing out at people, even when they try to help you? What if another Naoto comes along? What then?! Will you just lie to her too and let her go by, hating you?!!" She slammed her hand on the table, making the older boy jump in his seat. "We can do this! I'm going to help you be a better person!"

"Wait, what?! I-"

"Here." She slid something over to him. He looked at it, and to his shock, it was a key. "This is Naoto's spare house key. When I helped take her home last night, she let me hold on to it so we could visit. Take it. You'd probably cook a better meal for her anyways," she giggled.

"..." Yu picked the key up and eyed it. He looked at Rise, who grinned back at him. He tried to smile back, but it didn't work. He just shook his head with a scowl on his face. "I... Rise, I can't... I can't even begin to tell you how I feel about this. I-"

"Hey. I'm not the girl you should be talking to right now."

He looked at her, as if trying to understand what had just transpired. He slipped the key into his pocket and took out his wallet. She watched him count the yen in there, before placing a crumpled up wad of money on the table. "Here."

"S-Senpai? This is a lot more than just the meal."

"I know." He got out of his seat. "I'm paying you for your time. I... I think I needed to hear at least some of what you were saying."

"So... you're paying me for... what? Being your friend?" She chuckled. She stood up with him and reached towards him. He had a faint blush on his cheeks as she began to fix his collar and push down the wrinkles on his clothes. "That's what friends do, Senpai..." He looked away, muttering something through his teeth. "Senpai... Have you never had a real-talk with a friend before? Have you never asked for advice from a friend?"

"Rise, you've known the real me for about half an hour. What do you think?" He retorted, but it lacked the same venom the previous insults contained. "Just... just take the money. I... I'm really-"

Yu swore under his breath. Rise's Shadow was kicking their ass! He struggled to hold himself up. Yosuke and Chie were already out, and Yukiko was running out of magic. They were being wrecked and if he didn't think of something quickly, they were going to die.

Killed by some air-headed stripper... Not gonna lie, this is almost fitting. He used his sword to help himself stand up fully. He searched the room, counting only one exit. Could I escape if I ran now? The others would distract her... Maybe I can convince Kanji to take one for the team...? His gaze fell on the sleeping idol's body and a new option presented itself.

If... if a Shadow's original self dies, what happens to them? Do they just... go away? He started limping towards her. Part of him couldn't believe he was even considering it, but he had to. He had to save the others, but most importantly, he had to save himself.

Then there was a loud explosion and Yu fell to the ground, his sword clattering beside him. The Shadow was destroyed in a bright flash of light, forced back into her more manageable self. The sleeping idol stirred, and Yu's eyes widened. He quickly moved to her side and held her, putting on the mask of a dashing hero.
"Really sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't the man you thought I was, or the man you deserved. I'm sorry. You deserve a lot better than me." She smiled at him, and he tried to smile back again. It was a melancholic smile, but it was there. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Senpai. I don't think a relationship would have worked between us anyways. Not while the two of us are... like this. Both of us wearing masks, it... it would have only made it worse for us," Rise explained.

He nodded in agreement. "You're right. Heh. You're a lot smarter than I thought you were, Rise. Thank you." He reached for her hand and he held it, gently stroking it. He stopped and shook his head. "Sorry. Old habits. Heh. I just... Thanks for the talk."

"Like I said, that's what friends are for."

END
Kanji - Comrade

Chapter Summary

Kanji meets the Real Yu.

Kanji - Comrade

Kanji took a deep breath. The first time he had ever stepped into the TV World and it looked like he was about to die. Damn it, he couldn't believe this! What would the others think? They trusted him, they brought him into their gang, and here he was, fucking it all up!

The group had been attacked by Shadows on what was supposed to be a simple training mission. Instead they had been ambushed and attacked by a squad of Shadows. It hadn't been too bad at first, definitely wasn't easy, but it wasn't impossible. Both sides were locked in a stalemate, with the Persona users destroying the Shadows as quickly as they could summon reinforcements.

Just like always, it was stupid Kanji who messed it all up.

Yukiko was in danger. The Shadows had gotten the bright idea to target her, their healer, first. They all ganged up on her, surrounding her and trying to overwhelm her. Konohana Sakuya was doing her best to protect the girl, but every spell she wasted to incinerate a Shadow meant the others couldn't be healed, not to mention she was running out of magical energy.

So Kanji tried to help her. He stomped on the ground and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Mazio!" His Persona, Take-Makazuchi, appeared in a blue flame, obeying his master's commands. The echoing clap of thunder filled the air as lightning fell from the Heavens. It hit the Shadows, electrifying them so hard they all froze in place, paralyzed.

Somewhere behind him, Teddie cried out. "Kanji, no!"

But it was too late. The Shadows attacked Yukiko again, faster than ever. She cried out in pain as she was knocked to the ground, barely conscious as the Shadows surrounded her.

"No!" Kanji charged forward to save her, smacking the Shadows aside in a flurry of guilt and rage, but this was nothing like he'd ever seen before. It wasn't like fighting a person. The Shadows were savages, brutal and primal in nature. They didn't care if you smashed one of them into the ground, they just kept coming.

He was going to die. He had let his friends down, he let himself down, and his parents? He failed them... He wasn't a man, he was just a stupid, dumbass brat...

It was only thanks to Yu-senpai that Kanji and Yukiko were saved. He came charging in, slashing at Shadows with Izanagi, cutting them down before his Persona changed. A healing light formed over Yukiko and Kanji, saving their lives.

"It's okay, I've got you!" Yu grabbed Kanji’s hand and heaved him up, helping him stand as the older boy's Persona fought off the wave of beasts. "You okay, Kanji-kun?"

"I... I nearly got us killed," the blonde groaned, holding his bruised ribs. Another healing spell and
"It's what friends do, Kanji. Now come on, let's show these Shadows they attacked the wrong men."

"Yeah... Y-yeah! Hell yeah!" Yukiko's Persona rained fire down on their enemies, before Kanji and Yu charged forward, side by side. He wasn't scared. He knew Senpai had his back.

"I'm going to help you be a better person!" Damn it, Rise. Make it sound so easy," sighed Yu as he cleaned Naoto's counter. It had been mere hours since their conversation and Yu had about a dozen separate trains of thought going. Okay. Stop. Let's categorize what's going on and we'll work it out one by one... I will work it out. Shit, it's been a long day.

First up? Rise. When I first met her, what did I think of her? Well, I thought she was a brainless bimbo, so you know. Might have been off there. Yu bit his tongue, scolding himself as he sprayed the counter and wiped it down with some paper towels he had bought. She's smarter than I thought. A lot smarter. She's nice. Forgiving. Patient. How else could she deal with me being such a jerk to her?

He remembered the things he had said to her clearly. It didn't make him feel good about himself, in fact, he was beginning to get a very good understanding of guilt thanks to Rise and Naoto. I feel like an asshole... I was probably a bit harsh with Rise... Not to mention what I was considering when I fought her Shadow... Yu sighed and began working to clean Naoto's windows, leaving the counter sparkling and spotless.

"Should probably apologize for that. 'Hey, Rise, thanks for helping me! Did you know that I was considering killing you to save my own skin when we first met?' How do I even begin to apologize for that?" He grumbled, spraying the windows before wiping them down. I'll think of something later. Let's just work on being a better person, right now...

"Well, I'm cleaning Naoto's house for her while she's unconscious. That's a good deed, right?" Yu asked the silence. He received no response as he finished cleaning the windows. "Then again, I'm only doing it to get good with Naoto... Does it still count as a good deed then?" He shook his head as he began putting the cleaning supplies away. Good deeds aren't exactly my specialty. Maybe I should ask Rise for help with them...

Yu sighed again as he walked over to the microwave, popping it open and taking out the microwaveable container inside it. He popped it open and took in the aroma of the stew he had made. The hot air tingled his faced as he smiled. Perfect. He allowed the stew to air out a bit more, before putting a cover over it to help keep it warm. He then grabbed it and a cup of water and made his way to Naoto's room.

As he walked, his face shifted, donning different masks. He faked a charming smile and gave a smooth, gentlemanly laugh. "Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Enjoyed the kiss?"

He threw that mask aside and donned another, turning stoic and stonefaced. "Shirogane. We have a lot to talk about." His voice was firm, in control, and... utterly fake. He disregarded that mask and tried one more.

"H-hi, Naoto! Um... I-I made you stew! I hope that's okay!" The poor-me act had tricked a lot of people in the past. He'd suckered boys and girls alike into loving him with this act.

But Naoto wouldn't fall for it.

He pushed open the door with his shoulder and peeked inside, finding the young girl fast asleep on
her bed. She looked incredibly peaceful laying there. Rise must have helped her change, because now she was wearing pajamas, instead of the cute, light blue outfit she wore during her kidnapping. Her iconic hat was gently placed on a nightstand, allowing her blue locks freedom.

Yu suddenly found his trademark confidence, some would argue arrogance, gone as he watched the dozing detective. He scolded himself, but his own thoughts fell on deaf ears as he stared, a warmth growing on his cheeks as only one thought rang through his head. *God, she is beautiful... The natural sheen of her cerulean hairs, the symphony of her every breath that traveled past those succulent, kissable lips, her moonlight skin, the gentle rise and fall of her chest...*

*Wait.* Yu's blush intensified as he began to put the puzzle pieces together. Naoto was a girl who disguised herself as a boy. Girls have breasts. Even if they weren't that big, she would have to find some way to keep them hidden. So she used a sarashi. When she was taken home and changed, Rise must have taken that sarashi off to help her breathe. Meaning Naoto's breasts were free, covered only by her thin, blue, button up shirt.

*The hell is wrong with you, man?! You've seduced girls naked before. This is nothing!* Yu told himself. His eyes glanced over Naoto's sleeping frame, admiring how snugly the blanket wrapped around her, before coming to her chest. His cheeks flared up again and he looked away, his knees quivering as he walked beside the bed and placed the container of food on the nightstand.

He took slow, shallow breaths, trying to calm his racing heart. "H-hey, Naoto," he muttered to her sleeping form. He should be trying to wake her up. There was food to eat and he had to make sure she got her strength back. "T-time to wake up." His voice was so quiet, he barely heard it. This wasn't an act, and that was the worst part. He was actually scared of waking up Naoto!

*Damn it! I'm acting like Kanji! I can barely talk to her, barely look at her, and... Shit... Kanji. The first year student, Kanji Tatsumi, was in love with Naoto Shirogane. Anyone with an average IQ could see that, well, average IQ and basic people skills, meaning Naoto was probably oblivious to the fact. If Yu was going to do this, this whole 'be a better person' thing to try and win Naoto's heart, what was going to happen to Kanji?*

*Kanji's dumb as rocks, but he's been good to me. He's trusted me, and I've made a good meat shield out of him... most of the time,* thought Yu, remembering that horrid nightmare months ago. He shook his head and looked at her sleeping body again. She was so beautiful, not just in body, but in mind. She saw the real him, she destroyed his masks, even now, and he loved her for it. *Kanji doesn't even know the first thing about her! I want her! I deserve her! I-

He bit the inside of his cheek. Yu stood beside Naoto's bed, staring at her blue locks with a scowl on his face. He felt sick. He opened his dry mouth and let out a sigh. "Shit." *Damn it, Kanji. You freakin' bastard.* Yu's train of thought crashed as he heard the groan of moving springs and the soft moan from Naoto's harmonious voice. She was waking up.

Naoto groaned as gravity itself seemed to pin her body down. She struggled to get up, but her body felt so sore and at war with herself. She lifted a throbbing arm to her nightstand, reaching for her clock with closed eyes. Instead of finding her clock, she found a plastic container beside her, warm to the touch.

She let out a hoarse, scratchy mumble as she forced her eyes open. *What...?* She pushed against the soft sheets of her bed, forcing her sore body to sit up. She looked around the room, her vision hazy.

"Hello?" Her voiced strained. She coughed a bit, finding a glass of water beside the container. She reached for it, quietly sipping the drink as she sat on her bed. *Did Rise or Yukiko-senpai make this
She wondered, opening the container after putting the cup down. She picked up the utensil left for her as the fresh aroma of the food touched her nose. It smelled amazing, and the warmth stroked her insides pleasantly.

She quietly ate, wondering where the cook who made the delicious meal had ran off to.

Meanwhile, Yu Narukami was on his way home, texting Rise as he sprinted, the faintest hints of crimson still on his cheeks.

"You didn't talk to her?"

"No, Rise, I didn't! Okay?! I was scared, alright?!” Yu growled, biting into his lunch as he and Rise ate on a bench by the Fox’s shrine. He had even went as far as to make Rise her own bento box, which the retired idol enthusiastically ate away at. "And if you were wondering, yes, I am angry. Before Naoto came around, I was a playboy! Guys, girls, hell, even a teacher once! I was the King of Woo, the Conductor of the Yaoi Train, the God of Seduction... Then Naoto comes around, and I'm terrified of even looking at her."

The young man let out an exasperated growl, scratching at his head violently as Rise watched him. "Senpai! Senpai!" The young man stopped and looked at the girl with a glare in his eyes, only to take a deep breath and exhale. He tried to calm himself down as Rise thought about what she should say next. "It's okay to be scared. I mean, that means you must really like her, right?"

Yu was silent as Rise's feet kicked the stone, tiled path below them. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, curiously staring at the reminiscing girl. "I mean, I've flirted with guys before, but when I met you... When I thought I liked you that way, it felt... harder to be that kind of girl."

"You mean Risette?"

"Yeah..."

Yu gave a sympathetic nod, before hesitantly lifting up his hand. He gently placed it on Rise's shoulder. "Hey, um... Sorry I turned out to be such an asshole," he chuckled. She gave a tiny smile in return, nodding her head.

"You're getting better."

"I'm working on it." The two quietly resumed eating, before Yu spoke again. "And I think I have another problem on my hands," he sighed, shaking his head. "Kanji."

"Kanji? Why is he a... Oh." She physically cringed at the revelation, mentally smacking herself for forgetting such a major obstacle.

"Yeah." Yu finished his food and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Don't even know why I'm worried. I'm me, and Kanji's... Kanji."

"Meaning what, exactly?" inquired Rise, though part of her feared his answer.

"I'm perfect at everything, and Kanji's, well, not," Yu stated with a shrug. "I mean, he's a nice guy, but he's no Yu Narukami."

Rise watched with wide eyes, shocked at the callous comment. "Hey, that's mean!"

"Yeah, yeah." Yu shrugged her accusation off. He looked at her and his silver eyes moved up and
down, as if taking in the sight of her for the first time. She blushed, and was about to ask him what he was doing, but he spoke first. "I don't suppose I could ask you to have sex with him, could I? You know, comfort him with your body or something?"

Rise's slight blush suddenly exploded into a blazing inferno across her cheeks. "Senpai!"

"That's a no." Yu smirked at her, showing his teeth with flash and arrogance. "Calm down, Rise. I'm just getting a rise out of you." The boy chuckled at his own joke, but Rise didn't find it so humorous.

"You're acting like a jerk." Rise stood up from the bench and shot an accusatory glare at the young, surprised man. "Not like someone trying to sound better." The words hit their mark, wiping the arrogance off of his face and replacing it with quiet contemplation. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, before letting out a huff of air.

"Alright. What do you think I should do, instead?"

"You act like I'm an expert," sighed Rise. She sat back down with a pout, before giving a timid shrug. "Talk to Kanji?"

"Talk to him? You want me to talk to Kanji? And what, tell him I'm sorry for the fact that I'm stealing his girlfriend? Apologize that I'm me, and he has the misfortune of being not-me?" Yu bitterly spat. "Great idea, Risette."

The idol didn't take his venomous words sitting down. She leaned over and poked the man's shoulder, glaring at him. "Okay, here's an idea. Stop doing that." Rise stomped her foot on the ground to emphasize her point, scolding the silverette again. "Stop being such a jerk to me and stop insulting Kanji! You said you're trying to be a better person, well act like it!" His eyes widened at the outburst. "Maybe you're scared because, somewhere in your heart, you're afraid Kanji is better for Naoto than you are?"

"Hey! I-"

But Rise didn't allow him the chance. "Think about it. Kanji is sensitive, sweet, and honest, not to mention tough too. Maybe a bit rough around the edges, but he's just a big teddy bear deep down! You know he'd treat Naoto well if they got together."

Yu's face flinched and contorted into jealous disgust. He looked away and grabbed his own hand, squeezing it as he spoke. "This conversation makes me want to throw up..."

"I'm being serious!" Rise snapped. "Maybe that's why you're so hung up on all of this? You're insulting Kanji so much because you're insecure! Like, you think Kanji would be a better boyfriend than you! I am nailing this advice thing! she thought to herself, smiling in her head despite the look of anger on her face.

"So... What? Do I just give up my own happiness so Kanji and her can get together?" He scowled at the thought. "I want to be happy too... Naoto's the first person to make me feel... real. Content. She sees through all my crap, and I feel like if I stay by her side, I could actually become a better person."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting love, Senpai..." Rise comforted. "Everyone wants to be loved by someone. You're not a bad guy for wanting her love."

Yu nodded, hanging off every word as he sat beside her. His face was unreadable to the young woman, but she gave him the space and time he needed. After a few short moments, he turned to
her with a grimace on his face. "Do... do you think Kanji would be a better boyfriend for Naoto than me?"

Rise was the silent one for a moment. She had to play this carefully. She answered hesitantly, "I think that all three of you need to grow up a bit more before I can answer that. I think you should just try your best to be you and let the pieces fall where they will..."

"That's a really good non-answer, Rise," he laughed, bitterly shaking his head side to side. "But I guess you have a point." They sat there, in a quiet peace, the only sound being the chatter of people in a completely different world than them and the soft howl of the wind. Yu chuckled. "I've seen this cliche in a couple of books I've read. The love story, where there's the perfect guy and then there's the 'loser,' and the girl has to pick one. She always ends up picking the loser. She doesn't care if the other guy is smart, or strong, or good at everything."

Rise could hear the older boy's voice tremble as he spoke. There was a shudder in his bones and a chill that crawled up his spine. "The girl picks the 'loser,' because he's a better person. A decent human being." Yu hung his head, numb to Rise's comforting hand on his shoulder.

Kanji took a deep breath, analyzing the doll's careful stitching. He gently placed the doll to the table, before picking up a nearby spool of thread. He looked it over and nodded in acceptance of the color, only to stop as he heard a familiar ring.

Pipipipipipi

He kept his eyes on the doll as his hand aimlessly reached for the vibrating cell phone. He grabbed the phone and held it to his ear as he looked the doll over. "Hello?"

"Kanji?"

"Senpai? Hey, what's up?"

"Can... I need to talk to you. You free?"

"Huh? Yeah, I got time. Where are you? We can meet up." What's with the weird echo? Don't tell my phone's busted...

There was a pause as Kanji heard his mother talking to someone at the front door. He turned in his seat, hearing footsteps growing louder. "I'm outside your room." Yu pushed his door open and entered the room, greeting the young boy with his free hand. He ended the phone call and scanned Kanji's room, as if looking for something.

"Huh? S-Senpai? What's up? Y-you feelin' okay?" The blonde boy watched as Yu walked past him, plucking Kanji's wallet from his desk and looking through it. "S-Senpai?!"

"Give me a minute, Kanji." Yu reached into his own pocket and pulled out a wad of yen from it. He shoved the bills into the wallet, before closing it and placing it back on the desk.

"Senpai, what the hell are you doing?" Kanji asked, not really angry at the sudden gift, but deeply confused. He stood up from his chair and walked towards his friend, who finally looked at him. Yu opened his mouth, but nothing came out as his eyes fell to the floor.

The hell's up with Senpai? thought Kanji. "Is everything okay, man?"

Yu's silver eyes glanced at him again, and he let out a silent sigh. "No. Everything is not okay,
Kanji. "He chewed on the inside of his mouth as he began to pace back and forth in front of the young man. "Kanji, I-" He bit his lip and kept pacing, rubbing his hand against his face in frustration.

"Yeesh... I ain't ever seen you so..." The blonde took a moment to pick the right word, before shrugging. "Emotional? What happened, Senpai?"

"I just said, no! Everything is not okay!" Yu let out an uncharacteristic snarl, surprising Kanji. He was glaring at the artisan, his eyes sharp as he began to walk towards him. "I'm angry and upset and pissed off!" The blonde delinquent stared at the older boy with wide eyes, like a son who had just been yelled at by his father. Yu cringed and rubbed his forehead. "Shit, I'm bad at this."

"Never heard you swear before..."


"Senpai, whatever's going on, just tell me! Did somebody do something? Do you need my help? Cause I got your back, man!" Kanji put on his tough guy face and flexed his chest, making himself even larger and more imposing as he stood in front Yu. "Whatever happened, Senpai, I got your back!"

*Not making this any easier, Kanji, thought Yu. "I love Naoto." Just like a band-aid. Rip it off, fast as possible. But it didn't feel fast. Instead, it felt slow and painful for both of them. Kanji's tough, angry expression was shattered, smashed into the ground by the three, simple words.*

He opened his mouth, unable to say anything as Yu stared at him. The older boy saw every detail on his face, every wrinkle as Kanji's face changed between shock, to pain, to anger. The blonde's Adam Apple bounced as he gulped. Yu saw the slight tremble in his shoulders, and the wrinkles as the younger boy's eyes were squeezed shut.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Y-yeah. Okay. I mean... Don't know why you're even telling me," muttered Kanji. He tried to force his lips into a smile, but they twitched and wavered too much, eventually falling flat. "Congratulations, I-I guess."

"..."

"Anything else you need, Senpai?" He looked away, pretending to act tough.

Yu's scowl, which had softened in the last few moments, returned with full force. He grabbed Kanji's shoulder and shook him. "Don't bullshit me, Kanji."

"Let go..." Kanji tried to pull away, but it didn't work. Yu's grip was tight and the anger on his face was clear.

Yu squeezed his shoulder tighter, before declaring, "That's it? You're not even going to fight for her?!" Kanji kept facing away from him, but Yu shook him by the shoulder until he looked him in the eye. "You know damn well why I'm telling you this! You like Naoto too!" Yu felt his insides retch, but he still stated the obvious fact, or rather, he admitted it. Both of them needed to hear this... "You love Naoto."
Kanji smacked Yu's hand off of him and glared down his older friend. Kanji was taller by a couple of inches, but at the moment, both of them stood like titans, an air of tension and betrayal heavy in the air. His nostril flared as his hands tightened into fists. "Stop it."

"You love her, and I love her. You gotta say something to that! I'm throwing all my cards on the table, the least you can do is return the favor!"

"Just leave it, Senpai." The younger man pleaded, silver eyes met light blue ones. Yu could see the fire behind those aqua colored orbs, and he was determined to hear what Kanji really had to say.

He didn't stop to think, maybe he should have just kept his mouth shut. "You could make her happy!" Yu couldn't believe what he just said, but he ignored the nagging voice in his head like how he ignored the churning in his gut. "You could make her happy!" He felt his heart being skewered on a spear and thrown into a freezer, but he kept going.

"Senpai-"

"You could be the one for Naoto, and you aren't even going to try to fight for her?!"

"I-"

"Maybe you're the one for her, maybe I am, maybe neither of us are, but are you really just going to stand back and let me walk over you?!" Yu questioned. There was anger and exasperation in his silver eyes, sharpened to a point as he demanded the blonde to speak. Some part of Yu's heart told him to stop; warning him that he was going to far, but his head had been swarmed with so much fear and dread before. He glared at the shrinking Kanji, growing more and more frustrated as the younger boy tried to lie to him. "What the hell is wrong with you?! Come on! Be a man!"

Something snapped in Kanji's head at that moment. He felt all the frustration and anger he had caged in his heart break out, ripping the bars apart and come charging out, screaming and roaring. His eyes widened as he lunged forward, slamming the older boy into the wall, hands squeezing his collar. "What the hell do you want from me?!!"

Yu flinched in pain as the back of his head hit the wall, before his eyes widened as he was stunned silent. Kanji screamed in his face, shaking his collar every few words. "You come into my room out of the middle of nowhere and drop that shit on me?! You wanna know how I feel?! Get the hell out of here!" Kanji spun around and released Yu, flinging him to the ground.

The silver haired liar hit the ground, his head banging atop Kanji's desk. Normally the young man would have been eager to help, who he thought, was his best friend. He'd never intentionally hurt Yu, and somewhere deep in his heart, a voice pleaded for Kanji to calm down, but rage and heartache were excellent silencers.

All Yu could do was stare, wide-eyed, utterly stupefied by the bellowing young man. He slowly got up and held out a hand, his lips moved as he tried to speak. "K-Kanji, I-"

"Get the hell out of here!" He demanded, shoving Yu and knocking him onto the ground again. "Get out! Just leave!"

Yu stared with fear in his eyes, watching Kanji tremble where he stood. He didn't know that he was shaking just as much. Yu had no masks to hide behind, no quick witted lies or fake words. It was just him and Kanji, both breathing slowly and deeply, emotion heavy in the air. "I'm sorry."

Yu turned around and left, leaving Kanji alone in the room.

Kanji Tatsumi stood alone in his room, panting, hands crushed into fists, nails digging into his
pals. He felt his heart ache, betrayed by his best friend, stabbed and impaled and left on the floor. His insides writhed as he walked towards his door and kicked it shut, ignoring his mother's terrified gaze. He turned around... and fell back against the door, holding his head as he cursed and swore.

Meanwhile, for the second time in two days, Yu walked away from someone else's home, dialing Rise. When she picked up the phone, she heard his quiet, shaky voice. "I messed up again..."

The next day, Kanji walked out of his house with hands in his pockets and a scowl on his face, which wasn't a particularly new sight in Inaba, but this particular frown was even worse than usual. His mother kept trying to talk to him, trying to get him to open up about what he and 'that nice Narukami boy' had argued about. Kanji couldn't stand it anymore. He grumbled to himself, needing to get away from his concerned mother before he said something stupid...

Like I always do, he thought, his voice bitter with regret and self-loathing. He shook his head and saw Aiya's down the street. With a shrug and mumble, he started walking towards the restaurant. Least he had the yen for it (and then some thanks to Yu). The blue-eyed bad boy sat down at an empty seat and just asked for his usual, not noticing the next person to enter the restaurant.

He sat alone, idly waiting for his noodles as the clicking of heels grew louder, and then stopped. Kanji saw someone standing next ohim in the corner of his eye and he sighed, nearly snapping the wooden chopsticks in his hand. "Buzz off. I just came here for a bite to eat, so if you got something to say to me, go screw yourself."

"Wow, you are in a bad mood."

"Huh? Kujikawa?" Kanji turned his head, surprised to find the retired idol standing there. She seemed to laugh, her pink colored lips forming into a small smile as she sat at his table, across from his own seat. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hungry, so I went to a restaurant, Kanji-kun."

Kanji nearly smacked his own forehead. "Oh... Right..."

There was an awkward silence in the air. Neither had really spoken to each other all that much since Rise's rescue. They hung out, but they were more acquaintances than anything else. Kanji still had a hard time talking to the girls, meaning he usually hung out with the guys on the team. Yosuke-senpai was alright, but he had a bad habit of being a total dick at times. Teddie was alright, really cute-looking and fluffy, but they still weren't close. Kanji's best pal in the Investigation Team was Yu, probably, and after yesterday...

Compared to Kanji, Rise was at ease socializing with Yosuke and Teddie, and she seemed to do pretty good with the ladies too. *Err, not like that, Kanji mentally noted to himself. Then there was how she was around Yu... Kanji bit his lower lip as he thought about the silver haired man. What, an idol wasn't enough for him? Had to try and score with Naoto too...?*

"Um... Kanji? You okay?" Rise's voice called out to him, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine," the young man muttered, shaking his head.

"You sure? Cause you've just been staring at me for like the past minute," giggled Rise.

Kanji felt a fire underneath his skin. It pooled around his cheeks as he cough into his hand and looked away. "The hell I was!" He thanked Aika for bringing his bowl over and began to eat away at it, loudly slurping away at the bowl as Rise gave Aika her own order.
Deja vu, the redhead thought, before clearing her throat. "You know, my grandma is friends with your mom." Kanji grumbled something as he scarfed down his food. "I heard you've been kinda grumpy lately."

He stopped for a moment, eyes down on the table, mouth open. He finished up the food that was in his mouth and downed his glass of water, before letting out an annoyed groan. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Kanji, you can talk to me."

Rise heard Kanji scoff at her remark, blowing air through his teeth. "I don't want to hear it, Rise."

"Kanji-"

"When the hell have you ever cared about me?" The words shot at Rise, and the glare his blue eyes gave her was heartrending. She tried looking away, only to look back at him when he spoke again. "We've barely spoken to each other, what the hell made you come here and try to act like my best friend? What made you think I'd even tell you anything?!" He slammed the palm of his hand on the table, shaking it and causing Rise to jump.

"... Yu asked me to be here."

Kanji didn't say anything at first. He just scoffed again, shaking his head with disbelief. "He didn't have the balls to come himself?"

"He's scared, and he knows how angry you must be at him." Kanji tried standing up, only to stop as Rise attempted the same thing. "Please, just give me a minute! That's it! Just a minute..." He looked at her, his face wrinkled from the glare in his eyes and the furrow of his brow. He faced the front entrance, before sighing and sitting back down on the bench.

"One minute."

"Thank you." She took a deep, relieved breath, before starting. "Yu isn't the man you think he is."

"The hell's that supposed to mean? You saying his name ain't Yu or something?"

Rise sighed as she shook her head. This wasn't going to be easy...

Kanji's bowl was half empty and cold. He thanked Aika for the refill, before looking at Rise. His eyes were a storm, a mix of so many emotions. Anger's thunderous roar, a downpour of sadness and regret, and the crashing waves of frustration and confusion. "So what? Senpai's really a jerk deep down inside? The hell, Rise? How can... How could you say that?" Yet somewhere in Kanji's heart, it didn't seem so crazy...

"I'm not saying hes a bad guy! He's... He's like you. He's complicated, and he puts on an act because he's afraid people won't like the real him! So he lashes out and shouts at people until they leave him alone..."

"Senpai's... He's like me?"

"He's confused, and frustrated, and he doesn't know what to do. I guess, he's like all of us in that regard," sighed Rise. "Naoto... He told me that Naoto is the first person he ever really loved. He fell for her... hard."
It hurt to hear her say that. The heartbroken young man just tried to ignore the pain in his chest. He tried to distract himself from how much hearing those words hurt. No matter how deep he pushed it, no matter how much he tried to bottle it all up, it still stung to even think about. "Shit... That... That can't be easy. I mean, you liked him, right?" Kanji's voice was slow, even delicate. His eyes lost the thunder and rage...

"I thought I did." Rise's voice was forlorn, reminiscing of a simpler time. Her chocolate eyes had the familiar glimmer of tears, but she hid them well. She brushed them away. Funny to think how much can change in a few months. "But I'm over it." She forced a smile onto her face. She was good at that. "Right now, I'm more concerned about you."

There was a blush on Kanji's face as he looked away. When Rise realized why, she snickered, amused by his flushed features. "So Senpai... He likes Naoto? I mean, like likes her?"

"Yeah... He does."

"Shit..." He chewed on the inside of his mouth, turning his head this way and that, before just glaring at the table. "Fuck..."

"When Senpai... When Yu asked me to come and talk to you, he wanted me to make sure I did something very specific. He wanted me to tell you something."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"You should ask Naoto out."

"... Wait, what?" The heat on Kani's face intensified as he stared at her, gobsmacked by the statement. "H-he said... W-why would he-"

"Because, deep down, Yu wants Naoto to be happy. He wants to try to be the one who makes her happy, but he knows you could be the one instead. He says he's going to try to win her heart, but you should try too." Rise finished her drink and reached into her purse. She threw some money on the table as Kanji thought about the message. "He just wants you to try, if not for Naoto, then for yourself. It'll hurt a lot more if you don't try."

"I... I don't... I mean, I've never asked a girl out before."

"First time for everything, Kanji-kun. I'm with Yu, though. It'll hurt a lot more if you just give up now."

"Man... I just... I don't know what to do," he sighed.

"I think... you should just be you. I think you should just try your best to be you and let the pieces fall where they will..."

Kanji took the words with a perplexed stare, before he nodded his head, a faint echo of a smile on him. "Thanks, Rise. I think... I think I need to do some thinking on my own right now, but thanks." His eyes weren't perfect, but they lacked the crashing waves. There was a sadness to them, but it had calmed into a manageable rainstorm. "Uh... I think I might have given you more than a minute though." He lifted up his arms, silently reminding her he lacked a watch.

Rise giggled at the faint blush on his face, before she smiled back and gave a cheery nod. "No problem, Kanji." She rose out of her seat and walked towards the entrance, passing the blonde. She placed a sympathetic and gentle hand on his shoulder. "Good luck, Kanji-kun. If you need to talk..."
"I know where to find you. Thanks, Rise."

Yu looked up from his soda as Rise walked into Marukyu. He offered a melancholic smile as he lifted his drink at her. She greeted her grandmother, before falling into the seat across from him with a groan of exhaustion. Yu felt a pang of guilt, and he quietly slid an extra soda towards the girl.

"Sorry. How'd it... How'd it go?"

"Well as could be expected, I guess." Rise gave a humorous grin and he flinched at the sight.

"That bad, huh?"

"No, no, I mean... He seems to be doing better."

"Really? That's great!" Yu sighed, his face relaxing into an expression of relief. "Shit, that is a weight off my shoulder." He held up his own drink as Rise popped open hers. They tapped the metal cans against each other, before gulping the bubbly nectar down. "Thanks, Rise. You know, you're really good at this whole... talking to people thing." He reached for his wallet, only to stop as Rise grabbed his hand.

"Do not pay me again."

"I-"

"Don't." He did as he was told, but he silently asked for an explanation. She crossed her arms and sighed. "Senpai, we're friends, right?"

"I... I think so. I mean, like I said before, you might be the first friend I've ever really made." Yu shrugged his shoulders, watching the girl with a curious glint in his eyes.

"Then as my friend, can you please do me a favor?" Yu's silence was a sign for her to continue. "The next time you hurt someone's feelings, apologize to them yourself. Don't ask me to do it for you." The demand hit Yu, surprising him and giving Rise the chance to explain. "It should have been you there, talking to Kanji and telling him he should still go after Naoto. Not me. I'm not going to be the one who apologizes for you... I'm here for you, and you can always talk to me, but I'm not... I'm not your babysitter," she sputtered.

The silver-haired man nodded his head, slowly at first, before he began nod more confidently. "You're right. You're right... I'm sorry, Rise."

"It's okay, Senpai. It's just... I still don't know about my own problems. I-"

"You don't need more problems. I got it." Yu sighed and rubbed the cold soda can against his cheek. "I'm sorry... I really mean it, Rise. I'm sorry. Thank you for everything you've done so far."

"No problem, Senpai... So, what's next?"

"Next?"

It was easy telling everyone a training mission was needed. The followed him into danger, trusting that he'd never leave them astray. The Shadows attacked the group, just as he thought, and it didn't take long for them to run into a pack that proved tougher than usual. They fought, of course, and
he played his role perfectly.

He sliced through Shadow with grace and style, keeping a close eye on their newest member. He was the reason Yu led the group on this mission. Kanji was new, an amateur compared to them. The plan was to swoop in and save Kanji after he had been hurt by a few Shadows, and voila, another sucker would have bought the 'stoic hero' bit.

It actually worked better than that. Kanji was stupid and actually used his Persona to shock the Shadows, healing them of damage and giving them the rush they needed to beat him and Yukiko to the ground. Yu had the strength to deal with the Shadows, he had calculated how best to converse his own energy and when to waste the others, so he was still in a relatively good condition.

Heroes get glory from rescuing people from danger, not preventing danger. Yu allowed Kanji and Yukiko a moment to think they were doomed, before he summoned his own Persona. He charged forward, saving the day as always.

Kanji looked at him with such admiration. He was so easy to trick...

"Next, I talk to Naoto. Hope she believes me when I tell her I'm trying to be better..."

END
Truth

Chapter Summary

The truth comes out, and a new day begins...

Truth

Naoto opened her eyes, but saw nothing. Her vision blurred, colors mixing together, the sound of electronic beeping ringing in her ears. She tried to stand, only to stumble back down. "D-damn it... Focus!" She took in a deep, calming breath and allowed her lungs to hold it... before letting it out in a slow, steady rate.

She mentally retrace her steps, recount how she ended up here, and where here even was. It was a simple, if risky, plan. She had used herself as bait, and dipped herself in the metaphorical waters. She waited for the kidnapper to strike, and she believed that to be the worst part at the time.

The waiting. She was sitting there, waiting for a murderer to come to her home. She remembered checking her watch repeatedly, ignoring the racing of her heart as she tried to focus on novel in hand. It was a fruitless effort. She remembered the look of fear on Narukami’s face, her own guilt at pushing him away...

Guilt? No... I don't feel guilt. Narukami had his chance to help me and he chose not to. I will solve this mystery, I will apprehend the killer, and I will not spare him another thought! She swallowed spit up, before taking another look at her watch. It was getting late. Despite her own inner turmoil, it was just another quiet night in Inaba. She was alone, left with own anxiety and wandering mind.

Enough, Naoto. You need to calm down. Do not allow your thoughts to be distracted by your fears, or by Narukami. The kiss. The memory reared its ugly head and she felt her cheeks flush. Damn it! Stop it! Narukami... Ever since she had came to this town, ever since she met him, he had been a constant thought. A thorn in her side!

Yet the kiss... The memory made her short of breath, made her cheeks crimson, made her heart race... The memory of their arms around each other, their lips pressed against one another, and their tongues..

Damn him! she thought, holding her head and digging her fingers through her blue hairs. Damn him... She tried to chalk the kiss as merely a result of their inebriated states, though she wouldn't be surprised if Narukami attempted such things when sober. She knew that she was an accomplice to it, she hadn't denied him, in fact at the time she was teasing him by sitting on his lap, but... but she never wanted THAT to happen.

It wasn't just the alcohol, though. There was more to it. Some part of me actually wanted to kiss him. She shuddered at the thought. Try as she might, she knew she could not deny that some small, microscopic part of her actually wanted to kiss him. She was, to her shame, the one who kissed him. Hormones. Curiosity. Stupidity. Had I not been inebriated, I would have never done something so idiotic! She squeezed her eyes shut, rubbing the bridge of her nose with her hand. She could feel the familiar mix of resentment and regret bubble inside her.
Before coming to Inaba, she was in perfect control of herself. She was calmer, in control, but Narukami... He changed her, and she hated it. *I need to solve this case, both for my credibility as a detective and for my own, emotional sake...*

She shook her head in attempt to rid her mind of Narukami, the kiss, and the feeling of his lips against hers, the electricity when their tongues met... *Stop it!*

When the doorbell rang, it came as almost a blessing. The feeling didn't last long, though. She felt someone grab her and her mind was divided. The logical, Detective Prince analyzed the arms, even as a foul smelling rag was pressed against her face. They most certainly belonged to a male. The heavy footsteps as she carried the weakening sleuth just added more evidence to the assumption.

Despite her calm demeanor, she felt a pang of dread. Terror as she was taken from her temporary home and dragged to who knows where. She could hardly breathe, which just made her struggle harder, which just made her weaker faster. The chloroform drenched rag was pressed harder against her face, making every labored breath a betrayal to herself.

She was scared. *Stupid girl... They... ashamed... you...* Her thoughts were slurring into each other. She was weakening. She could feel herself being lifted up and carried now. Her last thoughts weren't coherent, more like raw emotions. She was afraid, and that fear filled her with shame. She had to solve this case. She had to be worthy of her parents' legacy...

That brought her to this place, or rather, her kidnapper had brought her here. Her vision was finally returning to her and she examined the room she had been thrown in. To say, it was not what she was expecting was an understatement.

It reminded her of her childhood, as embarrassing as that was to say. In her youth, she would often wake up early and watch the adventures of the Phoenix Rangers, and other tokusatsu shows. She would marvel at the advance laboratories the heroes used, or the villains hid away in. This place resembled those laboratories, almost as if they were plucked from her memories.

"You're awake! Excellent, excellent! Please, sit down and we can begin!"

Naoto laid in bed. She wasn't asleep. Her eyes darted around her room, finding another serving of food beside her bed once more. That wasn't what caught her attention, though. She heard footsteps outside. Someone was in her apartment. At first, she had assumed it was Rise Kujikawa. Naoto's memory was foggy, but she did remember telling the girl where her spare key was.

She had been assuming she was the one leaving her food out for her, but the sound of the footsteps destroyed that theory. They were heavy, far too heavy for such a petite, young woman like Kujikawa. They were a male's footsteps, and from the rate of the footsteps, she had a rough estimate of the height of the person. A young man?

*The murderer?* She wanted to kick herself for even thinking such a thought, but she couldn't help it. It might have been days ago, but the fear and terror of being kidnapped and taken away like that... It weighed heavily on her heart, even now. She reached out towards her nightstand and opened it, slowly pulling out the drawer.

When it was open far enough, she stopped and slipped her hand in. She continued to hear footsteps outside. They were approaching her door. She let out a quiet gasp, before she found exactly what she was looking for. Naoto pulled her hand out of the drawer and looked at the pen in her hand. With a rush of courage and adrenaline, the Detective Prince quickly and quietly slipped out of her bed.
She did her best to match the footsteps, hiding her own behind them. The figure was approaching the door. So was she. She held the pen tightly, wielding it like a knife. The figure stopped in front of the door, so did she. From her angle, she could make a stab to the trespasser's arm, or if she wanted to risk it, a fatal stab towards the neck. She had to make her decision quickly, because she could hear the turn of the knob. The sharp click.

She pulled back her arm...

"Naoto? You awake?"

"Narukami?!"

The two were face to face with each other, Naoto was armed with her pen, Yu standing there with a glass of water and some napkins. They stared at one another, neither sure what to say. The sleuth's eyes glanced at her weapon, and his eyes followed. She slowly lowered her arm and cleared her throat, hoping to save face.

"W-what... What are you doing here, Narukami?"

"Oh, you know..." He stood there, uncharacteristically nervous. Naoto glared at the lack of an answer, and he noticed it. "What... I... Um..." Wow. Come on, man! Put on a mask and- Yu's eyes met hers and he crumbled under it.

"What?" Naoto sounded surprised. He glanced up, and his guess was proven correct. She looked at him with confusion, and he smiled.

"I was worried... about you. I'm glad you're okay."

Naoto stared, noticeably perturbed by the older boy's attitude. Gone was the chauvinistic, womanizing attitude, but it was more than that. He was meek, almost scared, it seemed. She stared at him, closely inspecting his face. He struggled to meet her stare.

He's different. Something's changed...

"Worried? Why would you...?"

It rushed back, like a tidal wave. It crashed and consumed her. The memory. Her doppelganger, her words, what she said... Narukami was there. He knew, he saw, heard everything!

Yu watched Naoto with a trembling heart. She looked like her world was just shattered. Considering what her Shadow had said, what Naoto had said, it might have just been. She stumbled back, before falling towards the ground. He moved towards her, catching her in his arms and helping her stand. "Whoa, hey. Naoto? Come on, let's get you back to bed."

"You... What she said..."

"Shh... It's okay." He lifted her arm and slung it over his shoulder. He then wrapped his arm around her and began to walk, helping her every step of the way. "I know you have a lot of questions. I'll explain everything, I promise, but you're still weak. Let's get you to bed, and get some food in you, beautiful."

Yu felt his cheeks burn as soon as the word slipped off his tongue. He was talking without any mask, speaking the whole truth and nothing, but the truth. And the truth is she really is beautiful...

Naoto was reminded of something her father had taught her when she was young. He would tell her that logic, science, knowledge, all were important for a detective, but there was one talent that could not be read in a book. He explained that there was something beyond cold, simple facts that
a detective needed. Her father called it, his Detective Sense. Her mother chose the simpler term, calling it 'intuition.'

Here and now, looking at the silver tongued devil that once plagued her mind... Naoto's intuition told her something had changed with him. She wasn't sure what, but... things were different.

Naoto tried to ignore what her senses told her. She focused on her memory, foggy as they were. "You... That thing, it-"

"She. That thing was you. You admitted it yourself, Miss Shirogane." For a moment, Naoto felt anger. Just like that, was he back to teasing her again? But one look at his face told her otherwise. The solemn frown, the glint in his silver eyes... He wasn't here to fight, it seemed. "She was your Shadow. The part of you that you repressed or denied..."

He helped her sit on the bed and he sat on the far end, away from her, giving her her space. "I know it's a lot to take in. The other world, the Shadows, Personas, all of it... I want to help. I will. So I'm going to explain everything I know to you, from the murders, to the other world, to Shadows, to... to stuff not even the others know about. Stuff, only I know about."

Naoto wasn't sure what to say in response to that. She opened her mouth, but despite her best efforts, nothing came out. She shook her head from side to side, shaking the sudden fatigue off of her. The adrenaline of terror was wearing off. She gently, if warily, placed the pen back on the nightstand, before picking up the food left for her.

"Here." Yu handed her the water, which she took with a mumbled thanks. "Um... I hope you enjoy the food. I made it. There weren't a lot of ingredients in your fridge, so I went shopping and stocked it for you." *Stupid! She doesn't need to know that!*

"Oh... I apologize. Do you require me to repay you?" *Narukami's been caring for me this whole time...? Why would he do that? After everything I've said to him... After not believing him, or trusting him...* Naoto bit her lip at the memory. *Had I only believed him all those months ago... I wasted so much time fighting him...*

Naoto's train of thought and shame were thrown off course when the silverette spoke. "No! No, no, no. You're good, babe." Yu kicked himself a second time for the slip of the tongue. Naoto seemed to hear the word, but he wasn't sure what she was thinking. Was she annoyed? Embarrassed? Shy? Scared? *God, this being honest thing is awful. Who does this?! "S-sorry."*

"What for?"

"Calling you... that. Old habit." A moment of awkward, tense silence...

Naoto opened the container, choosing to avoid the elephant in the room, and focus on filling her growling stomach. She blinked, marveling at the fried rice in it, complete with honey coated shrimp. She grabbed chopsticks Yu left her and dug in, taking a bite of the delicious seafood. The taste was spectacular, and it brought buried memories back to light.

Their time in the park... Their 'date.' The date that led to Naoto believing, if only for a moment, that there was more to Narukami than a perverted flirt. This time she controlled herself, only taking one more bite before her gaze fell upon the older boy. She wasn't smiling, but she wasn't frowning either. She just stared at him, and he stared back.

"Before I came to Inaba, I dated this girl, Kaiyo. I pretended to be this nice, sweet, shy guy, and she fell for it. I even gave her this silver bracelet and told her it was a family heirloom. 'My dad gave it
to me, so I would know what to give to the girl I fell in love with. That girl is you, Kaiyo.'" He
donned a mask, but neither of them were fooled by it. He tossed the mask aside and Naoto stared at
his disheartened expression.

"She bought it. Meanwhile, I was off reciting the same garbage to her best friend. I made out with
them both, and neither knew. I told them that 'they were the one,' and that I 'loved' them." Yu
sneered at the memory, shaking his head. "I'm telling you this because I know who I am. I'm not a
good person. I'm a scumbag, but I want to change."

He was looking at her, and his eyes revealed the fear in his heart. Her food was untouched as he
held her gaze, her mind contemplating and examining him as though he was case file. "When I first
saw you, I thought you'd be fun to mess with. You were a game. I know that's insulting, but it's
true. I thought you'd be fun to get with, and just like everyone else I got with, I was going to ditch
you when I moved away. I used use for my own fun, because I was sick of playing the leader and
nice guy around everyone else. But you weren't like everyone else! You saw through my bullshit
and... "I fell in love with you."

"You made me realize I wanted to be a better person, or- or you make me want to be a better
person. It's hard to tell the difference." He let out a bitter chuckle, more to calm himself down than
actually laughing at anything. Naoto hadn't said anything, she just stared at him. "I'm sorry." He let
shaking, unsteady sigh. "I'm sorry for lying, for being, well, me."

Silence. He hated it. He opened his mouth to apologize again, only to be cut short by the blue
haired detective. "You are not completely at fault here."

"Huh?"

"Had I taken your warning seriously, given you the benefit of the doubt, all of this could have been
avoided. Had I not been so stubborn, I could have helped you solve this case sooner, rather than
mistrust you and foolishly put my own life in peril. I was stupid... I'm supposed to be a detective,
and yet I couldn't see the truth when it was standing right in front me!" Naoto let out an exasperated
groan as she rubbed her forehead. "I was so stupid!"

"Hey, hey, whoa! Hold on!" He had to stop himself from referring to her with some kind of pet
name. He reached towards her and placed a hand on her shoulder, ignoring the slight warmth on
his face as he spoke. "Come on, a world behind the TV? Shadows? A magical killer? None of this
is normal. It's unfair to think you could have seen any of it coming when you took this case.
Besides, I didn't exactly give you a lot of reasons to trust me back then. It sucks, but both of us
were pretty stupid back then. Er- N-no offense! Sorry!" Shit! I am awful at this talking from the
heart crap... "Sorry. I'm not really good at being honest. Never was with anyone."

"I suppose I can relate to that," sighed the detective. "I've been told I have a tin ear, before." He
chuckled, and she responded with a weak smile. "Regardless. I am sorry. I apologize for the
insults, the mistrust, my own stubbornness, and... um..." Naoto felt her cheeks warm with
embarrassment as she stuttered. "I-I apologize for punching you."

"I don't want to hear it."

Naoto's expression fell, her heart feeling a pang of guilt as she nodded. "Of course. I suppose I
would need to do more than simply apologizing for such a stunt. I-"

"No, I mean, I deserved it. Some of it, at least." He shrugged, unsure of what else to say. "I know I
wasn't, I know I'm not an easy person to deal with."
"Narukami..." Naoto let out a low sigh, shaking her head as she placed her food aside. "If you would allow it, perhaps we should... start over?"

Yu blinked at the idea, stunned by the simple suggest. Start over? Can we even do that? After everything I've done to her? Can I just act like everything's okay, when I'm in love with her? His gaze fell to the blanket as his mind raced, before daring to glance at her face. She's so beautiful... She's like no one I've ever met before! I love her! God, I love her... "Hi."

"Huh?"

Naoto's confusion was met with a smile as Yu lifted up his hand to her. "I'm Yu Narukami. I used to be happy with who I was, before I met a pint sized detective who helped me realize I was kind of a jerk. Now I'm trying to be better..."

She blinked, staring at the offered hand, before she gently took it with her own. His hand was larger, and for a moment Yu feared hurting the sleuth. Then she squeezed his hand and gently shook it, making him chuckle. She's got quite a grip...!

"My name is Naoto Shirogane. I understand you have information relating to the Inaba murders of late?" Yu nodded, a pleasant grin forming on his features. Naoto returned the grin, nodding her head at him. "I wish for you to tell me everything you know so I can assist in solving this case."

"I'd be happy to." Yu suddenly stood up, standing by her bed as he took a deep breath. It was his first, true breath as a new man. "Alright! Today's a new day for both of us, Detective Prince! No more shameless flirting from me!" The silverette paused, before chuckling. "Less flirting from me. I promise. And I'll work to become a decent human being!" He dramatically turned and pointed at Naoto with both of his hands. "And together, we'll close this case and save the day! You and me, partner!"

Naoto gawked at the older boy, baffled by the sudden change in mood. "Sitting around feeling sorry for myself ain't gonna help me, and it ain't gonna help you! So I'm declaring my goals. You know, like they do in Phoenix Rangers Feathermen R," teased Yu. He took a mental picture of her blushing face. "Yeah, I saw that lab. Looked a lot like the labs in a certain televised masterpiece we both know."

He chuckled again, before punching the air. "I'm going to help you solve this case, I'll learn how to be a better person, and-" Maybe you'll fall for me along the way? Maybe you'll love me as much as I love you? "We'll do some third thing along the way!"

"You seem rather confident all of a sudden..."

"The confidence ain't a mask, if that's what you're thinking. I really am just that amazing. Besides, like I said. Moping ain't gonna get us anywhere. Actions speak louder than words, after all," he explained. "Besides, you don't hate me, I hope." He paused, giving Naoto an inquisitive stare, before continuing. "And I know I- LOVE like you! What's the point in staying on the past?"

"I suppose you have a point."

Yu grinned at that, before nodding his head. "Great! We're on the same team now! You're Sherlock Holmes and I'm your Watson. Happy to play sidekick for you, Detective Prince!"

"Please, do not refer to me by that title..."

"Right. Sorry. Naoto." Inside his head, Yu knew he was being slightly overzealous, but he was too happy to care. He had gotten what he feared was impossible. Naoto didn't hate him! In fact, it
looked like they were friends now! This case was all easy street from here on!

Meanwhile, the bluette watched the grinning boy with a bemused expression. All of that, weeks, months of animosity and distrust, just gone with one conversation? And what he said... A better person...? It would seem we both have much more to learn about ourselves... Naoto let out a tired sigh, closing her eyes for a moment to calm her storm-like mind. "It would seem things have indeed changed..."

"You say something, Naoto?"

"Nothing. Just mumbling to myself. Please, Narukami, sit down. I wish to discuss matters regarding the case with you."

"You got it, pal!"

---

Naoto Shirogane was soon back to full strength in a manner of days. She would have been out sooner, but Narukami was insistent on her being careful. While she appreciated the concern and knew he did not think her weak, she still found the insistence annoying. The only reason she allowed it was because he was still willing to fill her in regarding the case and the many 'unusual' factors ascertaining to it.

Once she was back to full strength, he requested her company on a short walk. When asked why, he merely explained that it was for something important. She donned a her cardigan coat and blue, plaid pants and (after reapplying her sarashi, she thanked her stars he didn't seem to notice that) the two were on their way out.

"I kept secrets from people, I have been since I was young. Hell, my own parents don't even know that much about me," chuckled the boy.

"Senpai? Where are we going?"

"Whoa, hold on." Yu came to a grinding halt suddenly. He glared at Naoto with his arms crossed as he sighed. "Look, since we're friends now, may I make a friendly request? Please, don't call me that. I get enough of it from everyone else younger than me. Just keep calling me what you always did." He winked at her, an obvious physical quirk that refused to go. "Narukami."

"Very well, Narukami. Where are we going?"

Naoto did not even acknowledge the wink, which for some reason made Yu smile. She was looking around them. They had entered the shopping district of the town, and as luck would have, there weren't many people on the street. Thank goodness for quiet afternoons. "We're here, because I want to prove to you that I've changed. I'm not going to keep secrets from you, Naoto. You're my friend."

The declaration brought a slight warmth to her cheeks and made her heart rate quicken just a bit, but the sleuth maintained her composure. "Oh? Um... I appreciate the sentiment, Narukami, but I do not understand what secret you could be keeping that involves coming here."

The silver haired teen just reached into his pocket and produce a key. It was rather simple, made of a light blue material with an odd design of a face at the end of it. The tip of the key, likewise, had an unusual tip to it. She couldn't imagine the lock it was used to open. "That is a peculiar key, but I fail to-"
"Naoto Shirogane, prepare to know something no one else in this town does, but me." He walked towards a nearby wall and press the key against it, as if he was trying to open a lock with it.

"Narukami, what on earth are you-"

He was gone. The words, 'deja vu,' came to Naoto's mind as panic and confusion struck her once again. He was gone. There one moment, gone the next, but this time there was no TV for him to enter. As ridiculous as that is, at least I've established that such a thing is possible, some calm part of her mind thought. Naoto ran to the wall, pressing her hands against the stony texture as she struggled to understand the engima.

"N-Narukami?! Narukami! Yu, where did you-"

Her hands were suddenly against his broad chest. Her face turned a crimson hue and she jumped back, shocked to find the boy returned to her.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. Well, the front door of the Velvet Room."

END?
New Beginnings

Chapter Summary

Our favorite couple returns in Arc 2 of Just a Delinquent.

New Beginnings

Love was a brother to Truth, and two simple truths were this. Love is something powerful. It can move the immovable, change the fates, damned the holy and saved the damned.

Silence. She just stared at him with such a look in her eye. Emotions clashed within those sapphire gems. Shock. Surprise. Confusion. Maybe even a bit of anger? Yu wasn't sure how to describe the emotional storm hidden behind her irises. He wasn't even sure about his own feelings. Anxiety sat in the pit of his stomach, worry plagued his mind, and the foundation of all of it was anger. Anger at himself, and at the residents of the Velvet Room.

"My... friend is outside. I want her to see this place."

"I apologize, but the Velvet Room is only accessible to those chosen, not to those who choose it. I am unable to fulfill your request at this time."

Yu's calm demeanor cracked and he crossed his arms. "... Why the hell not?" He motioned behind him as the occupants of the mysterious Velvet Room sat idly by, calm and unperturbed by his outburst. "Do you have any idea who is outside that door? Her name is Naoto Shirogane, and she's the smartest damn person I've ever met! Hell, she should have been your pick for this 'Chosen One' bullshit! Not me!"

"I apologize, but this game is yours to play, not hers."

"Well, why the hell is that?! Seriously, why the hell did you pick me?! Do you know anything about me?! I'm an awful person! I should never have been your 'Wild Card!' I lie, I cheat, and I fucking hurt people!"

"You were chosen for a reason, one that will come to light in due time."

"Due time? I've been playing this 'game' for months! I like to think I'm not crazy for wanting some God damn answers! Like, who are you? How do you know all this shit? What's really going on?!" With each question, Yu stomped his way closer and closer to the sitting, long nosed man. He reached down to grab Igor's collar, only to have his own arm seized and squeezed.

"I am the proprietor of the Velvet Room, and the ally of the Wild Card. I am here to help and assist you in any way that I can, but I reserve the right to withhold information until a more timely moment has made itself known." The sheer power behind his grip was staggering, and Yu had to fight to keep the growing fear and pain from being seen in his eyes. Igor released the boy's hand, allowing him to rub the nearly bruised skin. "I apologize for your frustrations, but these are the rules you agreed upon when you signed the contract. As for your friend, at this time, we are unable to accept her in. I apologize."
"Yeah... I bet."

He had told the truth. Now it was time to deal with the consequences. The two sat on the bench, quietly waiting for the other to speak up. When it became clear the silver haired youth that Naoto was at a lost for words, he chose to raise his voice. "So... Yeah. Magic room. Limitless Personas for me cause I'm a Wild Card, represented by the Fool or something. It's been my own dirty, little secret for a while. Since I came to Inaba, in fact."

"But... why? Why you? Why here?" Naoto asked. Yu wasn't offended by the second question. He just smiled as he shrugged.

"I asked. They didn't give me much of an answer."

"There's so much about all of this we don't understand. The other world, the murderer's intent, and now this 'Velvet Room.' None of the novels I read had anything so impossible," she sighed. She tipped her hat, shielding her eyes from the light of the rising sun as Yu chuckled.

"We'll figure it out. I know we will. You're on the team now, and with your brains, and my natural charisma, I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this." Yu gently punched the petite girl's shoulder, his smile morphing that Narukami smirk he used so well. Her eyes glanced towards him, and he felt his confidence melt away under her gaze.

"M-man, she's like... scary hot. Come on, Yu. Stay cool," the boy thought, refusing to look away.

Before he could say anything, to his shock, Naoto's lips formed into a coy smile.

"Perhaps you are right, Narukami. You seem rather confident of our victory, don't you?"

"I am nothing, if not confident," Yu retorted with a chuckle. "Got to put up a strong front, y'know?"

"Yes... I think I can understand that. Facades and 'masks' were something I hid behind as well," she reminisced. Yu blinked, before glancing at the detective. She was hiding under her hat, staring towards the concrete floor beneath them. She had a faint scarlet coat on her cheeks. "I am confident that we will find the answers we seek at the end of this long road."

"Yeah... It'd be nice," muttered the taller boy. And it'd be nice if you fell for me, but that somehow seems less likely than us solving this case and stopping the killer.

**The other truth, was simply this. Yu Narukami loved Naoto Shirogane.**

Naoto stared at the young man. Her relationship with Narukami had certainly changed since her first meeting with the silver philanderer. She had not expected them to become allies, how could she have? Yet, here she was, sitting at the Investigation Team's so-called 'special headquarters,' going over the facts of the case with those she had previously suspected.

She recounted the story of her kidnapping, going over every detail she had memorized at the time, and offering her own theories. The others listened, only speaking up to comment or inquire upon certain facts and assumptions. As the topic shifted itself from her kidnapping to information regarding Mitsuo Kubo, her eyes glanced at Narukami.

She had seen and heard him around the others before, but this was the first time she truly analyzed his facade. The mask he wore around the others was an intriguing one. She could see why so many bought the self-proclaimed act. His smile wasn't the smirk she associated with him, instead it was a practiced smile that radiated gentleness and compassion. By his own admission, this was a lie. She
stared at it longer than she would have liked, scrutinizing it under her gaze.

She picked at it, analyzing it, and dissected it. His mask came apart in her mind, and she began to see the more honest feelings hidden behind it. She could see a crack form on the mask, for only an instant, and she saw his brow twitch in anger. She wanted to ponder why the change, but her attention was directed away.

"Naoto? You okay?" Hanamura-senpai inquired, raising his brow.

"H-huh? I apologize, what were you saying?" Naoto turned her head to face the boy, tearing her eyes off of the Investigation Team's leader.

"I said, how come you got caught so easily? I mean, you're a detective..." Naoto felt her body stiffen at the question. A blush, formed by shame and embarrassment formed on her face as she tried to compose an answer. Before she could though, Amagi-senpai answered for her.

"Yosuke-kun, it can't be helped," she gently re primed. "None of us were able to resist him when he came for us, not even Kanji-kun. Besides, Naoto's younger than us, and a girl." Naoto fought the sigh creeping up her throat. She averted in her eyes in passive acceptance at the comment, silently lamenting how her gender had affected how others saw her again.

"To be fair, neither of those are as debilitating as any of us may think. She's the same age as Kanji, who is one of our strongest," Yu explained, speaking with the charisma the other members came to expect. His voice held an almost fatherly authority over the others, without coming off as aggressive or accusatory. "The only fact that matters is that she was able to gain vital information regarding the killer's identity. Nothing more."

"Oh! I-I didn't mean anything mean by that! I-I'm sorry, Naoto-kun!" Amagi-san apologized, bowing her head quickly.

"I-it's quite alright, Amagi-senpai."

"Oh, you don't have to call me that. Just Yukiko is fine, Naoto. We're all friends here."

"Friends...? Y-yes, of course. I will do my best to keep that in mind, Yukiko-senpai..."

When the meeting came to a close, everyone began to say their goodbyes. Naoto spied Narukami speaking to Yukiko-senpai, but she couldn't hear the conversation. Her attention was focused on Kanji Tatsumi, who was approaching her with an uncharacteristic blush on his cheeks. "May I help you, Tatsumi-san?"

"Uh... Y-you can just call me Kanji, y'know..."

"Oh. A-as you wish. May I help you, Kanji-kun?" Naoto repeated, correcting her previous error. There was a slight flush to her cheeks as she spoke to the young man in such a way. She supposed she'd have to adjust, considering the social circle she found herself flung into. The young man scratched the back of his head as he hesitated to answer.

"Um... I was wondering if you could help me study? Exams are coming up, and... I... Uh..."

"Ah. That explains his flustered attitude. Kanji-kun is embarrassed to ask for help. Naoto nodded her head, believing she understood Kanji's intentions. "I see. If you don't mind, I would be happy to tutor you in a subject of your choice."
For some reason, the blush on Kanji's face only seemed to intensify. She considered inquiring about his health, but decided against it when the boy nodded his head. "T-thanks. Um. I-I'll see you later, after class sometime, maybe?" Naoto gave a simple nod as confirmation, before an uneasy silence was placed between them.

"Will... will that be all, Kanji-kun? Do you require anything else of me?"

"Uh, n-nah. I mean, n-no. I'm good. I'm just-uh... S-see ya, Naoto!" To Naoto's confusion, the young man decided to suddenly end the conversation. He turned, walking away from the dark haired detective with his cheeks growing more flushed with every step. He was one of the last to leave the meeting, she realized, finding herself alone with Narukami, who was approaching her with a curious brow.

"What was that about?"

"Kanji-kun was asking if I would tutor him in some subjects he was struggling with. I agreed."

"Hm." Narukami's head faced the vanishing figure of their mutual friend. The color in his eyes, the tiny social cues Naoto had studied gave her only fleeting hints at what the silverette was thinking. Before she could voice her own inquires, the older boy turned to her with his facade cast aside. The change was truly jarring, but she was slowly gaining an understanding of his masquerade. "So, gorgeous, what's the plan for our first play date?"

The Narukami that she knew, and the one the Investigation Team knew, or was it more accurate to say, the true Narukami and the charade he put on for others? Where did one begin and the other end? Why did he insist upon the deception? Was it truly a mere show of arrogance, or perhaps the side effect of something else? These had been the questions plaguing Naoto's mind since Narukami's admittance of guilt.

The two found themselves in different, though equally unexplored, territory. She had never been one to foster relationships with others. A professional respect between coworkers was as deep a bond as she was willing to nurture before coming to this small town. Now she found herself a member of a band of misfit teenagers, ones who joked and spoke informally and without censor. Narukami was unaccustomed to the truth, preferring to hide away behind deceit. Now he was striving to find his true self beyond his self made prison of lies. As strange a choice as she believed it to be, he requested her help in his search.

"I ask that you refrain from such terminology if you expect us to spend time together in future confidential meetings."

"Right. Sorry. Secret play date," the light haired boy retorted, chuckling lightheartedly at his own humor. Naoto closed her eyes and let out a soft sigh, already finding the boy's jokes to be getting on her nerves. When she opened her cobalt eyes, though, she found him staring at her without his smirk. He looked uncomfortable for a moment, before he mirrored her actions and released his own sigh. "Sorry. Humor's a self defense mechanism. I think I use humor to hide my insecurities? Or because I just like getting on people's nerves... I'll try to cut back on it."

This was not the first apology Narukami had given her. Since their new beginning with one another, every time she displayed any level of discomfort towards his actions or what he said, he apologized. It was strange to see someone she once thought so lowly of acting so polite and apologetic. If what he implied was true, than she was the catalyst to his new behavior, a fact that left her rather flushed for some reason.

"Yes, well... Ahem. I understand some habits do die hard. Just try to refrain with referring to me in
such a way."

"I'll keep that in mind, beautiful," he grinned. He chuckled once more, shaking his head. "Sorry. That one was on purpose. It is way too easy making you blush." His demeanor calmed and he looked at her a relaxed, though inquisitive expression. "So, what now?"

"If it is alright with you, I was hoping we could simply... talk?" Naoto tried to disregard the obvious elation on Narukami's face, but he made it very difficult.

"Talk? Hell yeah, let's talk! If there's anything I know how to do, it's talk."

"Trust me. I've realized."

"Hey, was that a joke I just heard? From the Detective Prince? Glad to see I'm rubbing off on you."

Again, Naoto felt her cheeks turn warm at his teasing. A single glare silenced him, and he simply shrugged away any future teasing, for the moment at least. "So, shall we go to Aiya's and talk things out?"

"Hm. I would rather avoid Aiya's. Too many witnesses and if one of the other members of our team show up, we would have to justify our appearance there, not to mention why we're together."

"Ah. Okay. Sounds fair."

"I would prefer a less crowded area for our discussion."

"Hm... I think I have a place."

Naoto felt uneasy in her current setting. It was just that simple. She sat at a table, inside of a residence that was not her own, invited by a slightly older boy. She couldn't help but feel a slight embarrassment at the events. As nice and homely as the Dojima Residence was, she could not help but feel like she was intruding on the peaceful atmosphere. Narukami glanced at her sitting form from the kitchen, his face plastered with a smile.

A reflex? Perhaps it is involuntary?

"Uncomfortable, Naoto-kun?"

"Is it... that obvious?" sighed the detective.

"I'd say so." Narukami closed the distance between them, sitting at the opposite end of the table. Naoto felt a slight twinge of deja vu as he looked at her. "The food's almost done. Shall we talk?"

"Will it not be awkward if Dojima or your cousin return and I am here?" Naoto wondered aloud.

"My dear uncle spends more time at work than here, honestly. As for the tyke, she's at a friend's house or something. So it's just you and me," Narukami answered. "Does that make you uncomfortable?"

His tone lacked the teasing edge to it, leading to Naoto to wonder if he was genuinely concerned for her comfort. The suspicion was impolite, but warranted with Narukami’s past. "Would it matter to you?" she asked, her voice heavy with curiosity rather than any malice.

"I mean, yeah. I care," he shrugged. The blue-haired detective took his answer as simply as he gave it.
"I wish to understand you, Narukami. You are... intriguing." The young man was silent at the statement, silently motioning her to go on with his ever present smile. "You are different. Your actions and desire to find redemption pique my own curiosity, and perhaps I find even a kindred spirit in your struggles to find yourself. Normally, I would stow away my own curiosity and focus on the case at hand, but seeing as you're the leader of the Investigation Team..."

"You don't have to justify it to me. I'm just glad we're talking," he mused. "Anyways, please. Ask away. I'm an open book for you, Naoto. No lies."

Naoto stared at Narukami again, analyzing the features on his face as she spoke. "Why do you act the way you do? The arrogance. The exaggerated friendliness. The... offbeat humor. You seem to always be putting on some form of act, even now."

The question was not one he prepared himself for, it seemed. He blinked in surprise, his eyes open to reveal the full surprise hidden in his silver orbs. He pondered the question over for a moment, before answering. "I don't know how to be honest," he admitted. "I've lied since I knew how to talk. My parents taught me the art since I was young."

"Your parents?" Naoto gawked at him, eyes wide in surprise. "Your parents supported you lying?"

"My mom's a lawyer. Lying is her trade, though my dad's pretty good at lying too for a relations consultant." Yu shrugged his shoulders at the simple facts, but Naoto saw his demeanor shift. He seemed faraway, distant to their conversation.

"Please. Tell me more about your parents? I wish to understand you."

"Not much else to say. Mom's a good liar and has a habit of acting kind of haughty. Dad's... kind of the same."

"Did they..." Naoto wished she could have asked the question with more tact. While skilled at questioning individuals, speaking to them about a subject so personal was beyond her. She tipped her hat to hide her eyes as she voiced the question, speaking bluntly, not wanting to mince words. "Were they abusive?"

"Never laid a hand on me." Narukami tried to smile, but it was as fake and artificial as the one he gave Yosuke or Yukiko.

"You're lying."

"I'm not. They never laid a hand on me." Narukami's smile slipped away and she could feel his eyes on her. She tried to meet them, despite the tension in the air. She squirmed in her seat slightly, and he did the same. Neither were able to get comfortable as the conversation went on. "I used to pride myself on never laying a hand on someone. I never hit anyone before coming to Inaba, besides a few boxing instructors my parents hired. Doubt they count... I never punched anyone. Never punched a girl, or kicked a guy, or anything. Despite that, I know I hurt people. Maybe my parents were similar..."

"You don't know?"

"They never laid a hand on me," he repeated. "So I guess that means they were good enough."

"That doesn't mean they didn't hurt you. Not all scars are physical."

"Didn't think I was being psychoanalyzed," he tried to joke, but his chuckle quickly died. He rose up to check the food as Naoto continued.
"You are being analyzed, though I am no expert. I simply wish to understand." Narukami didn't say anything. He was closing himself off, but he did not push her away. He quietly turned off the stove and examined the food sitting in the pots and pans above it. She sighed, and recited what she knew. "I have read that when you live with abuse, physical or mental, you don't truly realize it. You just think that's the way things are." Narukami's features didn't move at the fact.

"Wow. You sure know me," he mocked. "Mommy and daddy didn't love me enough, and that's why I cheated on three different girls, and two boys, back a couple of years. What wonders modern psychology can bring."

"You also use humor to avoid problems and cover up your insecurities." She heard the young man sigh as he kept his back to her. "Narukami, your parents... it seems they had a hand in your behavior."

"Can we please change the subject?" He sounded almost begging. They fell upon her tin ears.

"Why do you not wish to discuss this? Are you not in pursuit of your true self? Do you not think this will lead to that?"

"Because I hate that you make it sound like it's an excuse!" Narukami growled, turning to face her with infuriated eyes. "Quit the therapist bullshit! Quit trying to act like whatever the fuck they did, or didn't do, is some kind of Get-Out-of-Jail-Free Card! I'm me, and I'm the only one in control of my actions! Me!" He advanced closer, every step heavy with outrage and frustration. "I didn't pull all that shit because mommy and daddy never hugged me enough. I pulled that shit cause I chose to."

"N-Narukami, I never meant-"

"I know. I just..." He cut her off, the anger in his eyes didn't vanish, but it faded just enough for him to stop walking. He let out another sigh, this one heavier than the last, heavy with his own resentment, she imagined. "How about a break, detective?"

"Very well..."

Narukami served her food, a delicious meal of curry and rice. It was relatively simple, though no less enjoyable Naoto realized. For all his flaws, he truly was a stunning cook. Narukami munched away at his own dish, quietly chewing the meal with a faraway gaze. His silver eyes rolled to stare at her. She returned the stare, both waiting for the other to topple under the iron gaze. Naoto wondered if she have apologized. She opened her mouth to do so, but in classic Narukami fashion, he interrupted her.

"What were yours like?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You asked me about mine. My parents made me who I was, you say. So what about you, Detective Prince? What were your parents like?"

"Ah. I see..."

"Do you not want to talk about it?"

"No. I mean, no, it is alright. I can speak about them. I suppose that is only fair." Naoto cleaned her lip with an offered napkin and she pushed her plate away from her. She placed her elbows on the
table and lifted her hands up, interlocking them in front of her face. "I interrogated and analyzed you, you deserve the same." Despite her cool demeanor, there was a shakiness to her voice. A quiver that she attempted to suppress with her next line. "You wish to understand what they were like? I suppose the simplest way to describe would be to help you understand something. My parents were both detectives out of choice."

Narukami devoted his attention to her now, and she took that as a compliment, not as something to be feared. "They became detectives to help others. My father desired to help others through solving mysterious. My mother desired the same. My father felt the weight of my family's legacy upon his shoulders, but he embraced it. My mother faced the stigma of her gender being used against her, but my father and grandfather helped her..." Sadly, grandfather lacks the same weight to his name to help me the same, and even if he could, would I want it? I do not want special treatment because of my gender... Naoto bottled the thought and buried it in the forest of her mind.

"I sadly do not recall much of my parents' time with me. They both perished when I was young." Immediately, the words seemed to shatter Narukami's stoicism. He placed his eating utensil down and began to apologize once more.

"S-shit. Sorry. I mean... S-sorry for bringing it up."

"It is quite alright. I've made my peace with their passing long ago," she swore. "What I do remember is that they were both exemplary detectives. My father treated his work as more of an art than a science. He often sought out the emotional motivation and expected the dramatic finale. He had a sense of it, as odd it may be to say, and he would often say that I had inherited his intuition. My mother was more focused, analyzing and scrutinizing every detail until she found the truth. She struggled to trust others, but my father... he helped her, and she helped him, and they helped me become who I am today..."

"But what were they like as parents?"

"I'm sorry?" Naoto's composure cracked, and she placed her hands on the table as he pushed his own plate away. Neither of them seemed hungry all of a sudden.

"What were they like as parents? I mean, they could have been the greatest detectives ever, but still be rude or something. Did they take you out to eat a lot? Did they cook? Did they read bedtime stories?" Narukami shrugged, his silver eyes unnaturally listless. "Sorry. I was just curious..."

"No, I understand. My parents..." Naoto's voice trailed off as she struggled to find the words to say. When it came to discussing logic and facts, she had the infallible mannerism of the detectives she often revered, but when it came to conversations focused on more personal matters, she stumbled. He was questioning her about memories that she had long buried deep within herself. All the same, she had asked him questions and he answered truthfully, or so it seemed. Perhaps he deserved the same.

"They were good. Kind. Loving. What parents should be, I suppose. When I told them I wanted to follow in their footsteps, they have their reservations. My father feared for my life, knowing the dangers of the role. My mother feared for my heart, knowing the hardships my gender held. In the end, though, they were both supportive..."

The detective's fingers stroked the rim of her hat in aimless thought. "This hat... it belonged to my father. He gave it to me as part of my detective wear," she explained.

"It has sentimental value," he noted, nodding his head. He opened his mouth, before scratching the back of his head. "I... I'm sorry about what happened to them. I really am." Naoto merely nodded.
The food was gone, and they were all alone. Naoto watched Narukami with a curious stare. The young man was cleaning the dishes, washing them and putting them away on his own. He seemed rather at peace with the role. "Narukami, may I ask you a question?" she inquired.

"Sure. It's your turn anyways," the silverette retorted.

"Did you lie to me today?"

"Wow. Blunt," he chuckled as he wiped his hands with a nearby papertowel.

"I apologize for lacking tact on the subject, but-"

"Don't be. I always like that about you. No bullshit. Just Naoto," he comforted, approaching her at the table. The blue haired sleuth felt the urge to hide her warm cheeks, and she averted her face when he sat across from her. "I hate dealing with other people's crap. Anyways, go ahead. What's up?"

"Did you lie to me today?"

Narukami was once again left silent by what she said. He contemplated the question, not appearing surprised by it, but still unsure of his own response. She patiently awaited his response, finally lifting her head up to peek at him from under the rim of her hat. He looked at her with a soft curve to his lips. "I don't think I did."

"You don't think you did?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to be honest."

"Hm. You understand my hesitation and caution, yes?"

"Of course. Hell, I want you to be cautious. The distrust is actually kind of a nice change," he chuckled.

The sleuth nodded in response. "You are a strange one, Narukami."

"When are you gonna call me Yu?" he wondered, though it like the question wasn't aimed at her, more of a thought he spoke aloud. Still, the question brought another scarlet hue to her features. "Calm down, Naoto. I ain't gonna make you do anything you don't want to. Just wondering."

"Hm. Yes. Of course." Her cobalt eyes glanced to her clock, before returning to him. "It is getting late. I should probably return home."

"Want me to walk you home?" he grinned.

"That will not be necessary."

"Poo." They stood up and walked towards the door, inspecting the falling sun when he opened it for her. "So, did you learn a little bit about me?" he teased, winking at her flirtatiously.

"I have. I will need time to mull over my thoughts about you and..." Naoto's blush returned, and she covered her face with the rim of her hat, using it as a shield from his laughing eyes. "You know what I meant."
"Yeah, yeah." She was glad she did not see the smirk on his face. She had no doubt that it would have been infuriating. "See you at school tomorrow?"

"Yes. Actually, I was wondering if you can assist me in a manner. I wish for us to visit the local hospital after school tomorrow."

"Huh?" A silver brow vanished under his equally silver locks. "Why? We feel fine."

"Perhaps, but we still understand little, both about Teddie, and the other world itself. We have no way of knowing if there are any side effects regarding it. It is very possible that we may have some sort of pathogen and not know it."

"S-shit! Wow... Um... that's grim," he laughed, a smile on his face despite what he said. "I'll tell the others. Smart move, Naoto." He was beaming at her, a sense of pride flowing from his features. "I'm glad I have you," he muttered under his breath.

Naoto gasped at the statement, and she quickly threw her stare to the ground. Narukami seemed to realize what he had said was heard by the sleuth, and he immediately backtracked. "W-we! I meant we! I as in we! The investigation Team!"

"Y-yes. Of course. I should go. Goodbye, Yu!" Naoto quickly waved her arm, walking out with as much composure as she could muster. Her face was brimming with crimson now as her mind scolded herself. W-what did... Why did you refer to him like that?! Ahh... Stupid girl. How could she have allowed herself to slip like that?! How could she have allowed what he mumbled to affect her in such a manner? She was tripping over herself, acting like one of her unwanted fangirls, not the detective she prided herself in being.

Why did part of her... like what she heard? Naoto discarded the thoughts as they bubbled to the surface of her mind. No. Focus. You're imagining things. What had before... what he had said and did... it was an act, by his own admission. There's nothing here, nothing more than a professional relationship between two colleagues. Just... just friends.

Yu closed the door behind her and took a deep breath. He was blushing. Why was he blushing...?

"Wow..."

END
Yu was never a fan of hospitals. Besides the chemically sterile atmosphere and the poking and prodding of the doctors and nurses, they were filled with people crying over the death of someone close, or worrying about the possible death of someone close. This was never really a problem for him before, since he never had anyone really close to him before, yet the atmosphere was no less depressing. There was a lingering in the air that made Yu queasy and off balance, it felt.

*God. How many poor saps ended up kicking the bucket here?* Even as a child, someone's death never really affected him. He remembered being informed of the death of his aunt, Chisato Dojima, and feeling utterly unaffected by the news. Why would he care? Why should he care about the death of some lady he hardly knew?

As his eyes briefly glided over the hall, struggling to find a distraction from the solemn atmosphere, his eyes fell on Kanji Tatsumi. The younger boy (or would man be a better term?) leaned against a wall, quietly waiting for the last members of their team to return to them. Yu remembered hearing that Kanji's father had passed away in a hospital. He briefly wondered what it was like to actually care about one's father...

A quiet sigh slipped out of Yu's lips and he tried to clear his mind of new, bubbling emotions. Sympathy for Kanji. Discomfort within the hospital's walls. Guilt over disregarding Chisato's death. When that didn't work, he made a different attempt, slowly pushing himself to accept the new feelings.

"Guilt's good, guilt means I give a-"

"Is something wrong, Narukami?"

"What?" Yu made a mental note to stop spacing out around the team as he looked at the speaker, finding Yukiko standing beside him. The rest of the team were preoccupied with their own conversations or thoughts; Yukiko's attention was on him, and him alone. He masked his face with that classic smile, and replied with an air of thankfulness. "I'm alright. Just going over a problem from school today. Thank you for the concern, Amagi-san." Just as he predicted, the raven-haired girl smiled at his words.

"You're always so formal, Narukami," she commented. "You don't have to refer to me like that."

"My mistake," he replied, giving a faux chuckle to accent his kind and sweet exterior. "Perhaps you can refer to me as Yu then? Or even Yu-kun?" he suggested, instigating a blush on Yukiko's fair features.

"O-oh, well... I mean, I could try, I suppose, but... Um... Uh... Oh! They're back."

Yeesh, these girls are too easy, the silver-haired boy laughed. He turned his head to the blue-haired detective he had fallen for, and blonde enigma known as Teddie. He crossed his arms, pretending to be the calm and collected leader as he leaned in slightly, curious about what information they had gathered.

"I'm very sorry for the wait," apologized Naoto.

Oh, Naoto. Always so polite... You're so cute!
"I'm bear-y sorry for the wait!"

*Shut up, Teddie.*

"So did they find anything out about Teddie?" Yosuke asked.

"They did indeed," she began, causing Yu to lean a bit more forward, curiosity baiting him closer. "They found out that they can't tell anything about him."

*Did she just make a joke? Man, I don't know if I'm impressed or annoyed,* Yu thought, ignorant of his lips curling into a more natural, upright crescent shape.

If Naoto noticed his little smile, she didn't pay it any mind. "I even had them take an X-Ray, but nothing came up on it. No matter how many times they tried, it would always be too blurry to read. A visual examination and standard palpations indicated that he seems perfectly normal. Since the machine could be malfunctioning, they told me to try another hospital if we're still worried about him." The sleuth let out a heavy sigh, her fingers tightening into fists as she scolded herself. "I felt bad for making them go through all this..."

"Hey. You don't have to-" The others turned to their leader, and Yu suddenly felt himself tripping over his tongue, his lips stuttering as he scrambled to speak. "Um... W-what I mean is, I'm sure the doctors are okay. I mean, they're still okay. They're fine. J-just fine. Uh... Sorry." Yu's eyes fell to the tiled floor as he was left quiet and embarrassed, a sight none of the members of the team were accustomed to.

"Dude, are you okay? I've never seen you stutter," Yosuke observed.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

Yu's silver orbs lifted up, and he noticed the looks he was being given. Yosuke, Chie, Yukiko, and Teddie all shared a similar expression incertitude. They looked at one another for answers, assuming everyone in the group shared their confused thoughts. On the contrary, Rise was behind them, and trying to hide the bemused smile on her rosy lips. Kanji looked at him with a mix of envy and distaste. The younger boy eventually just scoffed and looked away, leaning against the wall as he waited for the conversation to get back on track. Yu saw his rival's blue eyes glance towards Naoto, who was in the middle of trying to hide her flushed cheeks under her hat.

Yu found himself, surprising as it sounded, unsure of what to say next. He scratched the back of his silver locks, shrugging at the team's gaze. "At least we've learned something, I mean. That Teddie's... odd?" *Damn it. I sound so freakin' stupid...! My True Self is a stuttering moron!*

"Heh, like we needed a doctor's opinion to know that," joked Yosuke.

"Oh my, what should I do? They took a look at everything inside me!" Teddie dramatically lamented, motioning to himself with his hands.

"She just said they couldn't see anything on the X-Ray, you dork," corrected Chie, rolling her eyes at the bear's showmanship.

Suddenly, the blonde boy snapped his fingers, grinning as he spoke. "There's some things we do know, though. Hehehe! I got a bunch of awesome data with me. It's rather em-bear-assing that I'm the only one who had personal details revealed, so... TADA!" To everyone's shock, Teddie produced several sheets of white, information filled papers from behind his back. It didn't take a Naoto to figure out what the papers were.
Naoto's cerulean-steel eyes widened as she gave a voice to everyone's thoughts. "Is that-?"

"I have the results of everyone's physical exams!"

Teddie, you glorious bastard. Or should I say, bear-astard. Ha... Don't say anything like that in front of Naoto, she'll think you're stupid.

"What?!"

"Huh?!"

"Are you ready?! I have some major reveals!" he declared, brandishing the stack of papers with beaming look of glee on his face.

"Oh, no you don't!" Chie hissed, chasing after the boy, who dodged and evaded the ferocious martial artists. The two ran around their friends, who watched with a mix of excitement, curiosity, and dread. The girls seemed especially anxious about the details of the exam, that is, save for one of them.

"Sure, go ahead," shrugged Rise, who smiled pleasantly. My profile's been public knowledge for ages. Oh, but my bust size is two centimeters smaller than they print. My agency insisted," she noted, earning a quick glance from her silver-haired senpai. He glanced towards her covered breasts, before looking back to the scene at hand.

I knew it...!

"Nice! Teddie, you can start by telling us what all the girls' measurements are!" Yosuke cheered.

"Damn you, Yosuke! You stinkin' pervert!"

"I'm kind of curious too," admitted Rise. As Teddie struggled to keep the results out of Chie's grabby hands, she plucked the papers from him and straightened them out, reading from the first on the list. "Let's see! Oooh, Naoto-kun's up first! Let's see what we got..."

"W-wait, please, don't-"

"Huh?" The wide-eyed look on Rise's features was not what Yu was expecting. The girl swiveled her head to look at the Detective Prince, before returning her eyes to to the papers, then back again to Naoto. The blue-haired sleuth seemed to shrink with every disbelieving glance.

"Is something wrong?" Yu asked, his mask of stoicism cracking momentarily.

"Naoto... This says you're stacked."

Yu's mind felt like it had been hit by a bullet train when he heard those words. Naoto's rosy cheeks and quick act of snatching the papers back seemed to only confirm the earthshaking revelation. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Yu noticed Kanji staring at Naoto with a similar fire in his eyes, with no doubt similar thoughts, but the younger boy's fantasies paled in comparison to his senpai's.

Yu Narukami was handsome, smart, and he knew how to fake being charming. This led to many people wanting to be with him physically, and coincidentally, it led to him discovering his bisexuality. Boys, girls, he flirted with both and had made a past of breaking hearts of both genders, though he was trying to break that habit. Anyways, his experience with both genders had taught him that beauty came in many shapes and sizes.
So the idea of big, bouncy breasts and all the dirty fantasies thoughts like that brought along with them, they were nothing new to the young man. He had lived many fantasies, really. Making out behind the benches, getting people to strip for them, even a few lap dances. There was even a favorite memory of his where he had two girls at once, thanks to some lying and their air-headed minds.

Despite that, he felt like a novice before the news he was given. He felt like all of his experiences in pleasure and erotica meant nothing compared to the news that Naoto had big... she had. She was... physically gifted. It was like he was an inexperienced choir boy just given his first porn magazine!

Except Yu had seen read many porn mags, and he'd even seen girls and boys naked before, on and off a computer screen. So why was just the idea of Naoto with large... gifts so mind-blowing to him? Why did it make him feel so... titillated?

It was like he was a mere boy who had discovered that the internet was full of images of naked, beautiful people. A magical revelation that left Yu hungry to learn more, and scared of the uncharted oceans before him. His mind wandered for a moment, visualizing the voluptuous curves and dips that Naoto's body hid. He saw her, like a goddess, one with such flawless skin, such perfect, soft skin, such large, gravity-defying-

"A-anyways!" Yu's fantasy shattered before it could get to the good part, forcing his attention back to the real world, where the lovely sleuth spoke, papers now in hand. "The important thing is that according to the examination results, nothing's wrong with our health! So we won't be needing these anymore!" The flushed, panicking detective wrinkled the papers in her crushing grip. "I'm going to go shred them..." And just like that, Naoto was speeding down the hall, away from the others. An awkward silence filled the air in her absence.

"Uhhh... Well, thank goodness everyone's healthy," declared Yosuke.

"Y-You're right! Let's go home!" agreed Chie.

Yu was left like a statue as the other members of the group began to exit the hospital. He felt someone shake his arm, pulling him out of his returning fantasies. He looked at Rise with a mix of appreciation and annoyance, nodding at her as she smiled, coyly. He also noticed the glare Kanji gave the two, but did his best to ignore it. The younger boy and girl left the hallway, vanishing around the corner, leaving Yu with the boy of the hour...

"You okay, Teddie?" Yu inquired, noticing the blonde boy hadn't left his spot in the tiled hallway.

"Sensei..." The young boy lifted his head, staring up from the floor to look at Yu with his shimmering eyes. He looked scared, terrified even. "After all that, they found out nothing about me... I wonder what I really am..."

Yu silently cursed the introspective bear, and he even cursed himself as he approached him. He did what he imagined was expected out of him. He placed a fatherly hand on Teddie's shoulder and smiled a plastic, pristine grin. "We'll find out together, Teddie. Don't worry. You've got me, and everyone else, right by your side."

"Yeah... Thanks, Sensei!" Teddie beamed, gazing at the silverette with eyes overflowing with gratitude.

In the past, seeing the desperate boy look at him with such admiration made him feel great. He was king to the stupid bear, infallible and perfect. Now, though, Yu felt his body fraught with an
unpleasant pulsing in his chest. He flinched at the sensation, but maintained his strong facade. "No problem, Teddie."

The unpleasant pulsing grew stronger, like a cold sweat over his body. He rolled his shoulder, trying to shrug the sensation off of him, his mask nearly cracking as the strange toxin churned in his gut. It didn't hurt, exactly. It just felt wrong. Like he was being submerged in an oily substance from head to toe.

"Heeeey! If you guys don't hurry, we're gonna leave you guys behind!"

And just like that, it was gone. Like a weight thrown off his shoulders, Yu felt near instant relief. Teddie, ignorant to his sensei's pain, just shouted back to Yosuke.

"Coming, Yosuke! Ready to go, Sensei?"

Teddie looked at his mentor with an elated grin on his face as Yu took in a slow breath and straightened out his body. He glanced down the opposite side of the hall and saw no traces of Naoto. He glanced back to the shorter boy and quickly said, "I'll be right behind you, Ted. I'm going to go check on Naoto."

The delighted smile shift, turning sly and knowing as Teddie winked and gently elbowed the tall silverette. "Ooh, I get cha! Gonna put the Sensei Style on her, huh? Heehee! Good luck, Sensei! Nao-chan won't know what hit her!" The boy gave his friend a thumbs up, before skipping off, leaving Yu alone in the hall.

He released a quiet sigh as soon as Teddie was gone, and he rubbed his forehead. "Dumb bear," he muttered under his breath, before running down the hall, following Naoto's path.

He followed the sounds of a paper being shredded, soon finding the young girl standing alone in a small office-styled room. She had just forced the last of the papers into the machine and she watched in silent contemplation as the information was devoured. Yu stood in the doorway, savoring the sight of the beautiful detective for a moment, analyzing her short stature, yet pristine physique.

She's so cute... and pretty... and beautiful... The thought of what he had recently learned about Naoto popped into his fantasy, and his mind's eyes added two substantial additions to the vision. And really, really fucking sexy...

"How long do you intend on standing there, gawking at me, Narukami?"

Man, I have really got to stop spacing out today, Yu thought, shaking his head and quickly composing himself. He smirked at Naoto, in contrast to the scowl on her fair features. "Sorry, babe. Just reeling over this recent revelation. I mean-"

"Shut up." The older boy fell silent as Naoto's cobalt eyes glared daggers into him. Whatever he was about to say next crashed inside of his throat, creating a pileup of words and jokes to form inside him. He was rendered speechless as she spoke, walking towards him. Yu tried to speak up again, only to be pushed aside by the smaller girl, who marched past him. "Goodbye, Narukami," she grumbled.

What the hell...? Naoto... The cerulean-haired girl came to a stop as she felt someone grab hold of her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. She swiveled her head to the side, glaring at Narukami with a single eye.
"I'm not in the mood for your antics, Narukami."

"I can tell," mumbled Yu. "What's up, beautiful? Normally I need to flirt you three times before you get this mad at me." He tried to defuse the situation with a comedic grin and a joke. He even added a wink for that extra, personal touch, yet Naoto seemed to only grow angrier.

"Enough!" She pulled away, turning away from him as she spoke, her voice passionate and hot with rage. "I do not have time for your idiocy! I'm leaving." She stepped towards the door, only to watch it close, trapping her within the small office. She stood in front of the shut door, glancing at the older boy with accusatory eyes. The guilty party just stared back, his smirk fading away into a amiable smile. "Naoto, come on. Talk to me."

"..."

"We're friends, right? This is what friends do. I assume. My friend experience is kind of limited to you and Ri-"

"Why did you follow me, Narukami?" she sighed, looking away from the silverette and glaring at the closed, white door.

"Huh?" The boy shrugged, gently placing his hands on her shoulders to turn her towards him. She fought against him, shrugging his hands off. He shook his head in annoyance, holding back a sigh as he answered. "To make sure you were okay? Like I said, I heard that's what friends do..." *Don't lie. Be honest. It's not your fault you honestly are a scumbag... okay, it is. Note to self: Work on fixing scumbag nature.*

Yu's lips curled downward, into a guilty pout. "And I wanted to ask you about your breasts..." He expected anger and yelling from his blue-haired crush, but instead, he saw Naoto's shoulders rise and fall as she sighed. For some reason, the depressed acceptance was worth more than her loudly rebutting him. "Naoto...? Is that what this is about? You're upset you have big breasts?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Narukami. Now, unless you have more questions to pester me with, I will take my-" The door fell shut once more, Yu's hand pressed against the top of it, keeping it sealed. Naoto released the doorknob and sighed again. "Why are you doing this?"

"Cause you're hurting, and I'm trying to be a better person... And because I do, genuinely give a shit about you, Naoto." His voice lacked any trace of his previous teasing, not a hint of arrogance or humor. He was being serious, speaking softly and kindly and meaning it. "So... You hate the fact puberty was generous with you? Why?"

She said nothing for what felt like the longest time. Yu didn't say a word though. He wanted answers, he wanted to be the comforting friend, for once in his life, he wanted to actually be there for someone else. He had no alterior motives, at least, he hoped he didn't. *Please, just let me be her friend. Let me actually help her. No lies. No faking it. The real me, actually comforting someone I actually care about...*

"I remember my parents' funeral. It was a small gathering, as they had wanted. Close friends, respected colleagues... what remained of the Shirogane family." Yu nodded his head, silent, not daring to ruin the moment or betray Naoto's trust with a stupid joke. "I remember my grandfather speaking to a friend of my mother's. A young woman? An announcer, I believe. She spoke to my grandfather, offering her condolences and offering monetary charities to the estate. Their funeral was years ago, yet her words have sat with me since then, even now."

"She said, 'That's their daughter, Naoto Shirogane, isn't it?' My back was to her and grandfather,
but I could clearly hear her, and my grandfather's affirmation. 'Is it true that she wanted to follow her parents' legacy? The poor dear... She has to do it all alone. At least Yumi-san had her husband and you to help her, Norio-sama. It's such a shame that she's a girl.' A shame.. The superfluous pieces of flesh you wished to learn about? They're nothing more than reminders of my disability. If I was a boy, I would have been able to pursue my dream without that handicap."

She crushed her hands into trembling fists as she spoke, her back to the older boy. It didn't matter that she wasn't facing him though. He could hear the grinding of her teeth, the harsh breaths as she cursed to herself. It was almost as if she had forgotten about his presence. All she could feel was her own resentment, her self-imposed guilt. "If I was a boy, I'd be a better successor to my parents' legacy... I could give their name the honor it deserves, not disgrace it. I-"

"I'm going to stop you right there," Yu interjected. Naoto opened her mouth to argue, only to feel his fingers blanket over hers, squeezing them. The sudden touch, her cold hand meeting his warm digits sent a hot flush towards the detective's cheeks. Had she turned around to face Yu, she'd find his own was similarly colored. "Naoto, I... There's something I need to tell you. Something you need to know and really need to hear.."

Yu swallowed up spit, and took a deep breath. He ignored the fire on his face as he stroked Naoto's hand. He felt every indent, every curve to the petite hand. He offered it warmth, comfort, and kinship to her. He offered genuine companionship, not because he wanted to trick Naoto, but because he cared. It was a strange feeling that he was unaccustomed to, but he felt that maybe, he really was following his heart on this one. Being honest with himself and her...

I want Naoto to stop hating herself...

"I'm glad you're a girl."

He felt Naoto shiver at the statement, or perhaps it was a flinch. She turned her body to gawk at the older, flushed boy. Yu prayed he was strong enough to hide the blush as he winced under her gaze. The blue-haired girl looked at him, mouth agape as she struggled to form an answer, but only succeeding in making a flustered mess out of herself.

"W-what are you saying?! There's nothing good about it!"

"Obviously, you're wrong. You're a girl, and you're easily the smartest person in Japan. I mean, you saw through my bullshit. Hell, you were able to figure out a bunch of things about the case, and you didn't even know about the other world. You're easily the best detective in this entire town, and probably all of Japan." Naoto opened her mouth again, but Yu was quick to silence her. He pulled his hand away from hers, and placed it firmly on her shoulder. "I believe that there are three types of people in the world."

"Huh?"

"The first type are the most common. They're the types of people that are only going to succeed by riding on the coattails of winners. People like my uncle's assistant, or..." Yosuke? Kanji? "Or like all the people who looked down on you because of your age or gender. The losers of the world, and unfortunately, that's most people." Judging by her risen brow and the stare in her eyes, Naoto wasn't really following the older boy's speech. Despite that, he kept trying.

"Then there's the second type. People like me." At that, her expression changed, now more curious about what he was about to say. "People like me... We're a lot like the first type." The Detective Prince seemed surprised by his confession, and listened with a perplexed stare. "I used to think I was better than other people, and in some ways, I am. I mean, I'm smart and cool, but that's just an
act... The second type... They're liars. Fakers. I can fake being amazing and be rewarded, but at the end of the day, I'm still a type one. Maybe even lower than a type one..."

Yu took in a steady breath, before releasing it. He felt a similar unpleasant sensation to the one he felt around Teddie, but he tried shrugging it off. "Narukami..." He raised his eyes, lifting them from the white, tiled floor, and saw Naoto's sympathetic, cobalt irises staring at him. They washed over him, catching the ugly feeling and sweeping it away. Her eyes, her voice, her presence, comforted him.

"And then there's you."

"Me?"

"You're part of the rare few. You actually know what you're doing. You're smart. Brave. Cool. You're amazing." Naoto's composure fell against the brunt of compliments, a fact Yu was thankful for as his own cheeks were mirroring her tinted ones. "You know what you want to be, and you'll succeed, cause you have all the qualities. You have the talent. You being a girl? That won't stop you. It hasn't stopped you yet. Even if you're hiding that fact from the police, you're still here. Still trying to solve mysteries. That's amazing. You are amazing..."

"Naoto, there's nothing wrong about being a girl. There's nothing wrong with you."

An awkward silence floated in the air as Yu ended his speech to the young girl. Neither party could meet the other's eyes, both waiting for the other to speak up. As Naoto mulled over the words spoken to her, Yu had an internal discussion with himself.

"Stupid! Don't mess this up! You're coming too strong. You're gonna look like a total idiot! Damn it! "Um... Was that okay? I'm still not very good at this whole, being honest thing and-"

"Narukami." Naoto had finally composed herself, and she lifted her head to stare at the silverette. "I... I think I understand what you mean, though I do not agree with everything you have said."

"You do? I mean... Huh?"

"You truly do believe that I am a worthy successor to my family's name, and for that, I thank you." Naoto bowed her head, her lips curving into a crescent shape, an accepting smile on her features. "You respect me, despite your antics sometimes implying otherwise, and for that, I am genuinely thankful." She paused to take in a breath, before continuing. "But I disagree with your belief about the first two types. If I truly am a member of the third type, as you say, I believe you are as well. Everyone is. You have the potential to succeed, same as I do."

"Right now, all I care about is succeeding at making you feel better," admitted Yu.

"Then take this to heart. You have succeeded."

"I... I have?" And the world suddenly seemed brighter, and the overwhelming, lifeless atmosphere of the hospital vanished. "Whoa!" Yu threw a fist to the air as a wide, toothy grin shined on his face. "I rock! Yu Narukami, great friend and emotional pillar! Ha! YES!"

"Please, calm down. This hardly warrants such festivities," muttered the detective, tipping her hat to avoid staring at the exuberant young man.

"I beg to differ. I... Shit, the others." Yu's mood deflated as he smacked his forehead. "They're probably wondering where the hell we are. Come on, babe. We got to go!"
"Where the hell are they?" groaned Yosuke.

Rise's eyes darted to and fro, silently chewing on her bottom lip as anxiety plagued her mind. Her eyes were on Kanji, noticing the boy's uneasy attitude. His hands were balled into fists as he rapidly tapped the heel of his shoe against the ground. She knew the boy's feelings for Naoto, and the feeling of betrayal and distrust that had shattered his bond with Senpai. She watched him stand in place, getting more and more frustrated as the minutes passed.

"I told you! Sensei went to go put his Sensei Styled Smooth Seductions on Naoto! He's so cool," giggled Teddie. "They're so cool together!"

"I doubt Yu-kun would be trying to seduce anyone, Teddie. He's too much of a gentleman," commented Yukiko.

But for Kanji, Teddie's words were the final nails in a coffin. Kanji's patience was gone. "I'm going to go in after them," grumbled the boy.

"K-Kanji," Rise stuttered, calling out to the boy, but he was already too far, stomping towards the hospital's entrance.

The blonde-haired boy reached for the handle, only for it to open without his touch, and the leader of their team to nearly collide into his rival.

"Oh. Hey, Kanji..." Yu's silver eyes were wide with surprise, much like Kanji's own aquamarine eyes.

"..." The younger boy glanced behind his senpai, peering inside the hospital to find the blue-haired detective behind him. The leather clad teenager's face twitched at the sight of them together, before he sighed. "Hey." He had a moment of contemplation, before his eyes stayed on the Detective Prince. His cyan eyes met her cobalt ones, and out of the corner of his sight, he saw Yu-senpai shift, his gaze turning sharp with jealousy. "I'll see you later, Naoto."

"Oh. Goodbye, Kanji-kun." Naoto nodded her head, bidding the boy farewell as Yu silently observed them.

Kanji and Yu's eyes met again, and the tension turned dark and heavy. They both felt the rivalry between the two, and the broken remains of their link. Yu felt a familiar pain writhe in the pit of his gut, and Kanji felt a crushing pressure on his mind. He shrugged the unpleasantness off as Yu's sharp, metallic glare turned soft. The older boy tried to smile at him, but the delinquent paid him no mind. Kanji let out another quiet sigh as he turned and walked away.

"I'm heading home. I'll see you guys later," he grumbled.

"Huh? What's with him?" Yosuke wondered.

"No idea," shrugged Chie.

"Yu-kun, are you and Naoto-kun okay?" Yukiko inquired as the pair returned to the rest of the group.

"Yep, we're cool," answered Yu, only to notice the odd looks the others gave him. Rise and Naoto had hints of knowing in their eyes as he coughed a bit. "We are quite alright, Yukiko-san. Thank you."

"Well, alright then," Yosuke smiled. "Since we all have a clean bill of health, guess we should be
heading home."

"Probably. It's getting late," nodded Yukiko.

"Agreed. We'll reconvene tomorrow. Everyone, get some rest," commanded their leader.

The others all nodded in response as they began to separate, bidding their goodbyes, only for Teddie to step forward and grab Naoto's hands, holding them up, between the two. Yu's face twitched, his stoic expression briefly turning into a faint scowl as the pale-skinned boy spoke.

"Thanks again, Nao-chan! Thank you bear-y much, from the bear-tom of my heart!"

"I-it's quite alright, Teddie," muttered Naoto, a red hue covering her features.

"You're so nice! You're like the Team Mom!"

"T-Team Mom?! I beg your pardon?!"

"And that makes Sensei the Team Dad! Right? Right?!" beamed the boy, practically jumping in place. Naoto had to hide her tomato-like face, and Yu had to summon up all of his willpower to hide his pride.

Both were so distracted by the boy's titles for them, neither noticed Rise running after Kanji, leaving the group behind nor did they notice Yukiko's warm, beautiful gaze turning harsh and envious...

END
"I'm glad you're a girl."

Naoto was at a loss for words. A common trend in her conversations with Narukami... The way he spoke to her, the way he confessed to her, and now, the way he comforted her... It was not normal. It was like nothing she had ever felt before. It was a new. An uncharted field of possibilities. It weighed on her heart, pressing down on it with a compressor made of new emotions and feelings.

There's nothing good about my gender... It's a handicap. A weakness in my armor. There's nothing...

Why would he say that?! What possible reason could he have to say such a thing?

Maybe he was lying... But what could he gain from lying? My trust? My friendship? Has this all been a lie? Has he just been lying from the start? Why else would he tell me he was-

Stop. Stop it. Take a deep breath and recompose yourself. Naoto inhaled the cold, night air, before exhaling a warm breath. She focused her mind, cleaning it of the clutter and mess her earlier, emotional outburst left behind. She tidied every inch of her mental work space, leaving it pristine and ready to be put to work. She tackled the enigma again, with a new, fresh perspective.

Narukami is capable of many things, but lying to me? I understand that logically, it is possible, but my intuition speaks otherwise. He is hiding things, but no more than I hide from him. We both wear masks, yet he has exposed himself to me in ways the others have not seen... Naoto paused and replayed that line of thought again, her lips mouthing each word, before she felt her cheeks turn hot, melting the cold air that brushed against them. Thank goodness for the sanctity of one's mind...

"You okay, gorgeous?" Naoto blinked and lifted her hat, finding the older boy that plagued her thoughts standing in front of her.

"Huh? Oh, y-yes. I'm quite..." Realization set in once more and she let out a huffy sigh, hiding her returning flush with her hat, shielding herself from his jovial grin. "Please, stop referring to me in that manner..."

"Heh. Sorry. Can't resist it sometimes." She watched him, just under the rim of her hat. His fixed smile seemed to twitch, exposing the struggle and conflict that hid within... and then he turned away, as if he was never anything more than a grinning philanderer.

The couple continued their walk to the mysterious Velvet Room. Narukami had stated that he had queries for the residents of the bizarre, otherwordly location. They walked in comforting silence, allowing Naoto to return to her mental notes.

Narukami... What is it about him?

Narukami was a layered individual, complex and unpredictable at times, but the sleuth was beginning to understand him. She believed she was, at the very least. The young man often wore a facade of emotionless, regal strength for others. Like a king leading an order of knights, he was just, true, and compassionate, while never losing control of himself. He was all the things a leader was meant to be.
But that was a mask. In truth, he was more of a jester, and drunk with his own arrogance. He was a performer, willing to dance with fire, enthralling others to behold his show, so captivated, they didn't even notice the house burning down. He would twirl with the flames, dance with the pyre, and all would watch, mesmerized by his skill and charisma, they would sooner burn to death than abandon him... and he knew that. He just didn't care, or didn't have enough reason to care. This was the Narukami she had first met, and it was this liar that she had so passionately insulted and disregarded...

Yet even beyond that, there was something else to him. Something she had yet to put a word to. A nuance shift in his tone and body language. He was himself with her. He was angry when he was enraged. He was sad when he felt melancholic. He was an honest and happy, even if he was more of a fool than ever around her. He joked and laughed, he showed passion, flaws, but honesty... He wasn't the perfect king everyone thought he was. He wasn't the silver-tongued villain she thought he was. When they were together, he was simply a fool. When he was with her, he was Yu Narukami.

He was himself around her, a concept she was beginning to accept and even pride herself in.

Eventually, the two stood in front of that familiar, featureless wall once more, between Daidara's Metal Works and Yomenaido Bookstore. Yu offered a brief, apologetic glance towards the staring detective. She merely nodded in response, quietly accepting his goodbye. Without any fanfare or excitement, the silver haired boy stepped forward and vanished into nothingness...

Naoto was left with her own thoughts once more, but this time, she lacked Narukami’s presence by her side. She would never admit this to anyone, she was barely able to admit it to herself, but when the silver-haired fool wasn't by her side, she felt herself longing for his return. She quickly disregarded the enigmatic feeling, obviously she was just tired. She spent her time waiting by reciting trivia facts to herself with a quiet sigh, anxiously tapping her foot on the ground.

Rise didn't know what she was doing. She didn't know what possessed her to follow Kanji down the street. She saw him stomp away from the group after locking eyes with Yu and Naoto, and her feet started following. She could guess what was on his mind. She could empathize with the frustration and emotional whirlwind he was probably trapped in. She felt bad for him, but none of that didn't mean she understood why she was following him though.

"Kanji, slow down!" she pleaded, calling out to the leatherclad troublemaker.

"Leave me alone, Rise," growled the young man, keeping his distance from the idol, stomping even faster away from her.

What am I doing? Just rubbing salt in his wound? I should just leave him alone. He wants to be left alone!

But her legs kept moving her forward, after him. Her voice kept calling out to him, begging for him to stop or slow down. "Kanji, I just want to talk."

"Well, I don't. So you can just-"

"I know you're upset about Yu and Naoto!" He came to a stop, halting in his tracks on the lonely sidewalk. The dark, dusk air was cold, but neither noticed. Rise focused on Kanji, the distance between them shrinking with every quiet clap of her shoes on the ground.

Why was she doing this? Was it because she knew Senpai couldn't help him? Was it because
Senpai was the problem? Or did she just need a distraction from her own problems, and helping Kanji provided that? Or was it because she saw her friend hurting, and she just wanted to help? Whatever the reason, she was here. It was too late to turn back. All she could do was put on a strong face and put her best foot forward.

"Kanji... You can talk to me."

"What? So you can laugh about how stupid I am along with everyone else?" The boy didn't meet her gaze, and when her concerned hand fell on his shoulder, he shrugged it off. "Save it. I don't care what you, or anyone else says. I'm fine. Just leave me alone!"

'I'm fine. 'I'm okay. 'Don't worry about me. 'How many times had she heard that lie? How many times has she told that lie? Putting on a smile for her fans, even just faking it for her friends, and now watching Yu fake it to everyone while she knew the truth... "Don't lie to me, Kanji," she whimpered. She didn't notice or care that she sounded so begging. She didn't bother sounding strong. The plea was honest, and honesty was all she wanted now...

"..." He kept his face pointed away from her, staring down the empty, darkening street. Rise wondered, once more, just what she was doing, what she hoped to accomplish, when she heard the faint whisper traveling on the cold breeze. "I'm not a man. I'm a loser... If Pops could see me now, he'd wonder what the hell ever happened to the son he used to be proud of..."

And despite Kanji's leather jacket and piercings and dyed hair, Rise saw the young boy for who he really was. She had seen the real him before, but it was now that she realized how much he hid away. How much he faked for the crowd, for the audience that stared at him, waiting for the next act... Kanji wasn't a tough, boisterous manly man. He was, but he was so much more than that. Like how she was so much more than Risette.

It was a strange revelation... Even stranger to admit, but that night, Rise really saw Kanji Tatsumi, and in him, she saw Yu Narukami, herself, even Naoto... She saw the familiar fear and dread, and the same realization she had when Yu told her the truth.

She thought the older boy and her were meant to be, but she knew the truth. That despite everything she did, she was only second best...

"What was I even thinking competing with him...? I'm such an idiot!" She couldn't see the artisan's face, but she could feel the heartbeat and self-loathing seeping off of every word. Every word flew that flew from his mouth became a razor, a cut given and received by himself. "Dumb, stupid, weird Moronji! That's... that's me..."

Rise's feet moved forward, pushed by the venom seeping off of Kanji's every word.

"What the hell did I think was going to happen?! I never had a shot! What the hell would Naoto even see in a stupid, ugly, dumbass like-"

"Stop!" And suddenly, the leatherclad troublemaker felt a warmth press against his back. Something small and soft was latched onto him, and when he looked down, he saw a pair of arms wrapped around his midsection. There were hands digging against his stomach as a soft whimper was heard, muffled against his back. "Kanji, stop. Please, stop."

Kanji felt his cheeks turn hot pink, despite the cool wind blistering against their combined figures. "W-why the hell do you even care...?" He cringed as his voice cracked and his stutter flared. Even though he was growing more accepting of hanging out with girls, the sensation Rise brought out of him with her touch left him out of breath and flustered.
"Because we're friends." The answer was so uncomplicated and simple that a child could understand it, yet Kanji Tatsumi just couldn't to wrap his head around the concept. He opened his mouth to speak, but Rise's mouth raced faster than both of their minds. "I want to help you."

"Thought you were on Senpai's side...?"

So did she. Yet despite her mind fighting to regain control of her arms, her empathetic and emotional heart just wanted to stop Kanji from hating himself. It shouldn't have been her, here. She barely knew what to do about her own problems. Yet Yu revealed his true self to her, and now she was pleading for Kanji to do the same, so she could help him. Why? Why was she here?

Kanji shivered in her arms, and it was probably just the cold wind again blistering against him. But if it wasn't? If it was because he was terrified for the future and wracked with self-loathing? If he was hurting... She had to help. It was just that simple. It was just the place she found herself in. With Yu distracted, weighted by his own troubles, she had to do what she could, no matter how small, no matter how strange it might have felt... She had to do her part for the friends that saw her true self...

"I'm not on anyone's side, Kanji. I just... I just want everyone to be happy."

He trembled in her arms again. His hands were shaking, balled into fists, but no matter what his brain demanded, he did nothing to shake off Rise's embrace. It was almost funny. Most guys would kill to be here...

"Do you remember what I told you? Back when we were together at Aiya's?"

Kanji tried to answer, he raked at his mind for the memory, but the fog of self-loathing and frustration left him with nothing but empty, chilling air.

"I told you, I think you should just do your best to be you and let the pieces fall where they will. Well, I'm taking my own advice." Rise wiped her face. She hadn't been crying. The corners of her eyes had just gotten wet from the humidity... "I'm going to be myself, and watch the pieces fall where they will. If this is a mistaken, then, well... Helping you is worth that mistake."

No one had ever said anything like that to the young boy. No one had ever held them in their arms and told him he was worth the trouble he was inevitably going to make them. Not even his ma...

"I... You... R-Rise...?" He tried to speak, but broken words and fragments were all that fell out, jumbled together like his mind. His pink, flushed face only accented his words, and he thanked his lucky stars that Rise couldn't see him.

Similarly, Rise thanked her own good fortune. Her mind had finally reclaimed control of her body, wresting it away from her heart. Her face, scarlet and inflamed, was dug into the back of Kanji Tatsumi, aka Moronji. She considered letting go, but the fear of the cold wind and Kanji seeing her tinted features gave her enough reason to hold on a bit longer.

"Have you asked Naoto out yet?" Silence. Not even a stutter. Her hands could feel his chest expand with a deep inhale of the night air. "Kanji," she sighed, burying her face against his back with an exasperated and disappointed whine. Her blush was already beginning to fade as the boy tried to explain himself, lifting his arms as he momentarily forgot the idol had his arms wrapped around him.

"I asked her to help me study!"

"Kanji! That's not good enough! You need to ask her out! Girls love confident men!" She squeezed
him a little tighter, and he grunted in response, ignoring his flaming cheeks and embarrassment.

"I-it's not like I know what the hell girls like! I've never even asked a girl out before!"

"Then I know where we need to start."

"What are- huh?" She let out, and suddenly Kanji was reminded that it was night time. It was dark and cold as a icy wind fell upon the two. Deep down, the tough guy felt a pang of regret at the vanished weight, but he shrugged it off. He was a man. He wasn't cold. He was just... cool. Yeah.

Kanji blinked in dumbstruck silence when he realized a finger was inches from his nose. The tiny hand nearly made him go cross-eyed as he followed down its path, finding the determined idol at the end of it. "I'm going to teach you how to ask a girl out."

Narukami stormed into existence with a heavy stomp to his step. He let out a breath, his breath faintly visible in the cool air. His head fell towards the sidewalk, downhearted and lost, before his silver eyes caught her curious stare. He tried to compose himself for a moment, before blatantly casting off the mask. He spoke from his heart to her, as he always did.

"They weren't very helpful."

"What exactly is the problem? I may not understand the rules of this world as much as you do, but a different perspective could offer you a lead to the answers you seek."

"I have answers. I just... don't like them." The response left Naoto more confused than when she had started, a feeling that she assumed Narukami was currently feeling.

"Well, you remember me mentioning Social Links, right?"

"Hm... I believe they came up during the first few days of you tending to me while I recovered, but please, tell me again. If I remember correctly, they are the bonds you forge with others, yes? You are able to use them to empower the Persona you create with the help of the Velvet Room's benefactor, correct? Igor?"

"I think he prefers proprietor, but yeah. Basically." There was a slight upwards curve to Yu's lip, but it vanished as he began to regale her with what had taken place within the mysterious space. Of course, he withheld certain one certain truth...

"I felt so weird when Teddie spoke to me. Almost sick. It didn't hurt, but it did. Does that make sense?"

Margaret and Igor looked at one another, a set of beady, black eyes meeting golden, shimmering ones. The obsidian dots seemed knowing almost, while the amber eyes glittered with amusement. They both returned their focus to him, and Margaret began to speak as the long nosed man began to pick up several cards from his deck and place them along his table.

"Your Social Links are born from the bonds you create with others. The bonds you forge with them create your World. You remember me explaining this to you, yes?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Thing carefully, Yu Narukami." Margaret seemed to snicker at a joke only she seemed to know. It was even enough to melt the usually icy facade she had on her as Igor placed one card after
another onto the table before him. "Your links, since the beginning, were built off of lies."

The statement hit him like a freight train, and his eyes widened as the truth dawned on him. "Shit," he muttered, as Margaret nodded her head.

"I see you are beginning to understand. Your lies have built your World, creating a state of constant decay as you use more and more lies to cover the deteriorating mass. Ironically, more lies only achieve a quicker self destruction."

"S-self destruction?"

"Yes. To make matters worse, your decaying world has recently attempted to shift itself. Instead of being built upon the lies you give to others, it is trying to seek the truth. I'm afraid you only have a week left to live."

"What?!"

Margaret's stoic face cracked slightly, revealing a simple smile on her ruby lips. "Just kidding, at least, about your death."

Yu felt his insides crawl at the very, very bad joke. He glanced at Igor, who was still placing cards onto the table. Part of Yu considered demanding a real answer, but his last encounter left himself hesitant about such a tactic. So, instead, he played their game, quietly waiting for a real answer. He still felt his heart race as Margaret's smile stayed for a few moments longer, before slipping away. Her expression was deadly serious as she spoke again.

"Your World's condition is no joke, however. While you were creating it with the Social Links born from your lies, it became a monument to those deceptions and falsehoods. Now you are suddenly changing yourself, altering the world and links you have already made."

"Huh?" Yu found himself more lost than he was earlier, raising his grey brow, before sighing. "Okay, what does that mean?"

"Magician. Chariot. Priestess. Emperor. Star. Lovers... and Fortune." Igor had finally spoken up, flipping over each card he had placed down, one by one, before placing the last of these tarots onto the table and lifting his wide gaze at Yu. "Most of the Social Links, and all others formed beyond them, were created by you lying to their incarnate."

"Nanako Dojima, of the Justice Arcana. Ayane Matsunaga and Yumi Ozawa of the Sun Arcana. Kou Ichigo and Daisuke-"

"Alright! I get it. I lied. A lot," admitted the silver haired youth. "So I used to lie and wear masks to trick everyone into thinking we were friends, and now that I'm acting like the 'Real Me...'' Yu's fingers twitched in the air, emphasizing his own doubt and wonder about his True Self, before he continued. "The links aren't so good anymore?"

"That is a very blase, if accurate term about what is going on, yes," Margaret chuckled. "Or to put it in another way? Your Social Links have made a World that you are now rejecting. Your growing conscience caused you to feel guilt for lying to the Star Arcana. You are changing, and your Social Links must change with you..."

"Guilt...? Change?" Yu could only find himself repeating fragments of her explanations, before he rubbed his palm against his forehead, sighing again. "Social Links built on lies building a decaying World. Yeah, that sounds right for me..." The silver-haired boy stood up from his seat and approached Igor once more. Margaret observed the show, silently watching as Yu placed a
"Indeed," grinned Igor.

"Am I lying to her?"

"You don't know?" chuckled the proprietor of the Velvet Room, already knowing the answer, even before the scowl formed on Yu's features.

"No. I don't. Tell me. Am I lying to her?" He spoke slowly, barely holding back his temper, but daring to lean closer towards Igor. The grinning man stared right back, his unblinking, black eyes peering into Yu's soul, before his grin grew wider, if that was even possible.

"No. Your relationship with the Fortune Arcana was built, from the beginning, out of honest emotion and truth the day she awoke from her bed to find you. Interestingly enough, the Lovers Arcana, and Emperor Arcana have both been renewed and are stronger than ever, actually."

Yu let out a sigh of relief, his own spirit receiving a very needed break from stress and tension, even for a moment. At least he could take pride in knowing that Naoto and him really did seem to be friends. That Naoto actually liked him for him, just like how he liked her for her. He was about to step away, when another question popped into his mind.

"Wait, Lovers and Emperor? That's Rise and Kanji, right? Rise, I get, she's my friend, sure, but Kanji? Kanji hates me!"

"Perhaps, but is it not interesting?" laughed Igor. "A bond cracked by the truth is still stronger than one built on lies. I must say, you are proving to be one of our most interesting guest."

"Guilty conscience...?" Naoto muttered words and phrases from Narukami's recounting of the event. He watched the sleuth mull over details and facts, before repeating herself and nodding her head. "If I am understanding this correctly, you must share your 'True Self' with our colleagues, or you will...?"

"Be wracked with guilt." Narukami scoffed at the joke, shaking his head. "I don't know. They didn't really say. All I know, is that I'm going to keep feeling this shitty whenever I talk to anyone I've lied to until I actually tell them the truth. You know, Rise, and Kanji know... Now I just need to tell the rest of the town." He shook his head as they walked down the sidewalk, the light of the streetlights being all that illuminated their forms.

"You're exaggerating. Simply begin informing the others within our circle about your self."

"Easier said than done," sighed Narukami. "But I appreciate you trying to help, my dear." Naoto nodded her head, and a brief silence blanketed over the two. Despite the silence, the silver-haired boy continued to smile. Naoto scrutizied the smirk, before vocalizing her confusion.

"You seem rather jovial, despite the news."

"Just happy to have you by my side, my little Sapphire. It's good to have someone you trust by your side..."

Naoto felt her cheeks burn as memories flooded back to the surface of her mind. She felt her lungs fill and release a wave of warm breath, casting her eyes towards the concrete floor as they walked. "Narukami?"
"Hm?"

"What you said to me. Back in the hospital...? Did you-"

"I meant every word."

_How does he always do that? How does he always know just what to say to entice a reaction out of me? Ugh, I shouldn't be surprised. I should know better. It is Narukami simply acting how he acts. It doesn't... it means nothing more than... "Yes, well... Thank you. I'm glad. I'm glad you see me in such a way..."

Narukami stayed by her side, but his eyes were on the other side of the street. He said nothing to the Detective Prince, even as she forced her head back up to inspect him. He seemed distant, and she could faintly hear stuttered, quiet mumbling from his lips. "Naoto... I... I don't have an easy time saying this, mostly cause I've never said it to anyone, before I met you, but I mean it. Thank you for being a part of this team. Thank you for helping me."

"N-Narukami? I... Um... T-thank you," mumbled the scarlet sleuth. While her eyes were on the ground, her silver eyed compatriot found his pointed to the heavens.

"I made things awkward, didn't I?" Before Naoto could say anything, Narukami placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her to look at him. He was smirking again. "Allow me to change the subject, if you don't mind. Exams are coming up!"

"H-huh? Oh. Yes. They are," stuttered Naoto, sighing in relief at the more comfortable topic. She nodded her head, slowing her step as she saw the Dojima Residence in the distance.

"Wanna help me study?"

"Huh? Oh, I wouldn't know where to begin with second year subjects. Besides, I've seen your grades. You are quite knowledgeable about your subjects already. Besides, I promised Kanji-kun I would assist him in studying."

"Psh, I just cheated off of Yuki... Wait, what did you say?" Narukami came to a halt and seemed rather surprised to Naoto's confusion. "Wait, Kanji-kun? When did you start calling him Kanji-kun?!"

"You heard me refer to him by his first name when we left the hospital," stated the bluette. "And I simply said I was going to assist him with his studies." Naoto was not sure why the older boy's mood had suddenly changed. She raised a brow as he struggled to speak again, ignoring the slight flush to her cheeks. "Kanji-kun asked for my help and I accepted."

"O-oh. Okay."

"Narukami? What is it?"

Narukami did not answer immediately. When he did, he had composed himself only slightly. "So, are you going to start calling me Yu-kun?"

"W-what?" Now the flush on her cheeks grew more vibrant. "Y-you asked me to refer to you by your last name."

"You called me Yu once." They were getting closer to the front door of the Dojima Residence. Naoto felt a writhing in her stomach with every enclosing step for some reason. Perhaps it was because of Narukami's strange behavior... "Sorry. Nevermind. Don't worry about it."
"Perhaps we should reconvene tomorrow after I am done studying with Kanji-kun?"

"Huh? Hey, don't sweat it. Wouldn't want to get between you and Kanji's bonding time. Besides, I promised Rise I'd help her go shopping tomorrow. We're going to Okina City together."

"Ah." For some reason, the statement caused Naoto's stomach to lurch. Her lips twitched, turning dangerously close into a frown, but she maintained her composure. "I see. Kujikawa-san is good company. Energetic. Feminine." And as they neared the doors of the quiet house, the androgynous detective muttered under her breath a quiet word. "Beautiful..."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Simply talking to myself." Narukami was standing in front of the illuminated door now. Naoto kept her distance, tipping her hat to him with a neutral expression on her face. "Goodnight, Narukami."

"Yeah..." Judging by his tone, Narukami didn't want to open his door. He didn't want to leave the detective. But his choice was robbed from him as the door opened, revealing a curious, brunette head.

"Hello? Oh! Big Bro!"

Immediately, the silver-haired boy cringed at the words. Naoto assumed he was feeling the decay and guilt from his link to the small girl. He greeted the small girl, swiveling his head to find the Detective Prince already walking away. Naoto didn't pay a boy any thought as she could hear the pleads from the little girl. Apparently she had a good day at school and wanted to tell her big brother all about it...

Rise Kujikawa... She was the first, wasn't she? She was the one who Narukami went to first. They must be very close...

That night, Yu couldn't sleep. He was alone and the darkness enveloped his room. He was tired and fatigued and wanted to drift asleep, but his mind was plagued. He simply could not sleep. He rose up until he was sitting on his futon. He took his hand and reached under the soft bed, searching for something. He plucked a brown sketchbook from underneath, but tossed it aside without a care. He searched underneath the futon again, finally sighing in relief when he found the azure book, with a pen taped to the side of the book's spine.

Without a single word, he got out of bed and flicked on the lights. After his eyes adjusted to the change, he placed book on his desk and opened it. Within the book laid dozens of pages, each one littered with drawings and sketches of a certain detective. The girl of his dreams had been plaguing him even worse lately, and now it was reaching a whole new level with his recent discovery.

He turned page after page, until he finally found a blank, white surface. With a click of his pencil, he began to bring to life the images plaguing his mind. He drew her rarer-than-gold-smile. He carefully created every strand of her cerulean locks. He carefully recreated her gorgeous, cobalt eyes...

He took a deep breath, sighing to himself, before finalizing the drawing with two new additions. Naoto's, apparently, sizable bust.

God, I've fallen hard. But who can blame me? She's amazing...
"Just be yourself and let the pieces fall where they may."

"Don't rescue anymore..."

"I feel the message itself is rather clear," commented Yu, diverting Naoto's attention. His arms were crossed and his face emulated the seriousness of the situation. He stood to the right of the detective as she scrutinized the letter under her cobalt eyes.

"Shit, ain't this kind of thing only supposed to happen in the movies?" wondered Kanji.

"Don't shadowy monsters and other worlds belong in movies too?" uttered Rise, seated beside the blonde boy. "Our lives are more like the movies than anything else."

"Guess you got a point..."

"Dude, did you show your uncle this?" Yosuke asked, across from Yu and Naoto, sitting on one of the vents Yasogami had on the rooftop.

Yu's features seemed to harden, wrinkling at the question. "Obviously not. I wouldn't have it now if I had shown it to him. I doubt I'd even be allowed to be here if I had shown it to him." The sharp, cutting tone of his words pushed the brunette away, making him flinch a bit as Yu's glare was aimed at him. "Let's try to focus on smarter questions at the moment, Yosuke."

Yosuke hadn't expected such a response from their usually calm leader. None of the members of the Investigation Team did. Yukiko, in particular, seemed hurt by their leader's sudden fury and offensive nature. "J-jeez, dude, sorry. I didn't mean anything. I was just asking."

Then maybe you shouldn't be asking such stupid questions, thought the silver-haired leader. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, releasing his anger in a breath of air, before opening his eyes and donning his mask for Yukiko, Yosuke, and Chie. "I apologize, Yosuke. I am merely distressed by the letter. The implications are concerning, I'm sure you realize."

"He's right," agreed Naoto, quick to try and dissuade the others from focusing on their leader, rather than the letter in her hand. "The fact is that this letter arrived at the Dojima residence, addressed directly to Narukami. This means the culprit knows in great detail who has been interfering with his crimes. He knew our leader, his home, even his name."

"Oh my God," whispered Rise, covering her mouth as a cold chill ran down the spines of the seven teenagers.

"Shit, he knows where you live? Dude, are... are you okay?" Kanji inquired, looking at Yu with an expression of concern, rather than with the animosity Yu had come to expect in recent months. Sadly, the concern was not fully realized as Yu's face wrinkled again, rage brimming in his silver eyes.
"I'm fine. I still have my sword hidden away at home. If our killer tried anything..." The undertone of Yu's words was obvious, and it sent another chill down the others' spines, a chill far too similar to the one the killer gave them. Yu didn't seem to notice the unspoken question hanging in the air. Instead, he continued to speak about the letter. "But how could he know about us? About me? Even my address."

"W-well, Teddie always mentioned how he could feel someone watching us when we're fighting Shadows. You guys don't think we ended up on the Midnight Channel too...?" Yosuke wondered.

"I doubt it," answered Chie, though her own confidence seemed waning. "I haven't heard any rumors around school about us specifically. I've even spoken to people who watch it, but they never mention what happened to us specifically. Only the people who vanished."

"Well, that's good," nodded the brown-haired boy. "Still, how the hell does that place work? I mean, where did it come from? How is it decided who gets put on TV...?"

"We should hold off on making wild assumptions about the world until we have more data," suggested Naoto, who had unintentionally became the unofficial second-in-command of the team. "We have too little information on the world behind the TVs to make any real educated guesses about its' rules. Instead, we should focus on what we do know, regarding the murderer and this letter. What's most important is that we mustn't panic. We must be rational, calm, and collected."

"Right... Yeah, I getcha." Yosuke nodded his head as he spoke. "Freaking out is exactly what the killer wants us to do. So we'll just try to play it safe, right?"

"Still, Senpai, you have got to be careful, okay?" pleaded Rise, looking at Yu.

The older nodded his head in response. "Same to all of you."

Naoto silently noticed the shared look the two had, resisting a slight twitch to her lip as she watched them. She adjusted herself slightly, quietly clearing her throat as she stood there, with nothing to truly add now...

"Right. Calm, cool, and collected. Business as usual, right, Naoto?" Chie inquired. The blue-haired sleuth nodded her head, and in response, the martial artist awkwardly smiled at her friends. "In that case, anyone mind if I change the subject?" There were no arguments from the band of friends, or supposed friends, as Yu would call them. "The Culture Festival's just around the corner."

Yu rolled his eyes as the others began to speak. His eyes fell upon the small, silent detective, his focus on the love of his life and not the rising tension in the air. Rise's eyes darted between Naoto, Yu, and Kanji, the last of whom found himself more fixated with Naoto than usual. Yukiko's ebony eyes were on the silver-haired leader, her eyes shimmering with a confused and shattered light. Finally, there was the Detective Prince herself. Her eyes were on the letter itself, blind and deaf to the drama that swirled around her...

Like every meeting, the group began to disperse and return to class, and like every recent meeting, Naoto and Yu were the last to leave. The two would usually stay behind, telling the others they had to discuss things about the case privately, but this time a third party stayed behind. Yukiko Amagi looked at her friends, not caring about the looks they gave her.

Naoto was the first to speak, quietly voicing the elephant in the room. "Ah... Amagi-san, Narukami and I have facts about the case we'd like to discuss in private, if you do not mind..."

"I don't see why I can't stay. I can help go over details too!" It was a weak argument, and they all
knew it. Naoto was a genius detective, and Yu was her cunning assistant/partner, far smarter than even his supposed friends knew. As smart as Yukiko was, she simply lacked the same detective instinct the two shared. This did nothing to dissuade her though.

"Yukiko-san," Yu began, his voice waving with a tone the innkeeper had never heard from him before, cutting at her with sharpness and candor. Even the honorific he spoke seemed second thought, a formality more than anything else. His normally kind and calm eyes held a sharpness that she never knew before. "Please. Naoto and I have matters to discuss." Without another word, Yu reached his hand forward, capturing Naoto's in his grasp and pulling her along towards the exit.

"Wha-?! Narukami! St-AH!" Naoto was dragged along behind the older boy, and both heard the older girl attempt to follow them only for the door to slam in front of the raven-haired girl. Neither detective nor liar heard the quiet, depressed sigh that fell from between Yukiko's lips.

"Even I recognized that as being rather rude, Narukami," huffed Naoto, fixing her school uniform when her hand was finally released. Her hand was still rather warm from the older boy's touch. She ignored that and analyzed her friend, picking up on certain signs she came to understand from observing him. "You are genuinely upset."

"A tad, yeah. Just not in the mood to deal with these idiots," lamented Yu as the two walked down the hall. There were a few students still finishing lunch, and a few Naoto's eyes sharpened at his words as she kept her pace with him, walking by his side. "Those 'idiots' are our allies in this case. They deserve respect."

"You haven't been having to deal with them as long as I have, babe. They may be on our side, but they're idiots. You're easily the smartest person on this team."

Naoto considered asking him if he genuinely saw her as his intellectual superior, but she decided against it. Instead, she chose to focus on another question on her mind. "Narukami, may I ask you to clarify something?"

"Hm? Sure, shoot."

Naoto placed a finger to her chin as she thought of how best to word the inquiry. "What do you intend on doing with the killer when we finally meet him face to face?"

Yu didn't hesitate to answer the simple question. Not even for a moment. "I'm going to kill him, obviously." Naoto came to a stop, stunned silent by the frank confession. The silver-haired raised an equally silver brow at her, before he let out a slow sigh, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he spoke. "Oh no, babe, please, do not tell me you thought that too... Do you honestly think we can get this guy arrested? Like Yosuke and the others think?"

"Narukami, think about what you saying! You're talking about killing someone!" The two glared at one another, but their argument was cut short when Naoto and Yu realized the odd stares on them from the other students. They were quick to turn and scurry away, avoiding the scrutinizing stares. As they quickly walked down the hall, they continued their discussion. "You cannot seriously be telling me you plan on... on..."

"Killing the killer? Of course I am. Naoto, this dude has murdered two people and we both know the law won't do shit about him. How are they suppose to arrest him when his murder weapon is an another dimension?!" Yu asked, accenting what he said by moving his hands in the air. Despite this, Naoto was unwavering in her own beliefs.
"We will find a way. I do not know how, but we will. Narukami, think about what you are saying. You plan on executing someone!" she growled.

"I have thought about it. I've known since Yukiko was kidnapped that the only way this case was closing was by me ramming a sword through the killer's stomach." The older boy sighed, before continuing. "I'm not saying we have to gather around and hang him. I'll do it. I'll kill him, and I'll even lie to others and tell them it was an accident. I'll fake being traumatized if that's what it takes."

"Narukami... This is a man's life," repeated the detective.

"Yeah, and it's everyone else's lives against his. We either let a murderer walk, or we stop him as soon as we find him, no bullshit, no second chances."

"You're... resolute in this matter," Naoto whispered. "Narukami, I cannot support this sort of decision. I believe in the justice system, and the law."

"And I believe in getting the job done. I'd have thought you would be in agreement there." The two glared at one another, a tension growing between the two as the seconds ticked by. Yu was the first to crack, and he sighed, shaking his head once more. "Sorry. Guess this really isn't the time for us to be arguing. We can talk it out more about this when we have cooler heads."

"That... that may be best," she agreed, exhaling and releasing her own anger and frustration. "I apologize for raising my voice, Narukami, but I'm concerned about this strategy of yours."

"Okay, did I not just say we could talk about it later?" Yu wondered, his tone bordering between annoyance and laughter.

"I simply wished to voice my concern. Perhaps, logically you have a point, but morally? Could you really bring yourself to kill another man?"

"I appreciate the concern, my little azure, but I'm going to have to be. I know murder isn't exactly easy on the mind. That's why I volunteered myself for the role." Yu's gaze fell upon a nearby window as he nodded his head, reaffirming his will and drive. The boys and girls outside were completely ignorant of the turmoil and chaos swirling around them... "I'm going to kill him."

Naoto was quiet, staring at the older boy with concerned eyes. She raised a hand, hesitating on what to do, before she placed her hand firmly onto his shoulder. He looked at her, surprised by the physical contact. "We'll find a better way. I... I know we will."

"Maybe." Yu nodded his head, the question left hanging in the air, unanswered.

When they finally separated from one another to return to their individual class, both liar and detective were left wondering what the future of this case would bring...

The days that followed were busy ones for the boys and girls of the Investigation Team. Yu found himself working to repair or cure his ailing Social Links, with Naoto being his only real confidant. The young boy tried to speak to Rise about the matter, but the young girl was strangely busy over the following days. He ignored it, admitting to himself that Naoto was better company than the idol, but still wondering where his first friend ran off to without him.

The days passed without a single kidnapping, or murder, or even an inkling of strangeness. Yu went through the motions, the only moments that really mattered to him were the ones that involved repairing the Social Links of those not in the Investigation Team and his time with Naoto. As much as the silver-haired boy hated to admit it, he was scared of confronting those he had lied
to the most.

He thought of all the times he risked their lives for himself, how easy he found it to put their lives in danger to make his life easier. He remembered how easily he manipulated them into thinking he was their friend, when in reality, he was holding them up as shields to die for him. The lies he gave to Nanako, Yumi, and the others were poultry compared to that chaos...

So he just kept playing his part around his 'closest' friends, trying his best not to let them see the beast inside, but it was getting harder and harder with every passing day. Naoto had cracked his masks, and nothing was able to put the pieces back together again. He wasn't even sure he wanted to wear them again if he could...

So the week went by. It was decided his class was going to be doing a 'Group Date Cafe,' which he voted for, despite having no idea what that actually was. Regardless, it seemed like a fun idea, and Yukiko and Yosuke got more of the blame for it than he did. He carried on, until he came to school to find a strange sight in the hall.

A mass gathering of students stood in front of a board, chattering to each other as they crowded around whatever message the board had. He leaned closer, listening to them talk, trying to pick one word and phrases from the group. It didn't take long for Yu to hear the familiar names of Chie, Yukiko and Rise, but when he heard the word 'pageant' and 'Naoto' come up, every alert in his head was blaring.

That led him to where he was now. He stood on the roof of the school, watching Chie chew Yosuke out for his crimes. He was quiet, not even making a sound as he tried to look stoic and serious. His eyes glanced at Naoto every few moments, and he could feel the heat rise to his face as he imagined what this beauty pageant could bring.

Naoto in a bikini? Naoto in a maid uniform?! Naoto in lingere!! He bit hit lip, forcing himself to look as calm as he could, but the thought of Naoto on a stage, showing her body off for him... Okay, so it wasn't exactly like that, but it was how it played in his head. He quickly tore his gaze from the blue-haired sleuth, trying to shake off the perverted fantasies. He glanced around the rooftop, finding Yukiko staring at him with concerned eyes.

Yu tried to allow his action speak for him as he struggled to appear as the stoic leader once more. Should I look disappointed in Yosuke? Maybe upset? Or should I try to pacify the two so they don't kill each other? Shit, this used to be so easy...

"Let's all try to calm down," Yu pleaded, holding up his hands. He was at least able to get Chie to back off for a moment, allowing Yosuke the chance to defend himself.

"Oh come on, I didn't know Kashiwagi wouldn't let you sign out! How was I supposed to know that?!!"

"So it was you!"

"Oh crap! I mean, c-come on! It's just for fun! Everyone knows how popular Yukiko is! And on top of that, we have an idol and a Detective Prince! What's the point of a beauty pageant if all of these beauties aren't going to take part?!" Both Kanji and Yu's eyes fell on the blushing detective, before meeting one another. Yu tried to offer a smile to the taller boy, who just furrowed his brow and looked away.

Right. Kanji hates me. Silly me for forgetting that.
"So, wait... Where do I fit in?" There was a moment of awkward silence, before Chie's temper flared even hotter than before. "I don't want to be your comedy relief!"

*Either Yosuke has a crush on Chie and doesn't want to admit, or he's just stupid. Both seem pretty possible.* Yu had to fight the urge to roll his eyes, before an expecting pair of eyes fell upon him. Yosuke was looking at him, and that led to the others to stare at him too.

"Hey, you're totally stoked about it, aren't you, bro?!"

*Oh, God damn it, Yosuke,* Yu swore. His eyes fell upon Naoto's cobalt eyes, which shyly shirked away when their gazes met. He then looked towards the others and spoke, staring at each of them, and yet none of them at all. "If none of the girls want to participate, I see no reason for why we should force them. We can discuss things with Miss Kashiwagi and explain to her that this was all a simple misunder-"

"I want to do it."

"Huh?" Yu blinked as Yukiko spoke up, her cheeks featuring a scarlet tint as she spoke.

"I-I want to be in the pageant," she repeated.

"W-what?! Yukiko, you don't have to to say yes! Whatever Yosuke might have told you, a beauty pageant isn't just-" But Chie was cut off by her best friend, who spoke as adamantly as her embarrassed and flustered nature could allow.

"I-I know! I'm not doing it for Yosuke-kun! I'm doing it for me!"

"Really? Whoo!" cheered Yosuke, grinning as Yukiko's best friend was left dumbstruck.

"I... What?"

"Chie, please, will you go on stage with me too? I... I don't want to do this alone," pleaded the raven-haired girl. When Chie stared into those ebony eyes, her defenses fell. All she could do was reluctantly nod and sigh.

"O-okay, Yukiko. I'm in too."

"Really?! Thank you, Chie!" Yukiko beamed, hugging her friend tightly.

"Huh. What's that all about? The question went on unanswered as Rise was the next to speak up.

"Ah, why not? Guess I'm in too," grinned the copper-haired beauty.

"B-be that as it may, I'd rather not participate in such an event," argued Naoto. "I apologize, Yosuke-senpai, but I must insist that I will not be joining in this venture."

"I-I think you should join the pageant!" It seemed that today was full of surprises. Yu watched as Kanji stepped forward, staring right at Naoto. To the silver-eyed leader's disgust and jealousy, Naoto blushed under Kanji's piercing, if shaky, stare. "I think you should join the pageant!" He repeated it, but it didn't change how utterly amazing it was that Kanji Tatsumi was doing this.

"Dude," Yosuke gasped, watching with wide eyes along with the rest of their group. Yu was the only one to notice that Rise stared at Kanji with a different gleam in her eye, but before he could ponder it, the blonde spoke again.

"Y-you're smart, and cool, and confident, and... and attractive! I think you should join the
"Pageant!" His voice was getting higher and higher with every word, louder with every compliment. Naoto was left quiet and awestruck, just like most the Investigation Team.

"Whoa. When did Kanji get the balls?" muttered Yosuke.

"Good for him," Chie smiled, proudly.


"I... Uh... Urm... P-perhaps I will then," mumbled Naoto.

The only ones not to stare were Rise, who had a small smile on her lips, and Yu, who was too focused on his thoughts to say anything.

*WHAT THE FUCK!?*

It took far too long for Yu's liking for him to finally speak to Naoto about the events that took place at lunch. As soon as class ended, he stormed out, nearly pushing aside Yukiko as he ran out of the classroom to pursue the young detective. He came to a skidding halt in front of her classroom. He fixed his hair, before dusting off his outfit. With a deep inhale, Yu prepared to open the door, only for it to slide open from the other side.

"Kanji?" A rush of emotion slammed into the liar as he tried to speak. Rage. Anger. Jealousy. Angry, jealous rage. His face turned harsh and scornful, but then Kanji's expression changed as well. Yu expected anger. He could have dealt with anger, but instead, Kanji's features turned softer, more gentle than they usually were.

"Um... Hey, Senpai." Sympathetic. That was what the expression looked like. Kanji was sympathetic towards his romantic rival. He was pitying Yu.

Yu felt his stomach lurch at the expression, not just because he realized the awful, irony he and Kanji had made, but because the pity just made his anger immature and pointless.

"Kanji," muttered Yu as he stepped out of the way for the other boy to exit his class. Behind Kanji was a familiar face. "Rise?"

"O-oh! Hey, Senpai! Um... You okay?" she inquired, and it was obvious from her behavior that she was hiding something.

Yu's right brow vanished under his hair as he replied. "Yeah. I'm okay. You?" He didn't bother with any masks. Like Naoto, and even Kanji, she knew the real him. He didn't bother with any act of politeness, and spoke frankly and casually instead.

"Me? Oh, yeah! I'm okay." Judging by the shifty look in her eye, it was obvious she was not. Yu considered demanding the truth from her, but thought better of it. He kept his mouth silent as she bid her farewell. "I'll see you later, Senpai. I promised my grandmother I'd be home right after school..."

"Right." She passed by him, her every step heavy with guilt and fear. That left the boys alone with one another, staring at each other in the doorway. As she walked away, Kanji glanced at Rise, and Yu wondered if he turned around, would Rise be looking back at Kanji? It didn't matter, because Kanji's attention was back on the older student, his face still solemn and still.

"I'll see you later, Senpai. Sorry..."
Sorry? Once again, Yu considered stopping someone and demanding answers, or even just telling Kanji to stay away from Naoto, but he bit his lip, sealing it. He tried to play nice, tried not to be like his old self, but just thinking about Kanji complimenting Naoto made him want to lie and cheat and grind the competition to dust.

Once Kanji was out of the way, Yu stepped inside and found his target. There was Naoto, standing beside her desk, faced towards the window in silent contemplation. *It's been a long day. One problem at a time*, he decided, before Yu walked towards the girl, plastering a smile onto his face.

"Hey there, my cerulean beauty." Yu had to resist the urge to frown when he saw Naoto barely notice his pet name for her. "What's on your mind?"

"Huh? Oh. Narukami. May I help you?" The dark-haired girl swiveled her head to face the older, taller boy, her face a mix of emotions. Yu paused, noticing how lost and confused her cobalt eyes seemed to be. It was almost like she was a hundred miles away, and he left sending her postcards.

"I just came to make sure you were okay. Come on, let's walk for a bit, okay?"

"So..." Yu chewed the inside of his mouth as he tried to think of what to say. He and Naoto were walking out of the school, a common occurrence after class. This time though, rather than the two's growing friendship and kinship being palpable in the air, the two were locked in awkward, quiet fog of tension. The silverette sighed, before continuing. "What did Kanji want to talk to you about?"

Naoto's pace quickened, and she avoided her friend's stare as best she could. Despite that, she seemed to flinch under his iron stare. "What makes you think Kanji-kun spoke to me?" The detective was not a bad liar, after all, she fooled most people into believing she was a boy, but Yu had been lying since he could talk. He saw right through her.

"Call it a gut feeling," replied Yu. He made no attempt to hide that he saw through her. This time, Yu sought the truth while Naoto tried to hide from it.

"I do not wish to talk about it, Narukami. Not yet. I'm... mulling over details," the detective sighed.

The possibility of demanding a real answer came to Yu's mind. He might have, had it been anyone else, but the blue-haired sleuth was always a special case with him. He could only sigh, shaking his head, before stopping. He slowly nodded in acceptance, before responding, "Alright. Fine. I won't ask. Just... know that I'm here for you."

She slowed down enough for him to walk beside her. He saw a small, thankful smile on her lips, and he couldn't help but return it. *Whenever I see that smile, things just feel right. I can't put my finger on it, but just seeing her happy, even if I'm not... This must be love. "So can I ask you a different question instead?"

"As long as it does not pertain to what Kanji-kun and I spoke about today, please, go ahead."

"You don't really want to do this pageant thing, do you?"

"Well, no." Naoto sighed again, before putting a hand to her chin in contemplation. "But the others have already made their choice, and I would feel rather guilty to reject the idea after... Well-"

"What Kanji said to you?"

Naoto's cheeks turned a hue of crimson and Yu simply nodded his head. He was almost glad she
didn't vocally agree with the guess. "B-besides, I spoke to Yosuke-senpai for clarification. He explained to me that it is only a question and answer session. There will be no posing or dress-up, which I did find rather... comforting."

"Still, I assume it can't be comfortable, going on a stage and letting everyone see you?" Naoto tipped her hat, muttering something under her breath, but he didn't need to hear her to understand the answer. "Hm. Well, I'll see what I can do. I'll try to make the whole thing a bit easier on you." She looked at him, a dark brow raised in silent inquiry. "Just trust me. I'll think of something."

"Whatever you do, I hope it isn't too ridiculous. You do have a habit of acting rather dramatic, Narukami."

"Dramatic? Me? Psha, my dear, dear sapphire, I am not dramatic. I'm fun." The female sleuth heard his pet name for her loud and clear, and she looked away with red, hot cheeks as Yu practically beamed.

"This is crossdressing! CROSS. DRESSING!"

Yosuke shrieked like a banshee as the others watched he and Chie fall into another one of their arguments. Only this time, this particular argument was about the fates of himself, Kanji Tatsumi, and their leader, Yu Narukami.

"I keep telling you, we didn't sign you up for anything!" roared the martial artist. Her rage quickly changed into a smug grin as she followed by saying, "But I wish I did. Guess someone else thought you deserved some punishment for signing us all up!"

"Oh, come on! You really expect me to believe you didn't sign us up?! Just admit, Chie, you signed us all up!" he accused.

"I keep telling you, I didn't! Stop calling me a liar, Yosuke!"

"Yosuke's right! This shit ain't cool, Chie-senpai!" Kanji added, his voice cracking for a moment. "I-I mean, it's a matter of pride, damn it! This ain't okay! We ain't doing it, ya hear me?!"

"Chie's telling the truth!" Yukiko argued, rushing to break the two apart before the students below wondered what all that racket coming from the rooftop was about. "Neither of us signed you three up!"

"Well, if it wasn't you..." Yosuke's accusatory stare fell upon Rise, who held up her hands as quickly as she could, shaking her head.

"Huh?! Me?! No way, Senpai! I'd never sign you guys up for this!"

"Could... Naoto, did you do this?!"

"What?! I did not! I have no idea how this happened, I assure you."

"It doesn't matter." Yu's voice resembled that of a king, booming, yet soft, powerful, yet gentle. He commanded the attention of all of his allies, and they gave it, willingly. "We've been signed up. We can't back down, we all know Kashiwagi wouldn't let us. She'd probably bring our grades down as far as she could, yours included, Kanji. That leaves only one option open to us."

"Don't tell me..."
"Y-you got to be kidding me! There's no way, damn it!"

"Don't worry, Yosuke, I'll make sure you look extra pretty in a skirt," chuckled Chie as Yosuke's face turned a chilling pale tone.

"Don't worry, Kanji-kun, I'll make sure you'll look extra pretty," Yukiko promised, patting the younger boy's back.

As the two boys mourned their debut, Naoto's eyes darted towards the leader of their band of misfits. Yu was smiling, but it was not the soft, easy smile of a compassionate, wise leader. It was a smug, Narukami smirk.

"You signed everyone up, didn't you?" It was the first thing Naoto said to Yu when the two had a moment alone.

"Yep." He didn't even both to lie to her. His stoic mask shattered in a moment as his smile turned into a wolfish grin. It grew and grew more toothy, before he began to laugh. He was chortling loudly, now free to bask in his victory and mischief. Yu had no doubt been hiding his glee for hours, and now it was his chance to just enjoy it. Naoto tried to glare at him, but he was laughing so much, she almost felt like she was the one acting silly...

"How? Why?! You do understand you'll be on a stage, wearing women's clothing also, don't you?"

"Hey, it'd be bad if I wasn't up there. Too suspicious. Sometimes, to make a lie believable, you have to take a bullet," he laughed, sitting on the rooftop's vent. "Oh man, the look on their faces! Yosuke's so upset, and Kanji's... weirdly okay with it! Ha!"

"You are incorrigible... Why on earth did you even pull off a prank such as this? For your own amusement?"

"Not just for my amusement. I did it for you. Er, to help you, I mean..."

That was not an answer Naoto expected from her elder. The silverette's laughter was finally dying down to the point where it was merely a smug smirk on his lips, and that familiar gleam in his eye. He was arrogant, but his confidence seemed more good-natured to the detective, rather than the superiority complex it had previously came off as. She would have gave the behavior more thought, had Yu's answer not left her so stunned.

"You felt uncomfortable being in a beauty pageant. Well, misery loves company. Now, I'll be appearing right before you, wearing a dress and answering questions for all to see and hear. Thought it might make it a little easier for you, my cerulean bestie," snickered the liar. Naoto's eyes widened and she stared at him with those wide, disbelieving pupils.

"You... You did this for me?"

"That's what friends do, right? Make sacrifices for the other?" Yu winked at her, and she quickly glanced away.

"T-thank you, Narukami."

"Always a pleasure, Naoto."

The two stayed their, alone on rooftop, a familiar silence filling the void between them. Yu smiled at her, genuinely and honestly, but while she returned the gesture for a moment, her smile soon
began to fade away. She tore her eyes from his and looked towards the edge of the rooftop, gazing through the fence. The silver-haired boy raised a brow, but did not force an answer out of her. He merely approached her, standing by her side. He lifted a hand to stroke her shoulder, but it fell limp by his side before he could reach her.

"Kanji Tatsumi, er... Kanji-kun asked me to accompany him tomorrow, during the Culture Festival."

And in a moment, Yu's entire world was shattered. Like a sledgehammer swung into a glass castle, it exploded with a crash; bits and pieces fell towards the ground, each bit reflecting the damage and destruction around them. All Yu could do was stare as Naoto continued.

"I understand that, from a certain point of view, this outing may appear more intimate than I intend. I do not know what exactly I will say to him, but I have decided that I will accompany him. Being with you, Narukami, had helped me come to a personal revelation. I want to form my own bonds with others."

"Oh."

It was all he could say, and he hated it. He wanted to say something, anything. Insult Kanji. Insult her. Insult himself, but nothing came out. He was somewhere he had never been before. "I helped you realize that...?"

"Yes. Our time together before your... personal revelation, as well as our time together afterwards, has made me curious." Naoto took her hat off, and Yu was given a rare sight of her hair, flowing and free. She ruffled her hair, scratching her scalp for a moment as she pondered her next words. "I wish to become closer to Kanji-kun, and to create a bond with him."

'I don't wanna be alone!' Her shadow's words rang in his skull as he stood there, staring at her. He tried to speak again, only for his words to come as mixed stutters. "S-so... You? And Kanji?" He couldn't believe this. He couldn't believe, after all he had done, someone else just came in and swept Naoto off of her feet! Was this what it was like to be everyone else...?

"N-no!" A wave of relief washed over Yu, as minor as it was to his heartache. "I mean, I-I do not plan on pursuing any romantic endeavor. You understand, don't you? A romantic engagement would just be a detriment to our case! I-I have no intentions of pursuing anything of the sort with Kanji, or-or anyone!" Perhaps if Yu's mind was more open, more aware of Naoto's emotional state, he would have realized that she was speaking more to herself than him. But his mind was left drowning in a storm.

"Right. Of course... I-I understand. I mean, I wouldn't pursue anyone until the case is closed either. Wouldn't be right."

"Such things are simply... distractions," sighed the detective.

"Right. Distractions." Then silence, and all Yu could hear was his heart, trapped in his throat, beating like a clock, ticking down. "So you and Kanji...?" he repeated it to himself, still disbelieving of it all.

"Please, do not say it like that," she pleaded.

"Like what?"

"Like he and I are... entangled."
He wished her words could comfort him. He wished he could take the words as a sign that he wasn't going to lose this battle of the heart. He really, really wished he could, but all that came from his lips was a venomous reply. "Aren't you? I mean, you're hanging out with him, not me."

"N-Narukami?" Naoto opened her mouth to argue her point, but she stopped when she saw his face. He was smiling, ear to ear. It only took a moment for her to realize the smile was as fake as the one he gave Yosuke-senpai and the others. In fact, it might have been the exact smile, cut out and reused against her. Part of her felt a sense of betrayal; after all, wasn't she the one he was meant to be honest with...?

"Sorry. That came out meaner than I meant. Anything else?" he inquired, his voice straining to sound carefree and even. "If not, I should really get going." He didn't bother explaining why. They both knew that she wouldn't have bought any lie he gave.

"Narukami, did... Did I do something wrong?" she inquired. Damn it, what is it? I don't understand, why is he upset? Did he have plans for us during the Culture Festival? Surely there will be time another night to spend time together. Why is this affecting him so detrimentally?!

"Of course not, babe. I'm just being stupid," he laughed, and neither commented on how fake it sounded. That smile never moved, it didn't even budge as he began to walk towards the exit. "I'll see you later, okay, Naoto? Have fun with your date."

"It's not a-" But the door was closed before she could even finish her sentence.

Yu walked down the halls of the school, aimlessly. His face was twitching, shaking, and his every step felt heavier than the last. He was trying to comprehend what was going on, both around him and within him. He had never been on this side before. He had never felt like his heart had been ripped out and torn to shreds. And the funniest part was that she didn't even mean it. Naoto didn't know about his feelings for her, nor did she know about Kanji's feelings for her.

She had accidentally broken his heart, and it hurt like a gaping wound in his chest. How much did it hurt others when he purposely hurt them? The answer made his skin crawl, and he tried to sort the chaotic wasteland of his mind, if only so he couldn't think about how awful a person he had truly been...

Naoto and Kanji. Kanji. Asked her out. Can't believe it. Holy shit. Before I did. I was so stupid. Didn't have the balls to ask her out. Turn into a chicken shit coward everytime she's around. Stupid. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid stupid stupid!

Haven't lost her yet. But what if I do? Then I do. Let her be happy, with whoever it is. You said you just wanted her happy. But I want to be happy too. Then you'll find another way to be happy. Be happy for her. But damn it, I wanted her! Kanji doesn't even know a thing about her! How much she struggles! How much she hurts! I should be with her!

Damn it!

I'm so stupid.

And so emotional. Shit, pull yourself together.

Be happy for Naoto, she's supposed to be your friend.

'If you really love someone, let them go.'
Whoever said that was an idiot.

Where did Kanji even get the balls to ask her out?!

Let them go, my ass. Fight for them. Win them over. That's what I should have done. Instead I tip toe around like a pansy-ass.

But I didn't want to force it. For once, in my life, I wanted to feel what it was like to naturally love someone, and have them love the real me. No one's ever loved the real me.

God damn it, you sound like such an idiot! No one loves anyone, that's what my parents taught me! I should have known better! No one loves anyone!

But I love her...

Wait... Where did he get it?

Yu stopped in his tracks. His mind raced, images sliding before his mind's eye. Rise's smiles. She was glancing around. Where had she been recently? Last time I saw her, she was by Kanji's side. Acting weird. Concerned for me. Why would she be so concerned?! She...

It actually came as almost a blessing. It gave his mind something to focus on. Something to think about. The ocean of heartbreak and melancholy, the confusion of what to do, the turmoil of his broken heart... It all turned to ash from the flames of rage that were fanned in his heart. They fueled him, drove him forward, as he raced towards Rise's classroom.

He nearly ripped the door aside as he slammed it open, finding the copper-haired idol sitting at her desk, eating her lunch. The few students that were sitting in the classroom stared at their senior, his chest huffing, his eyes unfocused. Yu looked at Rise and motioned her over with a shaky hand. In an instant, she knew why he was there and why he was so disheveled.

She stood up from her desk, her own body suddenly very heavy. She walked towards him, and the other students watched as the door slammed shut behind her. Rise's eyes couldn't meet her senpai's as he spoke a single question to her.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Yes," she uttered.

"How much-?" He shook his head, the twitching only getting worse as his rage blinded him for a moment. "How long?"

"A few weeks...?"

Weeks?! She knew for weeks and she didn't tell me!?

"Why?"

"I just wanted to help him."

"Help? You... you helped him?" He laughed. He couldn't help it, even as he felt his heart being ground into even tinier bits. "You helped Kanji ask Naoto out." Neither knew if it was a question or a statement, as if Yu couldn't fathom the idea. "You... you helped him. Yeah. What was it you said? That I should do my best to be me? And let the pieces fall where they will? I didn't know that meant have you catch them and decide where they fell."

"Senpai, I-"
"I get it. I deserve some punishment for being an asshole. I get that, I do, but... but you, what was going through your head when you helped him? Did you ever, even for a second, think about how I'd react?" Yu tore his fingers through his silver locks, letting out a huff of hot air. "Shit, listen to me. Sound like such a freakin' idiot."

"I never meant to hurt you. I just wanted to help him." Rise had only seen the older boy like this one other time. When she first saw the 'real him.' She tried to speak through the fog of his mind, tried to reach him. "Senpai, you wanted Kanji to try! That's what you told me!"

"Yeah, but... but I never thought he'd actually win." It wasn't a rage-filled roar. It wasn't heartbroken bellow. It was just the sigh of a man on the verge of defeat.

"He didn't win anything!" she argued. "He just asked her out!"

"And she said yes!" Yu growled and closed his eyes, trying to suppress his outbursts. "I know that. I know, but no matter how many times I tell myself that, it just... It doesn't change how I feel, and I know how stupid and whiny that sounds, and it just makes me angrier at myself," he groaned, rubbing the temples of his head.

"I just wanted everyone to be happy..."

"Well, nice try. Two out of three ain't bad." His words struck her, and he wished he wasn't so angry. He squeezed his eyes tight, pleading to himself to find some clarity.

"Senpai... I-I'm so sorry." It was all she could think to say. She reached her hand forward to him, but her fingers never touched him. Yu's hand shot forward, wrapping around her wrist and squeezing it. Her eyes widened as his silver eyes glared at her.

"Don't." He almost sounded like he was begging her. His eyes softened and his breathing slowly began to stabilize. "I'm not..." He couldn't say he wasn't angry. That was a lie. He was furious. "It'll be okay. I'll be okay. I just... I need to be alone. I need to do some thinking." Yu released her hand and he nodded his head, affirming his own beliefs. "I'll see you later, Rise."

Yu didn't say anything else. He turned around and walked away, leaving Rise alone with her guilt and frustration.

That night, Yu returned home to find his cousin, Nanako, ready to greet him. She smiled at him with such joyful eyes.

"Welcome home, Big Bro!"

Her smile was full of glee, and she raced to greet him and tell him about his day, only to find him looking like her father after a bad day. His hair was a mess, scalp red from how much he clawed at it. His eyes were tired, with a glassy sheen over them, leaving them dull and weak. His every movement was like walking through mud. Yu looked ready to collapse at any moment.

"Big Bro! A-are you okay?"

He didn't respond. He just walked past her, leaving her alone. It was just like before he came to live with them. Nanako was alone as Yu stumbled into his room, kicking the door shut behind him.

He didn't turn the lights on. He sat in the dark, taking comfort in it as his mind ticked on. He didn't know how to feel. His heartache had gone numb after a while. He wasn't angry, though he feared a return of his rage if he saw Rise, Naoto, or Kanji. Despite all of it, he wasn't empty. He
remembered quite clearly what it felt like to be empty, and this wasn't it.

*Maybe I really am changing,* he wondered. It didn't matter, at least, he didn't care about it right now. Yu simply did his best to let time go by, and as much as he hated the idea, he was going to stick with Rise's advice. Despite the whirlwind of confusion and emotion inside of him, he promised himself.

He was going to be himself, and let the pieces fall where they will.

**END**
"C-Come in for a first-hand experience with group dating…"

"Please, come in and share in the group date experience with your friends," Yu added, motioning people towards the open doorway. His voice dripped with the weariness he struggled to mask. Yu coughed into his hand and spoke again, his tone sprinkled with artificial sugar. "It's great fun!"

"I don't think this is working," sighed the raven-haired girl.

"I think you're right," he remarked. Yu let out a sigh as he walked back into the classroom, leaving the girl to lure in customers on her own. He let out a disinterested yawn as he sat down, leaning back casually and relaxing by the window. He didn't notice the confused stares Yukiko and the others.

"No one? Still?" Chie inquired. Yu glanced at her and straightened himself out, fixing his form to be more 'normal' for her.

"I'm sorry, but no. Nothing so far." As soon as Chie changed her focus, he sighed, relaxing into his chair again. He briefly wondered his options, before glancing out the window. His attention was distant as Yosuke, Chie, and the class president began making a racket. He stared out the window and his eyes glanced over the drifting masses outside.

The students of Yaso High walked around the grounds of the school, completely oblivious to his own troubles. Part of him was envious of them. The rest of him focused on scanning the jovial masses, trying to find a certain bluette and blonde outside the classroom. His efforts were for naught though, as he couldn't find them anywhere from his seat.

If it was me, I'd start with a nice walk through the haunted house... We'd probably laugh at the shitty effects together. Then maybe we'd get something to eat. Ooh, no, I'd make something at home to eat with her. Yeah, that'd be nice. She loves my cooking... Yu let out a sigh, before closing his eyes. Damn it! Pull yourself together, dumbass. Moping about it isn't going to do shit, so you might as well try something else. Anything else. Literally anything else.

Yu glanced at his friends and noticed how Yosuke acted shocked by something the president had said. Cept murder. Best to avoid that one. Don't wanna add more to Naoto's plate.

Suddenly his train of thought was derailed as he heard the brunette boy's voice. "W-wait, we're supposed to act like we're on a group date?"

"But there's five of us!"

"Maybe... Maybe we could try doing it with four people...?" muttered Yukiko as she glanced towards Yu.

The young man didn't pay any attention to her though. He stood up abruptly and walked towards the doorway, turning his head to briefly notify the others. Yosuke and the girls stared at him, bewildered by their leader's behavior. "I'll get us some attendants." It'll be a good distraction, he mentally added as he walked out the door.

"Hey, you hang out with that guy, right?" The class president looked at the three with a perplexed
expression. "Is he feeling alright? He's been acting really weird lately. I mean, I think he was one of the guys to actually vote for this group date thing. That's already nuts!"

"What? Yu? No way," argued Chie. "He's way too serious and cool to vote for something Yosuke thought of!"

"Gee, thanks."

"It is true he hasn't been acting like himself lately," muttered Yukiko. "I hope things are okay with him..."

Yu leaned against the wall as he watched the passing masses go by him like a stone in a river. No one seemed to pay him much mind, but he promised that was soon to change. It was an old game, one of the oldest in fact, but it was one he was the master at. The game of lying. As simple and sweet as a grain of sugar. It took the young man mere moments to scope out a target and devise a plan of attack. With a flick of his wrist, his glasses were ready to be worn. He placed them on his head and moved in, soon walking into a young girl.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, no! Please, it was my fault! Are you okay?"

The girl was a poster child for 'cute and nerdy,' so much so Yu had to bite the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. Despite his own annoyance and disregard of the girl, his face smiled and offered faux kindness and compassion. "No, please, that was my fault. I didn't look where I was going. I can be such an idiot sometimes," he chuckled, fixing his glasses. "Are you okay, miss?" He took her hand in his and to look for any sign of injury, before pretending to act embarrassed. "Oh, gosh! I'm so sorry!"

"N-no! It's okay! I mean, you're okay. I mean... Your hands are really warm," the girl flushed.

This is almost too easy, thought Yu as he pretended to act coy. "Oh! Uh... T-thank you." Yu looked the rather plain-looking girl over, doing a once over her body when she was looking away. It didn't take long to find the right bait to lure her in. "Is that Millennium Snow?"

"Huh?" The girl's chocolate eyes tilted down to stare at the book in her hand. She turned even more pinkish when she realized the taller boy had seen it. "Oh, uh... I..."

"You're a fan of Bisco Hatori's work too?" he gasped.

"W-wait, you know Bisco Hatori?" The girl's eyes seemed to glisten when she looked at him, and he knew he had her hooked.

"Know her work? I love it! All everyone seems to know is Ouran Host Club, which is amazing, but-"

"But so is the rest of her work! Oh my gosh, I can't believe I finally found someone else who likes her work!"

Gotcha...

The four students left behind were sitting at the small table they had made, acting out what a group date was, or rather, what they hoped it was. Yosuke and the class president sat on one side, Chie and Yukiko on the other. Despite the situation, Yukiko seemed rather distant to the voice calling out her name. She looked at the others and wondered aloud.
"Do you think we should go look for him?"

"Who? Yu? Dude's probably just fine. If I know my partner, he's probably off solving our problem right now, as we speak."

"Solving our problem?" The class president's face wrinkled with uncertainty. "I dunno, I get that he's your friend and all, but he's been acting pretty weird lately. He probably just abandoned us."

"No way would Yu-kun abandon us!" Chie argued, crossing her arms. "He's probably just meditating on how to bring more people in here."

"Meditating? He's a high school student, not a monk, Chie."

"Hey, he looks like the kind of guy who meditates!"

"Meditate or not, I doubt he can pull off that kind of miracle," the president sighed.

"E-excuse me?" Four pairs of eyes swiveled and turned towards the doorway, where a young girl with jet black hair and oversized glasses stared at them. She tried to hide behind her book as she stuttered out a greeting. "H-hi. Y-Yu-kun told me that this is where we can discuss our favorite manga?"

"..."

"My partner, the miracle worker," Yosuke beamed proudly.

"Yu-kun?" repeated the raven-haired girl, her eyes sharpening into a glare.

It didn't take long for the class to be filled with life and laughter.

Yu's handiwork soon became more and more obvious, with more students and more students flooding into the room. When asked, all answered that they had been directed to the cafe by their missing member, Yu Narukami. Soon the class was filled to the brim with students, almost like class was in session, but rather than discussing science or history, the students had grouped their tables together to talk about dating.

It was almost chaotic, but a lively and exciting disorder. The class president was struggling to calm the rambunctious students as one girl tried lunging at another for mentioning how cute Kou Ichijo looked. Yukiko and the others watched with shock, before rushing towards the entrance when the instigator of this chaos, Yu Narukami, entered the room.

"Partner! What the... How the heck did you get so many people to come here?!" questioned Yosuke. The silver-haired boy looked at the headphones donned teenager, before glancing around the room. The others watched as Yu's lips coiled, contorting into a toothy grin. The way his features twisted and turned was unlike anything the three had seen from the silverette. What he said next was even stranger to them.

"What can I say? I'm amazing."

There was a palpable silence as the trio just stared at their leader. He disregarded them as he scoped out his work, pride filling his lungs as his smirk grew. Yukiko voiced what the others thought, her face struggling to not reveal her complete and utter confusion. "Yu-kun? A-are you feeling alright?"

"Just fine, Yukiko," he replied, not even glancing at her. "I'm going to join in the fun, if you don't
mind." He didn't even wait for an answer as he passed by them, slipping between Chie and Yosuke and towards the closest empty seat. He sat across from a first-year boy and quickly began chatting him up, uncaring about any stares or looks he got.

"Okay, that's weird," commented Yosuke.

"Maybe he's tired...?"

"He's been acting like this since Naoto joined us..." Both brunettes turned to look at the furious Yukiko. She was glaring at Yu, who was oblivious to her leer. "He hasn't been himself. He's been acting... wrong. He..."

"Yukiko?" Her friend placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"I'm okay, Chie." Yukiko plastered a smile onto her face and she told herself everything was okay, despite the aching in her heart and the writhing in her stomach. "I'm just worried about him." She pulled away and walked briskly towards the entrance. "I'm going to go see if we can have more chairs. We're going to need them at this rate!"

"Man, what's wrong with her?" Yosuke wondered, earning him a glare from the shorter girl.

"Do you seriously not know?" Chie asked, a hint of disbelief in her eyes.

Yosuke met the glare with one of his own as he crossed his arms. "Tell what? What the hell did I do now to piss you off?"

Immediately Chie seemed to regret her actions and she quickly broke the glaring contest to look at a nearby wall. "I'm not telling you if you can't see it. I promised Yukiko I wouldn't tell anyone about it."

"Wait." Yosuke glanced at the doorway where Yukiko had walked through, before glancing at Yu, who left a table to go talk to someone else. He then looked back at the martial artists with wide, walnut eyes. "Whoa... They like each other?!!"

"No! I mean, maybe? I know Yukiko likes him, but I don't know if he likes her back!" explained the flustering Chie.

"Well, he probably does. I mean, who doesn't like Yukiko? She's pretty, smart, probably the most beautiful girl in the entire school!" Yosuke grinned, winking at the jacket-clad girl. She responded by elbowing him and rolling her eyes as her cheeks burned crimson. "Ow! What the hell?!!"

"Ugh. Nevermind."

Yu winked at the girl as she left her seat. He received her scarlet face for his efforts and he admired his handiwork. The silver-tongued devil had made an effort to remain a good boy for Naoto, but if she could have a bit of fun tonight with some dumbass, why couldn't he spice up his night with a bit of flirting? A corner of his mind tried to speak out about the idea, something about immature and hypocritical, but he disregarded so callously Yukiko or Yosuke might as well have said it.

He heard the seat in front of him groan as it was dragged against the tiled floor. He looked up to see who had the honor of sitting in front of him and he actually needed a minute to put a name to the familiar face. Short, dark green hair that almost looked black and grey eyes... Yu nearly snapped his fingers as he put a name to the tiny figure.

"Ayane, it's good to see you. How are you?" he greeted, playing it cool and artificially caring.
"O-oh! I'm okay! Um... H-how are you?" she stammered.

Gross. Her face is even redder than usual. She sick or something? Despite the slandering thoughts, Yu maintained his facade. "I'm quite alright. I'm glad to see you outside of the club room," he lied. "Any particular reason you decided to go out on a date with me?" he teased, causing her permanently scarlet face to turn an even redder hue. If that was even possible...

"D-date?!" she repeated, and her knees nearly gave out. She fell onto the seat opposite of Yu and she shivered a bit. "Um... I-I wanted to see you, Senpai."

If Yu had to make an analogy, he'd call Ayane a mouse. She was small, tiny, and so easy to bait around. That would make him the cat, looming over her, playing with his food. He struggled to his his arrogance as he nodded. "Oh? Thank you, Ayane. I'm always happy to see you."

"R-really?" she squeaked.

"Of course. You're the best musician in the entire school. How could I not enjoy your company?" Some small, sensible part of his mind screamed at him to stop this game, but his arrogance silenced that voice with ease.

"Oh. Thank you, Senpai... You're so nice. A-and smart too! And talented..."

I know, I know. Please, do go on. "Ayane, please. You're exaggerating."

"I like you, Senpai."

That should have raised a red flag. In fact, the sensible part of his mind was waving several red flags in an attempt to stop Yu from replying. Despite that, he continued to be entrapped by his own arrogance and egotism. "And I like you, Ayane." He leaned forward and placed his hands on the table, not noticing the tremble the girl experienced as he neared her.

"D-do you mean that?"

Her dainty hand touched his, and he felt her fingers coil around his. She squeezed his digits as her grey eyes rose to meet his. The glimmer in her eyes was one that was all too familiar. He had seen in it a dozen different pairs of eyes, some hazel, some black, some blue, some green, but the color was trivial. What mattered was the gleam of hope and adoration. The spark of something stupid and wrong, he realized.

He knew it well, because it was the same glimmer that he had in his own eyes when he saw Naoto. It was the same dumb look in his eyes he had whenever he saw Naoto. The look of someone who had fallen in love, and fallen hard. Yu's stomach writhed and his heartbeat drummed through his mind. Everything was silent when Ayane confirmed his fears.

"Senpai, I... I think I love you.""Oh." Yu wished he could have said more than that, but any smart quip he thought of was drowned out by the deafening beat of his heart and the utter vacuum his mind had become. He glanced down to their joined hands and he pulled away. His whole frame felt chilled to the bone. She was taken back by the sudden separation and she looked at him with pleading eyes.

"What's wrong with me?" That was what her eyes asked him. It was the same thought that went through everyone he'd ever strung along and broke along the way. Like a child, he played with them, before leaving them broken at the bottom of a chest. He'd have another toy to play with while they cried and screamed and bellowed, "What did I do wrong?"
He recognized that question well. He'd made so many people experience it, but only now did the full weight of his actions fall on him. How much he had hurt them. He tried to suppress it as he finally uttered something out. "Ayane. I-I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she replied, her voice brimming with desperation and need. "W-whatever you're worried about, it'll be okay. I can be strong enough. You watch, Senpai, I'll be the girl you want me to be. Confident, and pretty, a-and smart..."

"But you shouldn't have to be. I-I mean, you shouldn't try to be that for me..." Yu's arrogance, his smugness, it melted away like snow under the sun. He tried to breathe, but his throat felt tight, like a boot was stomping down on it. "Ayane, I-I'm not who you think I am. You don't want to be with me."

"..."

"I'm mean." That's the understatement of the year. "I-I'm not just mean. I'm a psycho. I'm a horrible, awful person. A scumbag. I'm the lowest kind of shit." Yu placed his hands on the table as he struggled to explain who the real Yu was. "I manipulated you. I lied to you, to make you think I was this amazing, kind Samaritan, when in fact, I've broken so many hearts, I've lost count. I... I am not a good person."

Silence. Again. Yu's stomach lurched as the void seemed to suck up every sound that was uttered between the two. He looked at Ayane, expecting her to whimper or cry, but she didn't. She was quiet as he silently pleaded for her to say something to his confession. She was silent as he reached out to her. His hand neared hers, only for him to hesitate. Instead, Yu raised his arm and gently placed it on her shoulder.

"A-Ayane?"

"You don't have to lie to me." She sounded so small. So weak. It was like she was bleeding and it took all of her strength to whimper out her dying breath. He could hear her struggling to breathe as the corners of her eyes filled with tears. Yu could feel a pain in his chest as guilt and shame flooded his insides. "If you don't like me, then just say it. I-I know you don't like me. Why would you?" she wondered. "Just, please, Senpai... D-don't lie to me."

"Ayane, I'm not lying! The person you fell for, he doesn't exist. The real Yu is a bad guy and-"

"Stop it!" She tore herself from her seat and ran. She wiped her sleeve against her glistening eyes as her chair clattered to the floor.

"Ayane! Wait!" Yu didn't give it a second thought. He rose from his own seat and took off after her, ignoring Yosuke's voice as he broke into a ran. He dashed out the doorway and saw the sobbing girl stumbling down the hall, towards the stairs. He gave chase, pushing and slipping past anyone in his way. "Ayane!"

If Yu's mind could stop for a moment, he might have wondered why he was chasing after the crying girl. In the past, when he shattered a heart he never cared about it. In fact, he'd probably make an effort to crush it under his boot as he walked away. But his past told the story of a very different man. Yu didn't know what he could say to make her pain go away. He didn't know if he could really explain how much of himself had changed from the day he first met Ayane to now.

He wasn't sure of much, but he was sure he had to try. He had to try to make things right.

Ayane was already running down the stairs to the first floor. It took Yu only a moment to figure
out a way to cut her off. He saw the indoor balcony that hung over the first floor hall and he made pushed his body even after. Thankfully, time spent in the other world was excellent for his physical health. He leaped over the balcony's edge, before grabbing onto it with his hand. With an impressive amount of physical strength, he swung himself down, landing right between Ayane and the front door, not to mentioning wowing several other students.

"I said, wait!" Yu was panting, but his body was still a wall. He was able to trap the crying girl, stunning her enough for a moment of respite. He saw the stares others gave him and without any warning, he grabbed Ayane's free arm, tugging her towards the front entrance. She didn't put up any kind of fight as they walked out of the school.

Once he had found a relatively secluded area, he released her arm, ready to chase after her again. When she showed no signs of fleeing his side, he sighed in relief. "Ayane. I wasn't lying."

"..."

"Ayane, please. I'm not making any of this up! The guy you spoke to, the one you fell for? He doesn't exist, and if he does, he sure as hell isn't me!"

She didn't respond for several seconds, before she forced out a shudder. "You lied to me?" Yu couldn't look her in the eyes when she looked at him.

"Yeah. I lied to you." He felt the twisting in his gut get worse as his mouth felt dry. His silver tongue seemed to rust in his mouth as she stared at him, tears flowing freely now.

"Why? Why would you... What did I ever do to you?!" She was sobbing one and Yu tried consoling her. He reached out a hand to her, but the girl smacked his hand away angrily, leering at him with puffy, scarlet eyes. "I loved you, and-and you're telling me you were faking it?! I loved you! We were supposed to be happy together..."

"I'm sorry..."

"Why?! Why did you lie to me like that?! What was the point?!" Yu muttered an answer, but Ayane couldn't hear it. The floodgates were opened, her inhibitions gone, her heart shattered... "Why?! Why lie to me like that?! Why did you make me feel like I even had a chance?!"

When Yu Narukami began his path of redemption, he made a promise to himself that he wouldn't be the same man he started it as. He wouldn't be the uncaring, cruel liar. He wouldn't be a void who manipulated others to fill some hole in his heart. He wouldn't wear a mask. In the past, he stumbled and he faltered at times, but here and now, he stuck true to his promise.

He told the truth.

"Because I thought it was fun. Because I thought you were a good time waster."

The slap was audible and it left a discolored print on Yu's face. Ayane's hand smacked into his cheek with all the strength she could muster, which sadly wasn't much. All the same, Yu took the hit quietly, accepting his punishment without a word of anger or pain. His silver eyes slowly rose up to meet her gaze, and he saw the furious glare she gave.

She had never looked at him like that before. It was always respect and admiration, not this. The spark in her eye was gone, replaced with a different, yet equally familiar flare. Hatred. It was the same look half of his exes gave him when they found out how he had manipulated him. They hated him, and now, Ayane did too.
He tried to say something, but all he could utter was, "I'm sorry."

Ayane didn't bother saying anything in response. She just walked away, rubbing her sleeve against her bloodshot eyes. Yu could feel whatever bond they had come undone. Every strand of lies that linked them together was cut, until only a single thread laid between them. It wasn't strong, and it seemed ready to fall, but it was there. It was real, at least.

Yu Narukami stood outside the school for what felt like hours. He moved from where Ayane had slapped him and he sat against the school's wall, taking in slow, deliberate breaths. His mind's eye saw images race by. The people he had hurt. The lies he fed others. It was so easy to manipulate others, so easy to make them fall for him, but why did he do it?

The truth was supposed to help him heal and grow. All it did tonight was make him feel revolted with himself.

"Shit," he muttered, moving a hand through his silver hair. I can't... I can't stay down. Come on, you dumb fuck, get up. Do something. He stood on wobbling, trembling legs and he let out a sigh. His eyes drifted towards the direction Ayane had gone. Deal with that later. One shitty problem at a time. Yu placed a hand on his cheek, and had he forgotten, he never would have known he'd be smacked.

Yu released another sigh, before he walked back towards the school's entrance. He melted into the flowing masses, walking around and through the crowd as other students talked and laughed, ignorant of his problems. Part of him hoped to melt away completely, and try to just forget everything. No cares. No worries. Have some fun. He sneered at the thought and bitterly chuckled. Look how far that's gotten me...

Instead, Yu's night continued to be an exciting one. He came to a stop when he saw a familiar hat atop a familiar head of cerulean hair. Naoto? He could have left it alone. He could have just walked away into another direction and completely disregarded it. Yet, he wanted to see her. He wanted to be around her, even if it meant he might get a little heartache in the process.

In for a penny. And with that, Yu's gaze followed after the Detective Prince, his body keeping himself a few paces behind her and her blonde-haired date. Yu watched them go, slipping through the seemingly endless masses of the student body. He saw how close the two walked, side by side, and it made his blood boil. But he had to know how it was going. He had to see.

Call it curiosity, or dread, or paranoia, but he wanted to see how their date was going. He kept his distance as he pursued them, watching them go towards one of the school exits. They stopped in front of a classroom and Kanji motioned inside. The two entered the room and Yu dashed towards the doorway. He hid himself behind the wall, peeking into the class with an inquisitive stare.

Naoto and Kanji were standing in a restaurant-themed classroom. The girls and boys of the class were handing out bowls of food, each of them dressed in formal wear more fitting of a ball or gala. Kanji and Naoto sat at a table and were attended by a young woman who seemed to beam at the two in a way that made Yu's blood boil. It was like the two had been dating for weeks and this was just another outing for them. They looked so happy... She looked happy. So at ease...

It made his skin crawl.

Kanji was talking, but the silverette couldn't hear the exchange. Their voices were blocked out by the white noise of the festival. Kanji reached into his pocket and pulled something out. It only took Yu a few moments to realize it was some sort of stuffed animal, with a keychain connected to it. Even from across the classroom, the unseen stalker could see that the small trinket was of a
Yu watched as Naoto wrapped her delicate fingers around it and marvel at the craftsmanship. He didn't need to hear her to tell she loved the gift. The look on her face, the smile, and the glistening light he saw in those cobalt eyes made Yu's heart twist. He felt jealousy. Revulsion. Happiness.

Shit. Shit shit shit... The smile on her face. She was so happy... That somehow made it all better, and hurt a thousand times more. Naoto was having fun on her date with Kanji. She was smiling, and Yu was happy for her, but it made his heart ache more and more. Naoto was having a good time...

Naoto could actually fall for Kanji.

He wanted to storm in and make a scene. He wanted to march himself over and deck Kanji and tell Naoto she belonged with him. He wanted Naoto. But a voice in his head held him back. It pleaded for him to calm down and be the better person. This time, he listened.

Make her happy. Take care of her. God damn it, Kanji, be the right one for her. Make her happy... He released his rage and frustration in a single sigh. He didn't feel better, but he felt lighter. He stared at Naoto's smiling face one last time, before he turned to walk away. Have a good night, Naoto. Whatever it takes.

"Senpai?"

Yu nearly jumped at the word, swiveling his head to find a familiar girl approaching him. For a moment, part of him wondered if Ayane came back. Instead, he found Rise at his side, staring at him with wide, hazel eyes.

He stared blankly as she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Yu chuckled at his own luck, shaking his head before he answered honestly. "Spying. You?" A moment's hesitation was all it took. He saw the skittish bounce of her eyes and the tension in her figure, before he smiled, weakly. "Wow. You too? Really?"

"I..."

"Hey. Save it." Yu rolled his shoulders as he walked closer to Rise's side. "Want to get something to eat? My treat. We can talk about our woes. Develop our characters. Bitch to each other," he teased. He walked past the stunned girl and reached into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and quietly counted his bills as Rise played catch up.

"S-Senpai, aren't you mad at me?"

"I was. Maybe still am. Don't care right now," he shrugged. "I hear Aika's class is serving noodles from Aiya's. You good with that?" She kept staring at him, scrutinizing him under her disbelieving gaze. He sighed and rolled his eyes, taking a deep breath as he asked, "What now, Rise?"

"Are you feeling okay, Yu?"

"No, not really," Yu's lips curled into an upside down crescent. His smile was weak, and looked ready to break, but it was there. "I've spent most of the night being angry, depressed, and stupid. Time to take a break..."
The scene of Kanji asking Naoto out reminded Rise of a horror movie. Thankfully, not because of any masked psycho running around or anything, but simply because she couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene. She and Kanji had spent the last couple of weeks preparing him for the challenge of asking out the Detective Prince. Now, as Rise sat at her desk and watched the train wreck with bated breath, she wondered if it was enough.

Come on... Come on! Remember what I told you! Confidence! Directness! Gentlemanliness! You can do it, Kanji.

He stood on the other side of the classroom with the bluette, stammering and flushing. His bashful and sheepish behavior was in stark contrast to the thuggish brute he typically appeared to be. Of course, Rise had ample time to get to know the real Kanji. He wasn't the neanderthal that everyone wrote him off as. Sure, he wasn't a genius, but he was an artist, with a genuine heart of gold under his rough edges.

The last week's preparation just brought the kindness and gentleness to the forefront. If Rise was in her shoes, she'd take Kanji up on the date without a second thought.

It took Rise only a moment to realize the implications of what she had thought, and she quickly nipped that thought in the bud. She just forced a practiced smile onto her face as he walked back to her. He was beaming, ear to ear. She told herself that, this was good. That everything was going well. That Yu would understand and forgive her, and that she wasn't jealous of Naoto.

That's what she told herself.

The soft click and hiss brought Rise out of her memories. Yu sat beside her on a school bench, a bowl of food for each of them sat in front of them. The older boy downed the carbonated nectar, before wiping his lips with his sleeve. He then cracked apart his chopsticks and began eating, glancing at her as she aimlessly stared at her bowl.

"So how you been, Rise? You seem to be taking recent events about as well as I am. What's wrong? My back hurt your knife?" he joked

Rise trembled at the words, and Yu felt a wave of remorse and pity wash over him. "Hey, seriously. What's up? You seem to be in an even worse mood than I am, and I just saw the girl of my dreams with another man." Yu placed his chopsticks down and he leaned closer, staring at her crestfallen expression. "Rise, come on. We're friends. I want to help you."

"Why?" Rise's fingers squeezed the hem of her skirt with shaky hands. "I mean, Senpai, I hurt you. I betrayed you."

"Fuck yeah you did," replied Yu, bluntly. He then immediately spoke again, with a far more gentle tone. "But I'm trying to be a better person, and while you may not be as perfect as the media portrays you as, I know you're not bitchy enough to have done this purely to hurt me. Let me guess. Wanted to help an ugly, lost puppy named Kanji, huh?"

"..."
"Yep." Yu took another swing of his soda, before letting out a breath. "So, from what I saw, they're pretty happy together."

"Yeah..."

"So why the long face? You should be happy, right? You did it, Kanji grew a pair and won Naoto's heart." He ignored the queasy feeling in the pit of his gut and continued speaking to the quiet ex-idol. "Rise, what's wrong?"

"..." Her lips moved, but he didn't hear anything.

"Rise. It's okay. I promise. Whatever's going on, I'll help the best I can."

And crazy enough, Yu actually meant it. Yeah, deep down he was still pissed off at her, and part of him still wanted to punch Kanji's teeth out, but it seemed time had changed the silver-tongued liar. His mind briefly reminisced about a time where Rise was just a walking sex toy to him, where he would just smile and nod and pretend to care about her. Now here he was, actually meaning the cheesy things he said to her.

Absolutely fuckin' nuts...

She looked at him and bit her lower lip for a second, before she spoke again. "I think I might like Kanji."

"So? I like him too, even if he is a stupid, piece of... Oh."

The festival was still in its opening stages when Naoto arrived. She was early for the engagement, a personal decision she had made when the inside of her apartment offered her little rest. Naoto watched as students ran by to prepare their own activities, while a few of the early birds were quietly mingling with one another, awaiting the festival to truly begin. She stuck out like a blistered, sore thumb among the school grounds, dressed in a cerulean blazer and plaid, cyan pants. Her trademark hat sat atop her head as she drank from a styrofoam cup.

Take off my skin, I will not cry, but you will.

The more you leave behind, the more you have.

Harder to catch the faster you run...

Naoto had been a fan of mysterious and enigmas since she was a child. While she was far from that same little girl, her grandfather continued to feed her weekly puzzles from the Shirogane Estate. This week's puzzles were not overly difficult, but it felt like Naoto had little time to spare for them. All of her time and attention was directed away; either by schoolwork, the investigation, or by spending time with Narukami...

Narukami... The older boy's reaction to news of her outing with Kanji Tatsumi was dramatic, even for him. She didn't understand why it upset him though. What did it matter that she chose to spend her time with him during the Culture Festival? Was he really so bent on spending time together? Was he jealous that Kanji-kun had asked me out? Naoto felt her cheeks flare against the cool, twilight air.

Stop. This outing is a social event between friends. Nothing more. Even if it were a romantic engagement, Narukami would not be jealous. Our relationship is strictly professional.
And yet, in some dark, corner of her mind, the same corner that her Shadow now resided in (she hypothesized) she wondered what Narukami would say if he was the one she was meant to meet.

"Looking good, beautiful. You wore that outfit just for me?" He'd smile that stupid smirk and lean close, tilting her hat so they could stare eye to eye. "I mean it, though. You look great." And he'd actually meant it, and she'd seen the real man beyond the lies again... A man that was kind and true, but dangerous and flawed...

Naoto grabbed those thoughts and locked them away, tossing the key aside so she could properly ignored and deny them. She let out a sigh as she tossed her cup into a nearby trashcan. Her mind returned to her grandfather's riddles and she began to mumble aloud to herself.

"Take off my skin, I will not cry, but you will... An onion. More behind, more you have... Footsteps." Naoto recalled the mailed questions with pinpoint accuracy, before memorizing her own answers for later. "Harder to catch the faster you run... Your breath."

"Naoto? Y-you okay?"

"Huh?" Naoto lifted her head up and found none other than the boy she had been waiting for. He stared at her with concern as a faint, scarlet hue colored her cheeks. Kanji Tatsumi stood in front of her with clothes she had never seen on the boy before. In truth, the clothing he was adorned in were completely counter to his typical character.

Kanji had replaced his usual skull tank top and leather jacket with a dark violet, buttoned up dress shirt that sat on the edge of being pure black. His pants were a dark beige, with a black belt around them to keep them secure. Finally, draped across his arm and neatly folded was a black coat. His hair still resembled its swept back style, allowing her to better accept that the finely dressed man in front of her was, indeed, her classmate.

"K-Kanji-kun?" Naoto had to stop herself from asking if it was really him. Of course it was him, she scolded herself. She shook the thought out of her head and approached Kanji. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Uh... How about you? You okay?"

"I am quite alright."

"Good. That's great," he replied, a scarlet flush forming on his cheeks, but rather than falter and stutter before the bluette, Kanji kept his cool. "So, uh... Wanna get started?" Naoto nodded her head in response, and the two began walking into the school to begin their not-date. As they walked, Kanji took a moment to lag behind and play with the collar of his shirt. *Damn, this thing is tight...*

"No, no, no, no, and no." Clothes flew across Kanji's room as the young man sat on his bed. The clothes soared through the air as Rise sighed and marched over to him, holding one of his many leather jackets in her hands. "Really? Kanji, how many leather jackets do you need?!"

"Hey, lay off! I just keep losing them," he grumbled, shrugging his shoulders as he stole his jacket from out of her hands. "Besides, what are you even looking for?"

"Clothes!"

"Uh..." Kanji's eyes drifted towards the several shirts and pants left around the room.

"Date clothes, Moronji." The boy glared at the girl as she sighed and scoped out the mess she had
made. "Okay. We'll clean up your room and go out shopping. If you're going to take Naoto out on a date, you'll need the right clothes."

"Uhhh..."

"Don't worry, I'll cover for them," Rise comforted.

"Huh? You sure? I mean, you told me that the guy always pays for the girl's stuff."

"One, we're not dating, Kanji-kun. Two, it's okay. I can cover for the price if you carry the bags. Deal?"

Kanji contemplated the offer for a moment, before smiling. "Alright, deal."

"When did you start thinking this?" He didn't sound angry. He didn't sound confused. Yu sounded like a friend, kind, caring, and without judgement. Rise didn't want to even think about how real or fake he was being. She just took it at face value and put her cards on the table.

"I don't know. I don't even know if it means anything. I just, I realized he's nice to have around. He's nice."

"Nice? You say thank you, and make friends with people who are nice. Nice doesn't get someone to fall in love. Try again," Yu urged.

"He's... he's simple."

"He sure is," chuckled Yu. "Dumb as a rock, and just as good looking."

Rise felt her temper flare at his words. "Hey! He's a lot smarter than he acts sometimes. Maybe not in school stuff, but he pays attention. He's trying!" she growled, glaring daggers at the smirking man.

That smirk vanished suddenly, leaving a more neutral, humble expression behind it. "So you like how he pays attention to you? Not too much, not too little, just the right amount of attention a boyfriend should give?"

Rise blinked, realizing she had fallen for Yu's trap. She looked away, back at her untouched bowl of noodles. She quietly cracked apart her chopsticks and began to eat. He didn't force an answer out of her. He was patiently waiting for her to speak for herself.

"What's wrong with me?" she wondered. "First you, now Kanji? Do I just look for the worst guys to fall for?"

"Okay, hurtful, but fair," Yu smiled. "Don't be too hard on yourself. I am, er, was? I was a manipulative, lying scumbag. I knew how to attract the-" *Almost said stupid... Good save, me. "Susceptible... But Kanji's the real deal, I guess. He actually gives a shit about people and actually would, probably, make a good boyfriend."

He looked at Rise again, crossing his arms and leaning forward, against the table. "But you have to ask yourself this, Rise. Are you actually falling for him, or are you just looking for love?"

"Looking for love...?" She repeated the words again, but came out with no answer.

"So, what do you want to do first?" wondered Kanji as the two walked down the school hall
"You did not plan ahead?" Naoto inquired.

Kanji shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't know if you wanted anything in particular." When she wasn't looking, the young man grunted and tugged at the collar of his shirt. Shit, this thing's tight. He tried in vain to stretch the cloth out, before glancing at the school's stairs. He briefly wondered what activities could be on the second floor, but a reminder of who was up there killed all curiosity. Instead, the young man looked around the hall, searching for something fun.

"How about that?"

Naoto looked to where he pointed and a feeling of dread instantly washed over her. A class room on the third floor had put a part of their budget to advertise their class' activities. the words were a bright, vibrant red, filled in with marker and each letter stylized to appear as though it was drenched and dripping red. Demonic faces decorated the words, some sticking their tongues out to try and lick up the raining blood drops.

"Horror of the Haunted Halls," Kanji read. "That could be fun, right? I've never gone through a haunted house before. You?"

"I... I'd rather not. Surely we can invest our time in a more dignified activity. I believe one of the first year classes has an art gallery. Let's examine that, shall we?" Naoto didn't wait for a response. She was already marching towards down the hall, leaving the blonde-haired delinquent to stare at her back.

"Did... Did I say something wrong?"

"You should take her to the haunted house first!"

"Huh? Really?"

Kanji took a moment to stop eating his ice cream to glance at his strawberry-ice-cream-eating compatriot. In his own hands was a cone of chocolate ice cream, half eaten and melting.

"During the Culture Festival," she explained, a soft smile on her features. "Girls love going through something scary hoping to see their man protecting them. If you and she go through it, she'll be on you in seconds."

"Huh." Kanji licked up his ice cream as he pondered the idea. Judging by the rising fire on his cheeks, Rise's words made their impact on the boy. "O-okay. Right. Haunted house... I can do that!"

"Good! And word of advice? Maybe try to control your cheeks. You're looking kind of like a tomato, Kanji-kun."

"Huh? Tomato...? Hey!"

Rise couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the furious tomato with a mouth. The other boy, to his credit, took the teasing as good-natured ribbing. All the same, he finished his ice cream with a few chomps, before looking at the girl.

"Yeah, yeah. It's real funny." He rolled his eyes as Rise's chortling finally ceased. "This the store?"
"Yep. Let's go, Kanji! You have a detective to impress!" she beamed, motioning him to follow after her. Her beaming grin hid the bubbles of remorse and dread well.

Naoto and Kanji walked along the gallery, examining the interesting pieces of art the class had put on display. In truth, many of the drawings and crafts were below even amateur level, but she still enjoyed this more than she would have enjoyed the supposedly haunted halls. She examined an above average piece portrait of a calm, cerulean waterfall as Kanji cleared his throat.

"So what was that stuff you were mumbling to yourself?"

"Huh? Excuse me?" Naoto blinked, pulling her eyes from the oil painting and looking at the blue-eyed student. He looked back at her and maintained a level of calmness, thanks to Rise's training.

"I heard you mumbling stuff to yourself outside the school. What was it?"

"O-oh," Naoto's cheeks turned warm at the question. She shoved her hands into her pockets and stroked the fabric of her pants with her thumbs anxiously. She dipped her head down to avoid his inquisitive stare as she muttered an answer. "My grandpa and I enjoy riddles. So he sends some to me from time to time and I try to answer them correctly..."

Kanji stood like a statue as she continued on down the gallery. "Seriously? Shit, that's awesome!" He followed after her as she kept her cobalt eyes directed at the floor, hidden under her hat.

"I-it's really nothing special."

"I've never been good at riddles. So I think it's pretty cool."

"It's nothing special," she repeated, trying to distract herself with someone's self portrait. The poor product did little to sway the conversation.

"Can I hear one?"

Naoto lifted her head up, meeting his oceanic eyes with her own blue-grey eyes. Her confusion was met with genuine curiosity. She felt the edges of her lips being pulled upwards as she replied. "Very well. I have been going over some of them in my head. Perhaps you'd like to help me with them?"

Kanji let out a nervous chuckle, scratching his warm cheeks with an anxious finger. "Uh... I-I don't know how much help I'll be, but I can try."

"The more you leave behind, the more you have. What am I referring to?"

The young man opened his mouth, before closing it again. He scratched his blonde locks as he pondered the question. "Uh... More you leave behind, more you have? How does... how does that work?" Naoto's face showed a certain level of amusement as he pondered the question, walking side by side with her.

"Do you want me to explain?"

"Can ya? I'm seriously lost."

"Footsteps. You leave more footsteps behind, and thus gain more." Naoto stopped in her tracks and swiveled her head to look behind them. They had left several footsteps behind them, from the painting to where they stood now.
"Huh. Okay, hit me with another."

"Ooh, how about this?" Rise suggested, holding up a blue jacket with white accents.

"I already have jackets," replied Kanji.

"You have a leather jacket. Correction, you have like seven leather jackets. Who even needs that many leather jackets?" she argued, placing the jacket back on its stand.

"I like leather jackets!"

"I know you do, and yeah, you fill them out well, but you need some kind of variety." Rise looked at another rack of clothes, leaving Kanji to glare at her. Before the implications of her words dawned on him and his eyes narrowed, as if trying to see through Rise.

"Wait, what did you say?" he questioned, following the retired idol around the store.

Internally, Rise felt a rush of embarrassment and regret at her words, but she made a show of playing it off. She didn't even meet his stare as she looked through clothes. "You have muscles. Girls like that, but they can come off the wrong way if you don't have the right outfit to accent them. Oooh, maybe this?" Rise smiled, taking a fashionable, dark grey shirt and holding it against Kanji's chest to the boy's exasperation.

"D-do you think Naoto likes them?" he wondered, glancing at his covered arm.

"Hm... She doesn't seem like the type to swoon for a guy with strong arms, but they won't hurt. Naoto may be a detective, but she's still a person. I've seen her blush, and I'm sure you will too!" she teased. "Now, take these, try them on, and tell me what you think! And make sure it isn't too tight on you, but also not too loose. We want it just right," she commanded, shoving a pair of shirts and a jacket into Kanji's chest.

"R-right! Okay!" And like a good soldier, Kanji nodded his head and followed her instructions, marching towards the fitting rooms. As soon as he the door closed behind him, Kanji inspected himself in the mirror. He looked himself over with a growing scowl on his features.

Yu Narukami was a hot guy. Everything seemed to go right for him physically. But Kanji? Kanji was far from perfect, and he sure as hell wasn't hot. Only person to call him attractive was his ma, and that was her job...

I'm tall. Girls like tall guys, right?

Yu Narukami was tall too, but unlike Kanji, he didn't tower over people like a decrepit building. He was more like a gleaming skyscraper, like a monument or something. He inspired people. Kanji terrified them like he was about to fall and crush them.

Kanji threw off his jacket and looked at his face, leaning closer to the glass. He put a hand to his chin, feeling the tiny hairs that were beginning to grow on him. He rubbed his calloused fingers against his sandpaper skin and sighed.

Yu's face is like a freakin' sculpture made by some... some sculpture making guy! I look like someone hit a rock with a jackhammer until it looked like a head...

Kanj threw his shirt aside and looked at his bare and naked chest. He felt his arms, measuring the bumps that his muscles made. He flexed his body for the mirror, looking himself over with a bit of
pride. That was one thing he had over his senpai. Then the idea of Naoto looking at him popped into his mind and his cheeks turned hot and breath short.

He let out a deep sigh as he began to dress himself in the clothes Rise had picked out for him. Every article of clothing had some designer logo or felt like it had been factory produced after some frou-fou artist sketched it out and called it style. To put it simply, these clothes were the kind of things he wouldn't be caught dead in. But if Rise thought they'd help him with Naoto over...

Kanji had his back to the mirror when he placed the stylish jacket onto him. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned around to take in the horror show he probably resembled. He forced his eyes open and took it all in, shocked to find that... he didn't look too bad. Granted, Kanji wasn't as fashionable as Rise probably was, but... he didn't look half bad.

He examined his purple shirt and felt his scowl turn upside down, slowly growing into a healthy smile. It hugged his body when he tucked it in, but he could stretch his arms up and down just as easily as he could in his leather jacket. His pants were a bit too dorky for his nature, but they weren't torn and no stains. They were clean and fresh and made him feel the same.

"Heh. Not bad," he chuckled, grinning at his reflection. "Not bad at all..."

Kanji stepped out of the fitting room with a new confidence and he turned his head around, searching for his partner in crime to tell her the good news. He expected to find her and maybe even wow her, but what he saw instead pissed him off. Rise was still in the main room of the clothes store, and she had her head nearly buried in a rack of dresses. That wasn't what caught Kanji's ire. It was the two douchebags staring at Rise from across the room.

"Dude, I'm telling you, I think that's Risette!"

"Dude, you think Risette would be hanging out here? Besides, look at her. She's way too plain to be Risette. Risette's a bombshell. She's like, a seven out of ten, tops."

"Hmm... Yeah, I guess you're right. Still, be my wingman. I'm gonna try and get her number."

Kanji's eyes drifted towards the copper-haired girl and he saw how her shape seemed to shrink with every word. The bubbly nature he always saw her with seemed to vanish as her dainty fingers squeezed a dress. The fabric wrinkled and her fingers turned pale and she shivered. If Kanji didn't know better, it was almost like she was on the edge of tears...

His eyes turned to the two boys again and he saw red.

"Hey!" The two boys turned their heads to find a well dressed, but pissed off demon of a man stomping towards them. They shrunk against his approaching figure, practically shaking as he towered over them. "You both better shut your mouths before I kick your collective asses, ya hear me?!"

"Oh God! T-that's Kanji Tatsumi!" one boy whimpered. "Dude killed a whole biker gang when he was a kid!"

"S-shit, d-don't hurt us! We didn't know you called her already!"

Kanji's nose flared like a bull as he leaned closer, causing both boys to tremble even harder. "I ain't calling shit! Both of you pack your shit and get out of here before I pound you into the ground, got it?"

"R-right!"
"W-we're sorry!"

"Hey!" The two boys froze in the middle of the doorway. "Just so you know? That girl you were talking shit about?" Rise felt her body go stiff and her breath freeze in her throat. "She's a million times better than Risette! Got it?!"

"Y-yeah, sure!"

"W-whatever you say, man!"

"Kanji..." Her voice was so small. She couldn't lift her head to meet his softening gaze. She just stared at the ground as she stumbled towards him. "Thanks..."

"No problem."

"I was offered a role in a drama before I went on hiatus."

Yu and Rise sat outside the school, sitting on a bench, away from the hustle and bustle of the festival. They could still hear music and laughter from within, but it all seemed so far away as the two stared at the darkening sky.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I was going to be a new girl at a high school full of quirky boys and girls and get wrapped up in all the drama that comes with high school." Rise let out a bitter chuckle as she shook her head. "When I refused the role, I didn't think... I didn't think my life would turn out like this."

"Yeah, our lives are kind of dramatic, ain't they?" observed Yu. "I mean, hell, when I came to this town, all I wanted was some sexy, fun time. Now I'm stopping a murderer and getting my heart broken by the one that got away."

"What's wrong with me? Why do I keep doing this to myself...?" The girl sounded so empty. So tired. Yu reached over to her and quietly placed a hand on the shoulder farthest from him, giving it a comforting squeeze. She leaned towards him, falling on his shoulder. He let her stay there as he spoke.

"There's nothing wrong with falling in love, Rise. Look, we still don't know what's going to happen. Either the night ends with them together or not. All we can do is sit here and wait."

"Easier said than done," she lamented.

"Most things are," he sighed, shrugging his shoulder. Her head gently rose and fell as she laid on his shoulder.

"I'm surprised you're taking it so well... I mean, no offense, but you've barely said anything mean about Kanji."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed," joked Yu, before he allowed his smile to fade. He sighed. "Honestly? I feel nauseous. It feels like my heart is being ripped out and stomped on, and yeah, it fucking sucks, and I'm pissed off, but ya know what? Long as she's happy."

That brought a soft smile to the retired idol's face. "You've come a long way." Yu just grunted in response as the window blew by. "Hey, Senpai?"

"Seriously, just call me Yu, Rise."
"Okay, Yu, can I ask you a question?" She felt him nod his head and she went on. "If you could go back in time, knowing what you know now, would you stop yourself from falling for Naoto?"

The silverette was silent for what felt like an eternity. Rise didn't look at him. She gave him that privacy as she rested on his shoulder, staring off into the sky. The wind howled again as she finally heard something from the young man. A chuckle.

"I know what I'm supposed to say. I know what would be the mature, moral thing to say." Yu cleared his throat and spoke with elegance and grace. "'I hold it true, whate'er befall. I feel it when I sorrow most, tis better to have loved and lost. Than never to have loved at all.'" Yu chuckled again, and Rise finally rose her head up to look at him. "And you know what the funniest, dumbest thing is? I actually agree with that. I fell in love with Naoto, and if I could go back? I'd fall in love all over again, every time."

"Even if she and Kanji end up together?"

"Even if that happens," he murmured. "Man. I feel bad. I was really hoping I could break the mold and say, 'fuck this shit, I'm out. I wish I had never fallen for Naoto,' but I guess that wouldn't be very honest of me, now would it?"


"Why stop now?"

"Do you think you and I ever could have been anything?" Silence. Rise lifted her head to look into his wide eyes. They were like two pools of shimmering, silver treasure. "Do you think we still could...?"

"Yeah, and my ma, she- she couldn't believe it. She was so mad! I'd never seen her yell that loud since," Kanji laughed. "Oh, man... The cops were shaking in their boots afterwards."

Naoto wasn't sure how it had happened. Perhaps her time with Narukami had left her more comfortable with social interactions. Perhaps the fact that Kanji Tatsumi had a genuine interest in activities she enjoyed was the key to a more easy conversation between the two. Perhaps Kanji was just an easy person to talk to, or maybe, just maybe, she had gotten better at talking to others.

Either way, Kanji and Naoto's outing had been an enjoyable one so far. Naoto was enjoying an activity she would have once called frivolous and pointless. It was almost comedic in a way. She had not expected Tatsumi to be such comforting company. He was almost as easy to talk to as Narukami had become.

The two's path had led them through the school's first floor, where they now entered another classroom. This class was serving food, with the students imitating waiters and waitresses at a black-tie event. Several decorations, including paper chandeliers hung from the ceiling and walls to try and enhance the atmosphere of the room. There were even cheap, electric candles sitting on every table. Most weren't even lit, as the room's lights kept the place perfectly illuminated.

"Heh. A-anyways, your turn. You wanna tell me another riddle or, uh..." Kanji pulled at his collar as Naoto stared at him. "I mean, I'd like to hear about you."

Naoto's felt her mouth become impossibly dry as the words sank. She coughed into her fist as she made her choice clear. "There's been one riddle this month that has left me scratching my head. Perhaps a fresh perspective would help me?" she thought as she walked towards a table. Kanji stood behind, sighing as he followed after her.
"I doubt I'll be much help, but I ain't no man if I don't trust. What's the riddle?"

The two sat down on unfolded chairs, seated around a table that was just two desks pushed together with a white cloth thrown over them. A single, pink and silver candle sat between them, flickering from on and off between the two.

"Imagine a large, dark room. There is no way to illuminate it, thus you have zero visibility. How do you escape within a minute?"

Kanji gawked at the riddle, before letting out a low stutter. "Uhh... Keep going left?"

"A unique strategy," Naoto noted with a curious tone to her voice. "But sadly impossible. There is not enough time. The room is too large to escape within the time given. Now, I have several theories on how escape is possible, but my leading theory is currently-"

"Hi there, may I take your orders?!" Naoto was cut off as a young waitress greeted them, skipping over with a notepad in hand.

"Oh, uhh... I'll have a couple of spring rolls," Kanji quickly answered.

"Do you have any coffee?" Naoto inquired. The girl's blank stare gave enough of an answer and the bluette sighed. "I'll have a bottle of water, thank you."

"Okay! Can I just say, you two make a really cute couple! I assume your boyfriend is paying for your water?"

Naoto's eyes widened, as did Kanji's. Both of their faces turned scarlet, but only one of them voiced their thoughts. "We are not a couple. Tatsumi and I are just friends. This is not a date! I will be paying for my own water!" Her reaction, no, her outburst was far louder than it needed to be and it elicited several stares from other patrons. Naoto's discolored face ignored them though, and she quietly tipped her hat down to ignore them better.

She couldn't see Kanji's own stare, his aquamarine eyes cracked from the force of her shouting. He let out a quiet sigh as the waitress apologized and walked off. "Um... Y'know, I could pay for the meal, right?"

Naoto didn't even look at him as she replied like clockwork. "It's quite alright, Kanji-kun. I will pay for my own order."

"Really, it's no problem."

"I insist."

"I-" Kanji bit his tongue and began to count down from five. When he hit zero, he released a captured breath. "Alright. Well, you wanna talk about anything?" Naoto was quiet, leaving the blonde to decide on the subject. There was a long pause, before he cleared his throat and spoke. "I... uh... I made you something."

"For this. I... uh... I made you something. For this. I already said that," he mumbled to himself, before reaching into his pocket. "I-I don't know if the others told you, but I'm pretty good at putting stuff together. Stuff like clothes or stuffed animals. My family owns a textile shop. You've... been there." The boy sucked on his lip as he inwardly cursed at himself. "Heh. Sorry.
I'm... I'm not really used to talk to... people, I guess.

"It is quite understandable, Kanji-kun." Naoto returned his smile and a weight was lifted off of his shoulders. "I can sympathize. I am still struggling with social interactions. I've been told I have a tin ear, so to speak."

"Huh? What's that got to do with anything?" he questioned, raising a brow.

"Well, it alludes to 'the Wizard of Oz.' A common children's story and popular classical film. There is a character within the story known as the Tin Man, and he fears he is unable to feel emotion due to his lack of a heart. The Tin Man does goes on a quest to acquire a heart, but... er." Naoto came to a stop and tipped her hat once more to shield her flushed cheeks. "I apologize. I ramble at times. Please, go on, you had something for me?"

"Hey, s'cool. I think it's neat. Er, you talking."

"Yes, Narukami has told me similarly. I do not know if he is merely teasing me or being genuine in such compliments." Kanji ignored the pang in his heart at the mention of senpai's name. He kept his smile, even when Naoto seemed to remember something. "You know about Narukami, yes? Perhaps we could talk about him later? I've been rather curious about him and I was wondering about your view of him."

"Yeah... No problem." His face was smiling, but his heart was pounding. He bit his lip again as he thought, *Did she just agree to this so she could ask me about him?* He ground his teeth against each other, but he calmed down when his finger brushed against the lump in his pocket. *Remember what Rise said. I can do this.*

"Kanji-kun? Is something the mat-"

"Here are your orders! Enjoy!" beamed the waitress, placing their orders on the table. Both offered their thanks as she skipped away, leaving them alone once more.

"So I made you something," he repeated. "I... I hope you like it." Kanji hooked the trinket on his finger and lifted it out of his pocket, handing the key chain to his friend as her eyes widened.

"Why can't I wear my jacket?! It's freakin' cold out there!"

"You'll be fine. I got you a coat, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but..." Kanji glanced at one of his many leather jackets, before his eyes drifted back to the purple shirt Rise had given him. He sighed. "Whatever." A hand gently fell on his shoulder as Rise spoke, her voice laced with concern and sympathy.

"You okay? Butterflies in your stomach?"

The look on Kanji's face said it all. "Y'know, my dad wore a leather jacket when he met my ma." He glanced at Rise and snickered at the look on her face. " Seriously. Crazy, huh?" His blue eyes drifted back to the violet shirt and his smile wavered. "Guess I like wearing them cause it makes me feel like he's by my side, y'know...?" He tore his eyes from the shirt and looked at the retired idol. "I mean, that and I like the way they look."

"Kanji..." Rise looked at one of the many leather jackets littering the room and lifted one up from the ground. She turned it over in her hands, inspecting it of any stains or marks, before looking at the boy again. "If it means that much to you, I can-"
"Nah. You're probably right. Whole thing looks better without it. Besides..." He began to put the shirt on over his plain, white undershirt. "I don't need my dad watching my back on this one. I got you." He grinned at her, and Rise felt her cheeks turn pink at the cool gaze.

"When I would get nervous before a performance, my manager would always try to give me a pep talk. He'd tell me, "Rise-chan-" The idol lowered her voice, trying in vain to mimic her manager's baritone voice. The attempt brought a smile to Kanji's features. "You can do this. You're a smart girl, you've been practicing for weeks, and you're a natural. Everything will be okay."

"Uh... I'm a smart girl?" Kanji repeated, amused by her imitation.

"You know what I mean, Moronji," she snickered, lightly hitting his shoulder with her hand.

"Yeah..."

"Hey, I've probably hung out with you more than any other girl, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Then trust me. You're a great guy. You're kind, sensitive, and just big ol' teddy bear deep down," she complimented, poking the delinquent's cheek. The taller boy scoffed, and gently tried to elbow her away.

"Knock that shit off," he joked.

Rise smiled at the boy and felt a small increment of pride and delight. She remembered her first meeting with the boy. He, Yosuke, and Yu had came to her grandmother's shop to warn her of the murderer. Yosuke, and looking back, even Yu were starstruck. Not Kanji. He never saw Risette, something not even Yu could admit to. Now she was friends with the blonde boy.

And he's going to run into Naoto's arms and leave me behind. Rise stopped and shivered slightly. Kanji didn't notice thankfully.

W-where did that come from? I'm not... I don't...

"Rise? Hey, you okay?"

"Huh? Yeah! Yeah, I'm great! What's up?"

Kanji peered at the copper-haired girl, before shrugging. "I was saying that I made Naoto something for our uh... date." The boy's cheeks flushed as he reached into his pant's pocket. He pulled out a small keychain and Rise marveled at the sight of it.

A gorgeous blue bird, flapping its wings as it took off. There was a chain connected to it, linked to a large, metal circle. The sapphire-colored bird was soaring, eyes, legs, and beak as black as night, The trinket was soft to the touch, almost pillow-like. Rise was beaming at the sight, astonished by the skill and craftsmanship.

"Kanji, you made this?! T-this is so cute!" Rise held it in her delicate fingers, treating the tiny avian with the utmost care. She turned it over in her hands, gushing about the lovable trinket.

"Heh. Thanks. I've been working on it for a while and, well... You really think it's nice?"

"Kanji, I love it! I mean, this is just... it's so cute!"

"Thanks. You think Naoto will like it?"

And just like that, Rise felt like smacking herself. She had been caught in the moment. A boy, one
that she had been spending over a week with, giving her an amazing, and handmade, gift... Could she really be blamed for getting lost in the moment?

"Naoto's gonna love it, Kanji."

She didn't know why that hurt so much to say. She just did what she did best and faked a smile.

"Rise." Yu lifted a warm, steady hand to her cheek. She didn't dare rest her head on his palm without his permission, but his thumb gently drew circles on her cheek. It brushed away a tear that she hadn't realized had even been there. He looked at her, and she looked back, holding her breath. "There will never be anything more than this."

Rise laughed. It came out harsher than she meant it to. She pulled away, but his hand kept her sitting beside him. "I'm not sure what I was thinking."

"That misery loves company. That maybe you had it right the first time. That maybe if I held you in my arms and kissed you on the lips, you could forget about Kanji like that." He snapped his fingers to emphasize his point. "Yeah. I get that. I... Was going to use you to get my mind off of Naoto. I... get it. I do."

"But...?" She felt like she already knew his answer. She still waited for his answer.

"Well, I'm trying. Trying to change, I mean, just like you. I..." Yu closed his eyes and sighed. His hand slipped from Rise's shoulder, but she didn't move away. The two sat on that bench, alone and cold as the night ticked on by. "There was this girl. Ayane. She's in my music club."

"You're in the music club? Aren't you also on the basketball team? And drama club? How-"

"Rise. Focus," scowled Yu. He exhaled through his teeth and looked away from the copper-haired girl. He leaned forward, glaring at his hands. "Ayane told me she liked me today."

"What? Oh. Oh no..."

"Yep. The Old Yu just loves causing problems for me, and yeah, if you were wondering, I did manipulate and lie to her. She fell for me, and I was planning on maybe getting some of her before ditching her when I left town." The silverette let out an aggravated groan as his fingers clenched and tightened into fists. "I don't even remember why her. She's not even that cute! What was I even thinking?! You're an idol, at least." Yu sighed again and placed his hands on the back of his head, gently pulling down as he continued. "Anyways, one thing led to another... I told her the truth. Got slapped. Then I saw Naoto and Kanji together. So, yeah..."

"It's been a rough night," mumbled Rise.

"Very." He rose back, straightening himself out as he glared at Rise. "Would you even want to be with me? I mean, really?" Rise didn't say anything as her almond eyes drifted away from him. His glare vanished, and a calmer mind guided his hand back to her shoulder. "Rise, you are an amazing girl. You really are, I mean, I don't even know if I'd be here if it weren't for you, but I simply don't like you that way. I know it sucks, but I'm done with faking love."

The memory of Ayane sobbing flashed across his mind and Yu inhaled deeply. His free hand flinched, nearly balling into a fist, but he relaxed it before it could. "I'm sorry." He wanted to laugh at their lives, but all that came out was a bitter grunt. "I'm sorry, Rise."

"It's okay, Senpai." They locked eyes, and finally found the strength to laugh. Rise wiped away her
tears as Yu felt his lips being tugged into a small smile. "It's not. It hurts, and I feel so dumb, but-but it'll be okay."

"This is very impressive, Kanji-kun," Naoto commented, gazing at the trinket. "And... and you made this for me?"

"Y-yeah."

"I hadn't known we were meant to make one another gifts. I don't have anything for you, and honestly, I'd feel guilty taking this."

"Don't!" Kanji pushed the extended hand back to her and he took a deep breath. "I mean, t-there's something you can do for me... i-if you want to make it even with me."

Naoto couldn't ignore the writhing in her stomach. She saw the fire on Tatsumi's cheeks. She saw the way his chest rose and fell as he took in fast, rushed breaths. She saw the way his eyes gazed at her. It was a stare that she was all too familiar with, but she still pleaded and hoped that she was wrong.

Kanji-kun, please, don't...

"Maybe we can do this again? As more than friends...?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"I-I said, maybe we can do this again as-"

"I heard you." Naoto couldn't meet his pleading stare. She felt her mouth dry up as his blue eyes burrowed holes in her skull. "Tatsumi..."

"Call me Kanji. Ya don't have to keep using honorifics either. You can just call me Kanji..."

"Kanji-kun, I'm sorry."

Those words hurt him a lot harder than they should have. They were just words. They shouldn't have felt like he was getting his heart stabbed, but God damn it, it fucking stung. The regret in her voice fell on deaf ears. All he could do was glare at her, muttering to himself, not even meaning or expecting her to hear him.

"Why are you sorry? I'm the one being dumped."

"Kanji-kun." Naoto took a moment to contemplate her words. Part of her wanted to repeat the same lines she always said when pressed into this issue, but with Kanji, she simply couldn't bring herself to speak with the same cold, apathy others received. "I'm sorry, but I simply do not want anything more than a platonic relationship."

"With me? Or with anyone?"

"With anyone." Naoto placed both hands on the table and sighed, raising her head to glare back at him. Her cobalt eyes softened when she saw his pained, shimmering eyes. "I am sorry, but I simply do not want a relationship like that. I'm not looking for this kind of relationship with anyone! Not
while there is a murderer running around, and not while I need to devote my time to solving this mystery and putting the killer behind bars. I can't waste my energy on distractions such as this."

"You sure have a funny way of doing that. Don't you and Senpai 'devote' yourselves to each other all the time?" he spat.

Naoto was taken back by the venomous remark.

"Narukami and I are friends, and yes, I would even go as far as to call him my closest friend, but I promise you that our feelings for each other are..." There was a pregnant pause as Naoto searched for the proper word. "Professional. Simply professional."

"Yeah. Right," he scoffed.

"I hope- I truly hope you and I can still remain friends, Kanji-kun..." Kanji didn't respond. They just stared at one another as time ticked by. Naoto realized the trinket still hung from her fingertips, gently swaying back and forth as she raised her hand and stretched it out to him. "I'm sorry..." His hand met hers midway, and he gently wrapped his shaky fingers around her hand.

"Keep it." He wanted to ask her to, but it came out more like he was pleading her. Naoto opened her mouth to deny the idea, but his eyes locked with hers once more. "Just keep it. Okay?"

"Very well..."
"Perhaps I should go?" He didn't say anything. Naoto glanced at him, before looking away. She saw the exit and sighed. "I'm sorry, Tatsumi."

Kanji's fingers twitched as she rose from her seat. He bit down on his lip, trying to stop his mouth from speaking. He failed. "Going to go run into his arms?"

"W-what did you say?" Her eyes fell on him again, and they saw the fire in his own azure orbs.

"If I was him, you'd probably be all over me, huh?" Kanji stood up, soaring over the detective. "Is it cause he's smarter than me? Better looking? Or do you just like liars?" His hands were fists and they were trembling. Anger and rage that usually resulted in fights had nowhere to go. He couldn't raise his hand against the blue-haired detective. No matter how angry he was, he couldn't do that to the one he loved.

All he could do was spit venom and jealousy. "If you like liars, then why don't you like me? Why the hell do you like him of all people?!"

Naoto's confusion shifted between emotions. A glimmer of hurt was seen in her eyes before it vanished, replaced with a steadfast temper. "Narukami is my friend. I understand that you are upset, Tatsumi, but I don't understand why you have to lash out at someone unrelated to-"

"Unrelated?!" He mocked. "Are you seriously saying you don't get it? The way he looks at you? The way he talks to you?! "The way I look at you... "Naoto... Just... What's wrong with me?" he growled, pleading for an answer. "Why can't you like me like, like how I like you?"

An answer that Naoto simply couldn't answer. No, that was wrong. She could answer. She just didn't know what the right answer was. "There's nothing wrong with you, Tatsumi. I simply do not return that level of attraction. I admit, you are an interesting boy, but-"

"But what?!" he raged. People were staring now. Naoto felt her cheeks burn hot under their many stares.

She wished Tatsumi didn't created such a scene. The attention was embarrassing and embarrassment was a fuel for her own anger. Guilt was another fuel, one that she felt more and more the longer she saw into his eyes. It wasn't a sight she was unaccustomed to. Heartbreak, confusion, and rage were an awful concoction. It was just painful seeing her friend look at her that way.

"I'm sorry." It was all she could muster to say as she turned to walk away. Kanji was left alone, the center of gossip and even laughter as other students stared at him.

*Don't do something stupid.*

*Don't... just don't... Just-*

Kanji let out a booming bellow, kicking over the table he and Naoto had sat at. Some people screamed. Some people flinched. Others just watched as the enraged delinquent walked out, huffing and panting.
Letting out his anger was supposed to help. Whether it was on those dumbass bikers who kept his mom up or a metal chair he'd swing until it broke or he didn't have any strength left, letting it out was supposed to help.

Tonight, it didn't.

Yu and Rise sat on the bench in quietly contemplation. Rise rested her head on his shoulder as he left his arm hanging on hers. Both wished the other was someone else, but they didn't say anything. It was just nice to have company. Just nice to sit there with a friend.

But to one ignorant of their recent heart-to-heart, the scene looked like one of romance. A pair of cobalt eyes fell upon them, and for reasons Naoto couldn't understand, she felt a pang of anger. The sight of Rise, so comfortably resting herself on the shoulder of her partner, her best friend, it made her stomach twist.

She considered leaving them be. She wanted to just leave the festival, and lay in bed until exhaustion carried her to sleep. She took a single step back, but failed to lift up her foot high enough. The sound felt deafening as Rise lifted her head off of Narukami and both turned to see her standing there.

"Naoto?" she heard him gasp.

"Narukami. I apologize. I was merely…" Staring? Ogling? Making a fool of myself? Damn it, you stupid girl, control yourself. She never had a chance to finish her sentence, interrupted by the copper-haired girl.

"Where's Kanji?" Kujikawa asked, rising up from the bench with Narukami. The two walked over and Naoto's eyes darted down, noticing the inches between their hands. In the back of her mind, she wondered about Kujikawa referring to Tatsumi by his first name, but disregarded it. The idol always was informal.

"Tatsumi is…” She didn't know how to answer the question. She didn't know how to explain it. It seemed like she didn't need two as the older boy and her classmate shared a look. They spoke without words and again, Naoto felt that pang of frustration.

She reasoned that she was merely jealous of their camaraderie. The ability to share a sentence with only a glance. Anyone would seek that level of friendship.

The sleuth saw Rise whisper something to the silverette. He nodded and whispered back at her as the two separated. They stared at one another for a moment longer, before turning their attention to Naoto.

"I should probably head home. I'll see you tomorrow, Senpai. See ya, Naoto." She smiled as she bid her goodbyes. It was a charming, winning smile that warmed the hearts of most who saw it.

As fake as her Risette persona, Naoto bitterly thought.

But is it as fake as your 'Prince' persona? A little voice mocked. She stomped it down and ignored it as Yu waved goodbye to the idol.

"You headed home?" he inquired, placing his hands into his pockets and leaning on one leg. She nodded in response, her face reflecting her frustration and annoyance for tonight, despite her best efforts to remain calm and collected. "Mind if I tag along?" He didn't bother giving a reason, but Naoto could guess.
"I like your company."

"I'm tired."

"I'm bored of Rise and want to be with someone smarter."

Naoto silently cursed her exhausted mind as she led the two towards the school's entrance. There was no need to be so hostile towards her teammate, her friend. She didn't know why her subconscious bit and hissed at her.

$Lashing out from stress. It's been a long night. I'm desperate for someone to take it out on. that's all... How immature, she thought to herself. She scolded and reprimanded herself as Yu fell into step by her side, offering quiet comfort and solidarity.

It typically wasn't hard to find Kanji. The young man usually made his presence known, either with his own boisterousness or how others feared or gossiped around him. Despite this, Rise couldn't find the young man anywhere in the festival.

She walked into their classroom and found his things sitting at his seat, and when questioned, the other students replied that they hadn't seen him. She sighed as she walked out of their classroom, her schoolbag hooked onto her shoulder. She glanced down the hall, but found no sign of the blonde delinquent.

*Kanji has to be around here somewhere, she thought. Where the hell are you, Moronji?! Think... Where would I be if I was him...? By Rise's side. Rise bit her lip, glancing left and right for the boy. Damn it. Stop that. Just... just focus on finding Kanji. That's all that matters right now.*

She wanted to be focused. She wanted to be serious. Like how Naoto could be... But all she could think about was what she saw, and everything it meant. She saw Naoto alone. What did that mean? What had happened to Kanji? What did they say? She could only imagine...

*Did Naoto reject him...?*

It was the first guess she had come up with. How could she not? Kanji was supposed to tell her he liked her, that he wanted to go out with her again. If she rejected him, that would explain why they were apart. Why she looked like she was in such a hurry to get away from the school...

The idea that Naoto rejected Kanji, after all the weeks of helping him muster up the courage to tell her, left a bad taste in Rise's mouth, and a churning in her guts. She felt something bubble inside her mind. It was disbelief mixed with rage, with a dash of relief and regret. How could Naoto reject Kanji like that?! The boy probably poured his heart and soul to tell her how he felt, and she rejects him?

If the positions were reversed, she'd-

Rise stopped when she reached the end of the hall. The doors leading outside were propped open with a large room, giving her a clear sight of the school's gym. The basketball court was being used to store extra goods and products that the classes might have needed. It was probably full of random junk, just sitting there in the dark.

The doors to the gym were opened.

*It could be anyone, she told herself. Maybe Kanji already went home and just forgot his stuff. Maybe it's just someone getting supplies. Maybe someone just left the door open.*
But what if he's hurt? I need to find him. If he's in pain, I need to help him...

Why? So you can get him to fall for you? She asked herself the question, but it almost like her shadow was alive and speaking again. Maybe she was. But Rise wouldn't let it get to her this time. She wouldn't let it scare her.

No. Because he's my friend. Because if he is hurting, then it's my fault. Rise was already walking towards the gym, purpose guiding each step. Maybe I don't love him. Maybe I do. But he's still my friend.

She came to the open door of the gym and gazed into the waiting darkness. The only light came from the moon, through the windows. Tiny, silver beams in an ocean of darkness. She didn't hesitate any longer, she couldn't afford to. She walked into the dark and called out for her friend.

"Kanji?"

The walk back was blissfully quiet. After all the excitement and stress of the festival, a quiet walk home under the cold nightly breeze was calming. Narukami hadn't said anything since they left the school. Part of her feared she was boring him, but whenever she glanced in his direction, he had a smile on his face.

Not a smirk that dripped with arrogance, not a grin laced with erotic thoughts and perversions, but a smile that put her fears at ease. She wished she could understand how he was able to affect her in such a way with so easy a feat...

Perhaps this is simply his ability to speak without saying anything? But it that were the case, why can I not do the same? Naoto let out the quietest of sighs as she continued walking, Narukami by her side. She wished she could quell her curious mind. She wished she could push aside the feelings or regret and guilt that plagued at her heart, pricking and stabbing at it like thorns.

The cold air bristled her face, no longer as comforting as it was before. It felt harsh. It felt spiteful...

That's when Yu's voice interrupted her thoughts. She glanced at him again to find his lips sealed in a wryly smile. "I-I'm sorry?"

"I said, it's okay." Naoto rose a dark brow, silently motioning for Yu to continue. "Whatever happened. I won't ask, and you don't have to tell me, but it's okay. Everything's going to be alright." He shrugged his shoulder lazily as his smile fell from his lips. "I don't know what you and Kanji talked about. I won't ask. Just know that I'm here for you. You and me? We're still friends. Unless you don't want that. Then I'll probably go home and cry like a little bitch." His voice accented the last word, drawing it out slightly.

And despite the crassness of his words, Naoto couldn't hold back a small smile. She brought her knuckles to her lip as she snickered at the hyperbole. Then that light snicker turned into a giggle. Her eyes closed as she laughed at the imagery. Yu Narukami, their leader and her senpai, eating away at a tub of ice cream over such a slight thing such as her?

It was rather comedic.

"I'm glad the idea of me suffering brings a smile to your face, Detective Prince," chuckled Yu.

"I-I apologize," she gasped between laughter. "It has simply been a long night."
"I didn't think my joke was even that funny."

She met his grin with a tiny, uneven smile of her own. "It wasn't," she admitted. "But I needed it. Thank you, Narukami."

"No problem, babe."

"No. I mean, thank you for the offer." Narukami paused at that, raising a silver brow as she explained with a soft smile. "I promise, I will explain what happened tonight to you another day, but for now."

"Hey. Like I said, Naoto. No problem." He smiled back at her, his features laced with trust for the detective. Confidence in their bond. Naoto adjusted the rim of her hat and quickened her pace, hiding her scarlet cheeks from his eyes.

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_I was so fucking stupid._

_Why would she want to be with a dumbass like me?_

_God damn it, I'm so fucking dumb._

_Damn it!_

"Kanji?"

His eyes widened at the voice.

"What the hell is Rise doing here?!"

"Kanji, are you in here?"

He was, but he couldn't her know that. He couldn't let her see him sitting in the dark, squeezed between cardboard boxes, acting like such a bitch. He had to be strong. He couldn't let her see him like this, acting like some pussy...

He considered meeting her head on, scowl on his face, but that wouldn't work. She'd find him and ask why he was there, and then what? No, he had to hide. Hide and hope she wouldn't find him. He'd text her and tell her he was on his way. It'd be fine.

He just couldn't let her see him...

He pushed his body deeper between the cardboard boxes, quietly trying to push himself deeper into his hiding spot. The corner of one dug into his scalp, making him shuffle and twitch in discomfort. His shoes squeaked against the basketball court and he let out a muffled cry of pain as a coat hanger stabbed him in the side. "Shit!" And then a box fell from its' place on another and landed on his head, electing another curse. "Fuck!"

"Kanji?"

"Damn it!" He picked up the small box that fell on him and threw it through the air like a bullet. It hit the wall and fell against it, bouncing on the floor harmlessly as its' contents spilled. _Chalk up another fuck up..._

Rise was walking towards him. Despite the darkness of the room, he could see her basking in the moonlight from a window. She stared at him with pitiful eyes. The same kind of pity that Naoto and the rest of the world looked at him with. Because why would Kanji Tatsumi be good at anything?
"Kanji..."

"Fuck off, Rise. I'm not in the mood." His words were nasty and spiteful, but they didn't slow her down. She approached him closer, still looking at him with those large, almond eyes. It pissed him off. "Didn't you hear me?!" He threw a box off of him and snarled at the smaller girl. "Get away from-"

She ran towards him, throwing her arms around his body and squeezing it. She was so much smaller than him, but that didn't stop her. She linked her arms together behind him and held him there as he froze. The hesitation only lasted a moment as he grabbed her shoulders and tugged at her, trying to rip her off.

"Let go!"

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry!"

What? He pulled her far enough back that she was just barely holding onto his shirt; her fingers wrinkling the purple cloth. Her chocolate eyes were wet, shimmering with tiny tear drops. She's crying? Why the hell is she crying? She leaned forward, hiding her face in his chest as she tried to hold back her tears, biting back tiny sobs.

"I'm sorry... I-if I had given you better advice, or if I had helped you more, than she wouldn't have-"

She knew? Of course, she knew. I wouldn't be in here, acting like a little bitch if Naoto told me she liked me too. Shit...

"Kanji, please... I'm sorry. I-"

"Stop it."

"What?"

"Kanji...

He pulled her off of him, but before she could speak again, he pushed her down. She sat him down in front of her and he joined her. He sat down in front her, hands massaging his head as he sighed. His voice was gravely and hoarse. "Just stop. This shit ain't your fault." He remembered his classmate. That little girl who he he wanted to make smile.

He remembered seeing her cry.

He remembered how much he hated it.

"Kanji...?"

"I'm fine." He shook his head as he sighed. "So stop crying, will ya? Can't stand seeing a girl cry, alright?"

"Kanji."

"I'm fine, Rise." He tried standing back up, but her hands clamped onto his sleeves, latching onto them. "Let go of me," he demanded, firmly. "I'm going home."

"Kanji, please. Talk to me."

"I'm fine." He wouldn't let her see. She couldn't see. So he tried to force himself up again, but she just pulled him back down. Now his temper was rising. He glared at her as he demanded, "Rise, let
"Why the hell not?!"

"Because you're not fine!" She yanked him back down for the third time, and he was shocked to see the melancholy in her eyes turn into a fire. "Being a man doesn't mean you don't feel anything, Kanji!"

"And how the hell do you know how I feel!?" he shouted, finally forcing her hands off of him.

"Because I'm not buying your 'I'm fine' crap!" The inferno in her eyes didn't back down. He didn't know or understand where it came from, but her jaw clenched as she glared at him. He had never seen her so man. "Don't you understand that I care?! Don't you get that you're not alone?! You can talk to me, you stupid, dummy!"

"I ain't stupid!" He tried to shove her away, gain some breathing room, but she shoved back, meeting his wrath with her own. "I don't need your help to do shit! I understand things just fine on my own! Naoto doesn't like me, and I don't like her! I... I hate her guts!" He wished he sounded more convincing when he said that. Instead, he just sounded like a whiny bitch.

She bought it about as well as he did, but her anger was at least waning. Her determination and stubbornness did not though. She planted her feet firmly as she spoke, softly, but with a steely edge. "I know that's not true, Kanji. Denying it will just hurt more..."

"I don't need anymore of your advice." The words hit like a hammer, but Rise proved stronger than he'd gave credit to. "I don't need your help. I'm fine," he lied. Despite what he said, they both knew it was denial. He wanted to say he hated Naoto. He wanted that to be true, but no matter how hard he tried... He couldn't change the way he felt about her.

Kanji still loved Naoto.

Even after she broke his heart.

"I-"

He was silenced by a tiny weight on his chest, pressing against him. It reminded him of that night after the hospital. When Rise first offered to help him. Except this time they were facing each other when he hugged her. She buried her face against the soft, violet cloth. He didn't know what to say when he heard the broken pleads of the idol.

"Shut up, Moronji. Just- just shut up."

He tried, for just a second, to push her off. She didn't let go. She just embraced him for what felt like hours until he gave her what she wanted. He hugged her back.

She was so small in his arms. Kanji was scared he'd break her in two, but every time his grip began to weaken, she only hugged him tighter. She held his firm body in her dainty arms for what felt like hours, never weakening, never wanting to let go. If she was in pain, she didn't say a word. She just held him. She held him until he stopped protesting. His arms crushed her against him as he buried his head in her hair.

"It' okay, Kanji. It's okay..."
He sure as hell didn't feel okay. He felt like his heart had been ripped out. He felt like he'd be shot and was bleeding all over the damn floor. He felt like he was a little bitch as his fingers dug into Rise's back and tears grew in the corners of his eyes.

He felt stupid. Stupid for thinking Naoto would ever like him the same way he likes her. Stupid for actually trying to ask her out. Stupid for thinking Rise would just let him go without trying to help. Stupid for rejecting her help...

"I'm a freakin' idiot," he wept as his vision blurred. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stop the flow of tears but again, Kanji failed. Rise just quietly shushed him, letting him brush the tears away in her hair as she consoled him.

"Shh. You're not. You're not, Kanji..."

"Narukami."

The silver-haired boy glanced at his compatriot, not missing a beat in his step. She had a far off stare in her eye, glancing over the horizon to see her apartment building. She may have been staring at it, but she wasn't truly looking at it. She just needed something to focus on so she didn't have to look at him.

"Yes, beloved?" he teased, his features twisting into something more arrogant and malevolent. Naoto would have been intimidated, if she couldn't plainly see through the act.

"I have a question for you. A serious question," she clarified, immediately wiping the smirk from his face.

"Oh. Sure, shoot."

"Why did you lie?" Naoto betrayed her own plan, glancing at the face of the older boy. She saw the genuine surprise in his eyes, the dull light of confusion playing in his eyes. He had stopped walking and she stopped with him, watching him from the corner of her cobalt eyes.

"Is this a specific moment, or..."

"No. In general. You lied to me, to the others, even to your uncle and cousin, I imagine. I understand you learned from your parents, but that is merely how you learned to lie. I am asking you, why?"

Narukami didn't answer at first. He pondered the question, showing caution and hesitation uncharacteristic of him. Naoto did not rush him. She merely stood by his side, awaiting a response. The night's air seemed just as still as they were, as if awaiting his answer as well.

"Because I chose to." He smeared a smile on his face, taking a step forward. "My parents never loved me, you see. My father would beat my mother whenever he drank too much, and he always drank too much, and when mom wasn't around, he'd beat me. It was a dreadful living."

"I said, it was a serious question," she chided.

"I know. Doesn't mean I can't give a non-serious answer," he replied.

"Why? Why will you not tell me, Narukami?" Perhaps she should have respected his boundaries, but her curious mind hungered for an answer, an understanding of the silver-tongued conman. To her surprise, she got one.
"Because I thought a lie was easier to live with." He looked around them, finding a patch of grass by the sidewalk ripe for the sitting. The town's river was not too far from them, she realized.

He motioned her to follow him as he sat down, falling onto his back as he gazed at the night's sky. Her gaze fell upon the shimmering lights that the river held. A moment of peace before they walked down memory lane. "When you asked me about my past, I reacted like a dick. I knew that then, and I know that now. I've been 'mulling' over it," he explained, using air quotes when he used the word. Naoto assumed it was meant to be teasing, but said nothing in response.

"And I think I'm ready to tell you about it, if you still want to hear."

"I do," she quickly answered. "I just... I want to understand you, Narukami. "I want the distraction. The company. The truth... And in a quiet, darker part of her mind, a portion of her mind added, I want to understand what Tatsumi meant..."

"My parents were liars. I mean, my mom's a lawyer. That should be enough of a sob story to explain how I got here," he joked. She didn't laugh, but that just seemed to ease him further. "My mom and dad also cheated on each other. A lot. They rarely had sex with each other, but with other people? I've lost count of how many guys have probably fucked my mom..."

Naoto should have expected something like that, but the bluntness still left her with scarlet cheeks and wide eyes. "N-Narukami, I'm sorry..."

"Why? Are you my mom?" His tone wasn't biting or rude. It was too light and friendly to be that. It wasn't a joke either, though. He sounded too cynical and uncaring to be that. He just stated it like a fact to her. Narukami turned his head to look at her and he gave her a weak, sympathetic smile, a gesture simply meant to show her he was okay. "Don't apologize for things that aren't your fault, Naoto."

Narukami closed his eyes. He looked so peaceful, laying on the dark, emerald blades. He looked ready to sleep, and Naoto found herself smiling at how content. "It's a beautiful night," he muttered.

"I suppose it is, yes."

"Hm." His eyes opened, and she saw his iron-colored eyes staring past her, reliving a memory long buried. "Dad cheated on mom, not that she cared. I'd see him making out with dozens of women, even a couple of guys if he was bored enough. I'm sure they did way worse behind closed doors." She didn't say anything. She merely sat beside him, staring at the glimmering waters...

"Narukami..."

"Don't apologize, Naoto."

"I won't." Her cobalt stared at his hand, calmly left on his chest, gently rising and falling with each breath. She lifted up her hand to grasp it, but reconsidered at the last moment. Instead, she gently placed it on his shoulder. A motion of solidarity. "I merely wish you had a better life."

"I have better now." He smiled at her when he said that, finally looking at her again. "Much better company, at least."

"I'd hope my company would be be more preferable," she replied, meeting his gentle smile with one of her own.

"Was that a joke, Detective Prince?"
"A humorous observation."

"Heh. I'm sure." The corners of his smile dipped as he sighed. "My parents lied. To each other, to me, to everyone. Growing up around that, lying just seemed so easy. Eventually, I realized if I lied to people, I could get them to like me. If they liked me, they'd do things for me. They'd fall for me, fight for me, cheat for me, even die for me... Lying seemed so much better than the truth."

*Lies better than the truth... Is that what Tatsumi would have preferred? A lie? Telling him what would make him happy, rather than how she honestly felt? The very idea is baffling! But Narukami grew up in an environment where my reality would have been seen as childishly optimistic, at best! "Your parents did not reward you for the truth, I imagine."

"They didn't care. Didn't care if I was good, didn't care if I was bad. So I decided to myself, might as well pick what's more fun." He shrugged his shoulders again as the night air gently brushed his hair. "And honestly? For a time, I didn't care. I just... went with the flow. Town to town. I'd lie to people, never caring about them, and then I'd ditched them in an instant. Looking back, it was a pretty empty life. Fun sometimes, but no substance. Just flash. I didn't care what my parents did, or what people thought of the real me. It was just so much easier lying..."

"What made you stop?"

Narukami was quiet, but his mind was active. She saw it in the way his eye flinched and darted away. The way his body tensed and his cheeks burned against the cold breeze. Whatever the catalyst was, it was not one that would be easy to coax out of him. Again, a part of her mind wondered if she should have stopped. Instead, she squeezed his shoulder in another silent gesture of trust.

"I met you."

Naoto felt a familiar fire in her chest. It burned at her insides, from the bottom of her curling toes to her scarlet cheeks. "I-I made you change?" she stammered.

"Yeah. Meeting you was a catalyst for... well, a lot of changes," he sighed. He sat up from his place on the grassy plain and dusted himself off. "Can I tell you something? Honestly?"

"O-of course," she stammered, rising up to meet the boy. He looked away and Naoto could see a familiar glint in his irises. She recognized it because she had seen the same light in her own eyes. *Shame.*

"This guy's killed two people. He's tried killing several more. He's a piece of shit, no doubt there." He paused, searching for the words as his eyes fell to the grass beneath their feet. "And I'm almost glad he did. If he never did, you would never have come here, and I never would have changed." He let out a breath through his teeth, shaking his head side from side as he thought aloud. "I'd still be the same guy I was before, and I wouldn't even be upset. I liked being bad. I liked being a scumbag. It was so easy to just lie to people and get them to do whatever I wanted."

"So why stop?" a voice asked. It took her a moment for the detective to realize it was hers.

"I told you. I met you."

"But how?" He tried walking away from her, but her fingers found themselves wrapped around his hand. "Narukami, that doesn't make sense. How could I have had that effect on you?" How wasn't the real question on her mind. It was why. *Why me? Why not Chie-senpai? Yukiko-senpai?! Rise-san!? Unless... No. No, that cannot be. Not again.*
Her mind recalled that fated kiss. At Port Island, when their had met, both of their breaths reeking of alcohol and foolishness. They took in each other's scent and their tongues... Their tongues were not just touching. They had been smacking against one another, tasting each other. His mouth had been dominant, controlling, whisking her mind away to a new horizon.

It was the exact kind of scenario she wanted to avoid.

It was the kind of moment a girl experienced when her first kiss was stolen. It was the same fleeting, hormonal stupidity that was so common among people their age. It happened to most girls. Normal girls. But it wouldn't happen to her. She couldn't let it. She was meant to be a detective, like the ones from her books, like her mother and father! She wasn't meant to be in a situation like this where her best friend...

When Narukami didn't answer, she released his hand, as if it burned her. Guilt chilled her soul when he saw his eyes stare at her. They reminded her of Tatsumi's. Please, not again. "N-Narukami? Do you... do you harbor feelings for me?"

The amount of people who saw Kanji crying could be counted on one hand. Tonight, Rise was added to that short list. She and Kanji sat on the floor together, the retired idol comforting the broken-hearted youth with kind words and gentle hands. He was crying still, though the flow of tears was on the verge of stopping at this point. He scratched at his face with the sleeve of his purple shirt, wiping his snot and salty tears on it as he let out stuttering breaths.

"It's okay. Let it out." Rise didn't know what she was supposed to say. She'd never been in a position like this before. The closest thing she'd ever experience to it were letters from fans who told her how Risette had changed their lives and made them so happy... But those letters were for Risette. Not Rise Kujikawa.

It was nothing like they movies portrayed it. It wasn't a single tear traveling down the side of an actor's face. It wasn't pretty and quiet. Crying was loud, with snot dripping down your face, struggling to gasp for air as your eyes turn arid and red.

No movie ever broke Rise's heart like this though.

"I can't believe I was so stupid..."

"You're not stupid."

"What the hell do you know?!" he bellowed, glaring at her through the tears. His eyes were a bloody crimson, matching his rage. She returned the stare with compassionate, almond eyes. "You're the one who calls me Moronji. Why the hell would a girl like her want a guy like me...?"

She saw him digging his nails into the palms of his hands, and without missing a beat, she grabbed his wrists.

"Give me your hands."

"What?"

"Give. Me. Your hands." She did her best to put emphasis and force behind every word, even behind her chocolate irises. He stared back with azure pupils, unsure how to react for a moment, before he uncurled his fists and offered both to her. He looked away, stubbornly rebellious, yet reluctantly willing. He felt her hands land in his palms as she ordered him again. "Squeeze them."

"Rise, what the hell-"
"Squeeze. Them." He rolled his crimson eyes and did so, firmly holding both of her hands. Her smooth brow wrinkled as she commanded him again, "Harder, Kanji. Like you mean it."

"Rise-"

"I'm not going to just stand by and do nothing! I'm not just going to sit aside and let you hate yourself! Squeeze my hands." He scoffed at her words, looking away with a scowl on his face. "I can take it." She squeezed his larger, yet surprisingly gentle hands in her grip. "Please, Kanji..."

"..." His scowl faded away as he just stared at a nearby box. He glared at it with weakening, heartbroken eyes. Whenever he opened his mouth, he just bit his tongue and squeezed her fingers a little harder. "I'm stupid."

"No, you aren't. Naoto's stupid," her mind hissed, but she pushed that thought aside.

"Then I'm too angry. Or not manly enough. A coward. A wimp! I'm just a fuck-up!" he raged, his voice growing louder and more hoarse with every declaration. "I messed up! She chose him, and I fucked up!" His hands were squeezing tighter now. She disregarded the pain and put on a compassionate smile.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Kanji. Naoto's the one who made the mistake."

"Then why am I the one feeling like shit while she's off with Yu?" he croaked, unable to hide the tremble in his voice and body.

"Sometimes, things just don't work out." His hands squeezed tighter. Rise hid the pain behind a gentle smile. "You can, but you can't force love. Love just happens. It happened for you, and it happened for Yu, but... it just didn't happen for her."

"Happened between them," he growled.

"You keep saying she chose him. Did she say that?" His scowl provided all the answer she needed as Rise continued. "And even if she did pick him, if it makes her happy, can you really blame her?"

"Yeah!" He spoke with a fiery heat, but the fire began to wane as soon as he saw those knowing eyes. "I... I wanted her to like me."

"And she does. Who could not like you? You're like a big teddy bear," she cooed, using their linked hands to gently poke at Kanji with his own elbow. "Kanji, I can't even begin to imagine how much you're hurting right now, but believe me when I say, it isn't your fault. The pain goes away. You could... even find someone else." She tried to shrug her shoulder nonchalantly, ignoring the slight discoloration of her cheeks.

"I wanted to be with her." The blunt honesty of his words stung at her chest, like tiny needles Rise's heart rolled in. She ignored it again as he opened up. "Do you think they're going to be together?"

Rise's jaw clenched as she searched for an answer. Her hazel eyes drifted shut for a moment as her mouth opened, but nothing came out. "It's possible. It's more about them than either of us."

"Yeah..."

"If they did, would you try to stop them?"

Kanji ground his teeth, but the fires of anger went cold once again as he sighed. Just a single breath
took the fire out of him. "I...I don't think I could." "I wish I could," she almost heard him say.

"Spoken like a true man." Kanji blinked, almost unable to understand the words. He lifted his head up, finally facing her with a bewildered look in his azure eyes. He looked like he was about to say something in response, but his eyes shot down to their locked hands. "S-shit! I'm sorry!"

Her hands looked so pale in his, probably because of how tightly he was squeezing them. He pulled his fingers off of hers, but wasn't able to tear his hands from her grip. She was holding his hands. Kanji... The thought of admitting her interest in the blonde delinquent bubbled in her mind. She popped the thoughts and brushed them aside.

"Kanji, it's okay. I'm okay. You and me...? We're okay, right?"

"COURSE we are..."

"Good." I want to take it slow. For the first time, a boy doesn't care about Risette. He cares about Rise. He cares about me...

"Um... T-thanks, Rise..."

She squeezed his fingers back, knowing her own strength paled in comparison, yet she didn't care. She smirked as he blinked in confusion. "Anytime, Kanji-kun. That's what friends are for."

"Friends, huh?" He scoffed. His hands finally freed themselves and Rise tried to ignore the urge to catch his hands again. He rubbed at his eyes, wiping away any lingering tears. He let out a melancholic sigh, before the corners of his lips curled upwards. His eyes had a spark in them again as he chuckled. "You're a real bro, y'know that, Rise?"

It was her turn to look dumbfounded, but she just sighed and brushed it off with a smile. "Thanks, Kanji-kun. You too."

"Do you... harbor feelings for me?"

Yu felt his heart stop at the question. He felt like he was having an out-of-body experience as he imagined himself just looking like a statue to the detective's inquisitive stare. He tried to open his mouth, but he couldn't even get that right.

Say something, stupid! "I consider you my best friend."

"And that is all?"

"No. It is not." Yu felt a pang of heartache at the way Naoto seemed to cringe at the words.

"I'm sorry, Narukami, but I'm with Kanji-kun now. I hope we can still be friends." Yu crushed his imagination under his heel and sat up, resting both of his arms on his knee as he looked at the detective.

"Naoto, I won't deny a certain level of attraction to you," he admitted. What am I doing?! His silver pupils glanced at her dark-blue eyes and he felt his breath being stolen away. He swallowed, pushing aside the piling anxiety in the pit of his gut. "You're incredibly smart, an amazing detective, and you... You didn't believe my lies. That may not sound like much, but when you're a liar who everyone believes, being told to shut up was kind of a crazy thing."

He let out a nervous chuckle as she continued to stare at him, mouth agape. He continued to talk,
enjoying the confession before she had the chance to break his heart. "You led to me becoming a better person, Naoto. No matter what you think of our relationship, that's a simple fact. You were the catalyst that changed my life. There's no way I couldn't have a certain level of attraction to you."

"But... and Rise!" Naoto stuttered. "Naruakmi-

"Wait, hold on a second." Yu's brow vanished underneath his hair. "What about Rise?"

"I thought you and Rise would have... You revealed your true self to her first. I would have though that she was the catalyst, and-and that she would be the one you had feelings for!" Naoto's cheeks were on fire, and he almost laughed at how endearing she looked. The great Detective Prince, turning five different shades of red, because of some stupid boy.

"Rise?" he repeated. "She's nice, and yeah, she's my friend, but she wasn't the reason I changed. She may have been the first person I showed the real me to, which is debatable, really, but you were the reason. I wanted to change because of you. Because of how you saw through me. Through my lies. How you didn't like me. I wanted you because I couldn't have you at first, but as time went on, you just... I found myself attracted to you. I realized that the night of the King's Game."

*The King's Game...* The memory of their kiss sent shivers down his spine. He wondered if it did the same for her. "That was also the night you punched me," he teased, hoping to lighten the tension in the air with a weak grin. The attempt fell flat as the bluette just cast her eyes away.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't be. I deserved it." There was a field of silence over them again. The cold breeze sent a chill down Yu's spine, or perhaps that was the memory again. The way their lips felt against one another. The passion and heat between them. The silver-tongued liar had kissed many, many people in his life. None compared to Naoto.

"I can't... Narukami, there are so many reasons why you shouldn't, why we shouldn't-

"Yeah. I know." She looked at him with wide eyes, gaping at the thin, knowing pools of silver.

"You know...?"

"Of course. I mean, you told me that you weren't interested in dating." With a silent glance, Naoto saw his smile hide more than was said.

"And yet...?"

"I like you. You're the smartest person I know, and you put your smarts to good use, actually helping people. You never thought to abuse it, like I did. Not to mention how determined you are. You get such a passion in your eyes when you find another clue. You don't give up, not even when we caught Mitsuo and got him arrested. You'd move mountains to solve this case, if you could. How can I not be amazed by your spirit? By your mind? I-"

"Stop!" She stomped her foot onto the ground and moved her fingers through her azure locks, knocking her hat to the ground. It laid there as she gnashed her teeth against one another. "You can't be serious. Surely, you must be joking. This is nothing more than a fickle, infatuation! Hormones! It must be! You can't honestly be saying you feel that way!"

Another pang of heartache. Narukami tried not to think about how easily Naoto wrote off his feelings. He ignored the festering sting in his gut and calmly replied. "Naoto," I love you. "Calm
down. You're acting-

"I am not acting like a child!"

"I was going to say presumptuous." Naoto's cheeks flared red as Yu shrugged his shoulders, lazily. "Besides, it's a moot point."

"What?"

"Moot point. It means it doesn't matter." He smirked, as smug as ever, at the cobalt glare she gave him. It was especially annoyed this time around, and even cuter because of it. "I'm not asking you to marry me. I just want to ask you out. I have every intention of respecting your desires, Naoto. I mean, I didn't wake up this morning planning on telling you about my attraction to you, but hey, done's done. Don't treat this like me telling you that I want to marry you. It's just me being honest."

"You- What?"

"I respect you too much to disrespect what you want. I care about our friendship too much to force it to be something it isn't. I mean, you're my best friend. You made me change, and I've fought too hard to just ruin everything," he sighed. "That, and I'm just a coward. I mean, I'm just talking out of my ass right now." He looked down to find his hand mindlessly plucking blades of grass. "I may try to look cool and confident, but I'm actually horribly insecure. Empty inside. Hollow. Etc." He shrugged again. "I'm probably not making sense anymore."

Naoto didn't confirm nor deny the claim. Instead, all she could do was stare in bewildered astonishment. "N-Narukami, I don't... I don't even know where to begin. I don't know what to say..."

"The truth is you don't have to say anything. Naoto, you're my best friend. You mean a lot to me. Honestly, all I want is for you to be happy. Whether you're happy with me, someone else, or with no one, it doesn't matter to me. All I'm saying is that I want to ask you out when this whole mess ends. I think it'd be fun. Feel free to disagree," he chuckled.

"What if I say no?"

"Then I'll say okay." The two locked eyes again and Yu gave her a warm smile. He reached for her discarded hat, picking it up with the utmost care as he rose up from the grassy field. "Naoto, I don't want to scare you. I don't want you to treat me any differently. I just wanted to be honest with you."

"And I... I appreciate that," she admitted, with a strain in her voice that proved impossible to hide or ignore.

Yu turned his head away and glanced at the corner of the apartment complex. He then brought back his attention to Naoto with a lost spark in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know. Just felt like the right thing to say." He handed her the blue cap and she took it with a mumbled thanks.

"I just... This is a lot to take in," she sighed. Her fingers dug into the navy material, bending it and twisting it, only to let it shift back into place. "Narukami, I think I'd like to walk the rest of the way alone. It has been a very long night..."

Yu's smile was a centimeter off, more than enough for Naoto to see the pain it hid. "I understand.
Have a good night, detective. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Of course."

"I wouldn't want you missing out on my performance." Yu flamboyantly flicked some silver threads aside. "I'm warning you, I look damn good in a dress." He wanted to see her smile, he wanted a sign that things were going to be okay. When Naoto didn't reply, he just nodded his head in acceptance. "Take care, Naoto. I'm sorry you had a rough night."

She nodded her head in acknowledgement. He didn't say anything more as he began to walk, brushing past her with his hands in his pockets. The crunch of grass underneath his feet and the whispering breeze was all he heard for a moment. Then Naoto spoke again.

"Did you mean it? That I am your friend? What of Yosuke-senpai, or Rise? I would have thought that you were closer to them. Of everyone in our group, you have known me for the shortest amount of time." She spoke like she was reciting facts off of a piece of paper. He didn't even turn to look at her as he answered.

"I'm done lying for the night, Naoto. You are my best friend. No doubt there."

"I have never had a best friend, not truly. It has always been my grandfather, Yakushiji-san, and myself." He wordlessly nodded his head, having not moved from his spot behind her. "Thank you for your honesty and understanding." He didn't look at her, but he could hear the slight shudder in her voice, the rise of heat on her cheeks. "If nothing else, you are my best friend, Narukami."

Then they parted ways, and Yu was alone. Alone, cold, and exhausted from the emotional hell the night had been.

And yet...

"You are my best friend, Narukami."

I'd never thought I'd be happy to hear someone tell me that. Yu's lips curled into the smallest of smiles as he stepped with a bit more life. He took in a steady breath and let it out in a loud sigh. It's a beautiful night...

END
"There, all done," Nanako beamed, placing the finished omelette meal onto her own plate.

"Mmm. That smells good, Nanako," Yu grinned, sniffing the warm aroma out of the air. "Good work."

"I couldn't have done it without you, big bro!" she replied. The older boy returned the gentle smile and held out his hand to her, which she gleefully smacked. "We did it!"

"Heh, I guess we did."

Yu lifted both plates and brought them to the table as Nanako retrieved several utensils and handed half over to her close sibling. "My teacher said you need to eat well in the morning! So eat up, Big Bro!"

"Don't worry about that, Nanako, I intend to." Yu gave an audible chomp as he bit into the fluffy omelette, before making an exaggerated moan. "Excellent work, Apprentice Nanako." The brunette beamed at the compliment and happily dug into her own plate, the two quietly enjoying their meals as Nanako told the older boy about what kind of activities she had lined up together.

"I can't wait until the Culture Festival tonight! Can we play games there and eat lots of festival food?"

"I hope so. I'll be busy with school stuff, so you and Dojima have to do that stuff on your own until I'm done." I may not be perfect, but even I'm not evil enough to trick Nanako into seeing Kanji in a dress. No child deserves that punishment, he joked. The young man paused from his meal as he noticed his relative's expression suddenly plummet. The light in her eyes dulled, almost vanishing completely.

"What if dad doesn't have enough time for me? What if he has to work?"

Yu glanced at the girl and sighed. He placed his utensils down and looked at his cousin, or as she preferred to be called, his little sister. "He's not a very good father," he remarked. Nanako's mood seemed to fall even lower at that comment. "But he's trying. Be patient with him Nanako. I know it looks like bad parenting is hardwired into our genetics, but I know Dojima is trying."

"Huh? Gene... ethics? What's that?"

"Er... Nothing. Nothing." Yu waved his hand in the air, trying to change the subject as quickly as possible. As luck would have it, the doorbell echoed through the kitchen, catching both youths' attention. Nanako stood up from her seat and walked over to the door, voicing both their thoughts.

"Huh? Someone's here?" Yu heard Nanako slide open the door as he quietly devoured his meal. He only stopped when a familiar voice greeted his cousin, shocking the silver-tongued man.

"Y-yo."

What the hell is he doing here?

"Good morning, Kanji!"
Yu gulped his food down as his rival for Naoto's heart entered the kitchen. Nanako skipped ahead of him with a gleeful smile on her face, ignorant of the rising tension as both boys saw the other. Yu tried faking a smile, but he just couldn't muster it. Instead, he just raised his brow as he noticed Kanji was lugging several small boxes in his arms.

"Sorry to show up this early in the morning, man. The old hag wouldn't shut up about me taking this to ya... I thought it'd be a pain to lug all around school, so I brought it now. Uh... Y-you don't want it, do you?" Yu just observed Kanji as both refused to look the other in the eyes. The older boy's face twisted and curled into a slight scowl, but the sound of Nanako's voice pushed it aside.

"Ooh! We're having breakfast right now! Let's eat it!" Nanako cheered.

"Here. Let me help you with that, Kanji," Yu uttered, standing up and walking over to the younger man. Kanji seemed reluctant to accept the silverette's help at first, but he reluctantly allowed him to take some of the boxes. Yu hid the strain the boxes were putting him under well, refusing to appear weak to the blonde. As Nanako began looking through them, Yu glanced at Kanji who finally returned the stare.

Well, this is awkward, the older boy thought.

"Senpai, can... can I talk to you, man?" Kanji motioned to the front door with his head, briefly glancing at Nanako as she picked through the boxes. "It's kind of... er... private, I guess?"

"We'll be right back, Nanako. Don't eat everything while I'm not looking, and make sure you're ready for school," Yu teased, ruffling his cousin's hair with a grin. Despite the smile, his stomach writhed and churned, and it wasn't out of hunger. He ignored the twisting jealousy in his stomach as he followed after Kanji.

"Okay, Big Bro! Have fun!"

The two walked out of the front door. Yu let the door swing open as he pushed it forward, before closing with a minor crash. "You two seem close," commented Kanji. "I mean, she calls you her big brother, so I guess that makes sense. Um... How do you feel about it?"

"I'm working on it." Yu's grin had long vanished. Now that he was out of his innocent cousin's sight, the boy had no reason to hide his true nature. The corners of his lips fell, and his eyes held a dark edge to them, but there was no fire in them. He merely watched Kanji with a sharp eye. "Why are you here, Kanji? I'd imagine this would be the last place you'd want to be at."

"I just came to talk, I guess."

"Then talk." The words held an unnecessary sharpness to them, a fact even Yu seemed to realize. "Sorry," he muttered, glancing away.

"S'cool." He kicked at the asphalt under his feet. "I just had a question I wanted to ask ya..."

"Then ask away." Yu walked towards the outside wall of the Dojima Residence and fell against it, sliding down until he sat on the ground. Kanji followed him, and when the older student said nothing, sat beside him. The two sat side by side, nearly drowning in silence.

"What do you like about Naoto?"

Yu blinked, his eyes widened for a moment as his mouth fell slack. "Oh. Um..." Kanji turned his head to face him, and the cherry hue on his cheeks did nothing to defuse the interrogative stare. Yu finally closed his mouth and cleared his throat slightly as he assembled an answer.
"She sees me. I mean, she saw the real me. You never really got the full story about us, did you?"

Kanji didn't answer as the corners of Yu's lips curled upwards. "I used to be a real scumbag, Kanji.
You have no idea the kind of person I was, but I was bad. Mean, arrogant, cruel... I was awful. I
knew I was back then, but it didn't stop me. I was a bad guy."

"You want to know how bad...? There was this guy about a year ago. Looking back, he was a lot
like you. Big, tough looking fellow." He paused, giving Kanji a chance to stop the story now.
When the younger boy said nothing, Yu continued. "I was dating his little sister. I don't even
remember her name, honestly. Sakura? Shino? I don't know. What matters is that I cheated on her."

Kanji's eyes grew into dinner plates, but Yu just scoffed. "It gets worse. Trust me. Her big brother
found her crying one day, and she tells him all about how I cheated on her. So the next day, he
finds me and starts demanding answers and threatening me. It was the start of school and there
were students and teachers all around us. I played dumb, all the while pushing buttons to piss him
off more and more. Eventually, he just pops. He punches me, nearly knocking some teeth out, but I
wasn't even upset. I knew I won, because suddenly students are screaming and teachers are running
at him. It was all according to plan. He was suspended and I was treated like a victim."

"J-Jesus, Senpai..."

"Call me Yu," he corrected. He let out a quiet sigh as he chewed the inside of his cheek. "That was
the kind of guy I was when you met me. You just never knew it. But Naoto did. She saw right
through my shit and... I guess that was nice. It was nice having someone who didn't buy my shit so
easily. Hell, nice doesn't ever cover it. It was liberating. After that, she just got better and better."

"I like her intelligence." Love, not like. "The way she doesn't take anyone's bullshit. The way she's
so determined to solve this case. She has resolve. She's amazing. Brave and kind and... beautiful.
Unattainable, almost. I've never met anyone like her before. She has this work-obsessed,
determined, never give up attitude about the case, but in social situations, she stumbles around and
stutters and blushes and it's just amazing to watch her. She's always so perfect. Not to mention she
just has this confidence and strength to her that is just... stunning, I guess. Even when it involves
stuff she isn't good at, like socializing, she has this grace to her."

Yu realized his face was warmer than normal. He rubbed his head, avoiding the other boy's stare as
he realized he had devolved into rambling. "You get my point."

Kanji silently nodded his head, absentmindedly chewing on his lower lip as he nodded. Neither boy
said anything for a moment, before Kanji broke the silence. "I told Naoto I liked her last night at
the festival."

Yu didn't react. "Oh?"

"Yeah. She and I are going out on a date next week." Kanji's eyes focused on the silverette, as if he
was searching for something. "She likes me."

"That so?"

"We kissed."

Finally, a reaction- Kanji watched as Yu's face wrinkled into a scowl. "You're full of shit,
Tatsumi."

"H-huh?"

"You're a terrible liar." His silver eyes drifted to the side, glancing at Kanji as his face twitched.
"Trust me, I wrote the book on lying. Why are you really here, Kanji?"

"I want to get to know you, Senpai. The real you. The one Naoto and Rise know."

Yu's face relaxed into a more curious, less tense expression. He stared at the front yard of the Dojima Residence, before he finally muttered a reply. "Well, I used to be a bad guy. A very, very bad guy. Then I met Naoto. Now I'm trying to be better. That's the short version, at least."

"That's it?"

"It's the short version. I told you, Naoto makes me want to be better. Because I want to be worthy of her love. I guess, that's how you know it's true love on my part," he mused. The corners of his lips rose, before he glanced back at Kanji. "I imagine it's the same for you." He expected a blush to form on the blonde's cheeks, but instead he only looked away, as if ashamed.

"I came here cause I wanted to see if you were serious about her," explained Kanji. "I wanted to know why you liked Naoto, and I needed to make sure you were going to treat her right." Kanji sighed, and his voice spoke with the slightest tremble, an effect that Yu hadn't expected to hear from the young man. "Last night, I asked her out on a date. I told her I liked her, like... y'know. Like, like."

"You love her." Just saying the words left a bad taste in his mouth, but he cast the thought aside and tried to focus.

"Does it piss you off that I do?"

"It used to." The silverette shrugged his shoulders. "Now, I guess, I'm just happy she has the option."

"Option?"

"I'm not a good guy, Kanji. I used to be worse, but I'm a long way from good still." Yu let out a melancholic sigh, shaking his head. He crossed his arms over his knees and stared off into the asphalt floor. "I want her to be happy. You're not perfect, but you're a good man, Kanji. I know you'd treat her right."

"Are... are you serious?"

"Why are you so shocked at that?" Yu raised his brow, sounding more annoyed than anything else. "Yeah, you're not as smart as me, but who is? You're a nice guy, you've got that whole... Teddy bear thing."

"Why does everyone call me a teddy bear...?"

"Cause you're big and grizzly, but deep down you're soft and cuddly. So cute." Yu chuckled at the sight of Kanji's scarlet cheeks. "I'm just busting your balls, dude. Calm down."

Kanji nodded his head, but still seemed perturbed. "Can't believe you're saying what you're saying, Senpai..."

"Surprised I'm not the goody-two-shoes you thought I was? Heh. Yeah, Rise had a similar reaction..."

"Yeah, I guess," Kanji sighed. There was a pregnant pause before he spoke again. "You really think I'd have been good for her?"
"Yeah, I do." The older boy hoisted himself up, groaning as he stood on his two legs. "You got anymore questions, or can I go back inside to enjoy breakfast with my little sister now?" Yu held out his hand to Kanji, but he didn't take it.

"I told her the truth last night. That I liked her." Yu's arm fell to his side as the younger boy sighed and rubbed his head. He waited with sympathetic patience as Kanji tried to form the words to his feelings. "She... she said we wanted us to just be friends."

Ouch. "I'm sorry, Kanji." Yu could feel the elation in his heart, but he tried not to show. He plastered an expression of pity and sympathy instead, biting down on his cheek to fight himself. "That sucks."

"I mean, we can't both be with her. Someone had to lose, right?"

"Guess you got a point. Still, sorry it had to be you." But glad it wasn't me. But also worried that it isn't me. Conflicted. Gah. Emotions... "How you taking it, man?"

"Rise's been helping me. She's been, like, my best friend for all of this."

"Rise?" Yu bit his cheek again, holding back the smile that nearly formed on his face. "Good. I'm glad. She's a good friend. Was my first."

"You care about her, right?" Kanji asked, hesitantly.

"Like a sister." Finally, Kanji offered his hand in a silent plead for help. Yu took it and lifted the taller boy up, lifting him up to his feet.

"Hey, Senpai?" Kanji's face was neutral, almost unreadable from Yu's silver eyes. He appeared cautious, almost frightened by the question on his lips.

"Yeah?"

"Take care of Naoto, okay? Make her happy."

Yu blinked at the request, before sighing. His hand slipped from Kanji's as he crossed his arms, leaning on one foot and bouncing onto the other. "Just because she didn't pick you doesn't mean she'll want to be with me."

"Yeah, you're right. She'll pick you cause she likes you." Kanji's fist gently pushed against the stunned boy's shoulder. "We should probably get ready for school. We're gonna be late." As Kanji walked back into the Dojima Residence, Yu was still reeling from what he had heard.

Kanji is giving me a pep-talk about girls? What has become of my life...?!

"Kanji, wait!" The delinquent froze in the doorway, staring at his upperclassmen with a raised brow. "So does this mean we're cool? You and me? Friends." Narukami let out a breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding when he saw Kanji's response.

The leather-clad delinquent smiled at his silver counterpart. He held up a fist and tapped it against his chest. "Yeah, I think so. We're cool, Senpai."
mocking innocence on Chie's, to Rise holding back a fit of giggles.

"Why are you guys just standing there? Come on, hurry up and sit down!" ordered Chie.

"Come on, Kanji-kun! Over here!" declared Rise, patting a desk in front of her for the boy to sit in. She had a smile on her face, despite her partner's vibrant blush.

Yukiko said something, but Yu's attention was on Naoto, examining the detective's posture and mood. She was doing an excellent job with hiding her emotions. If she found the particular situation humiliating, laughable, or just embarrassing to be around, she made no signs of showing it. The sight actually earned her a grin from the silverette's face, shattering his stoic facade.

"Yu-kun?"

"Huh?" The ebony-eyed innkeeper was staring at him, a glint of concern and curiosity in her eyes. Yu's smile faltered for a half-moment, only to be caught and hoisted up like a crippled soldier. "I'm sorry, Yukiko-san. Did you say something?"

"I was wondering if you were ready for me to dress you up?" In her hands were an assortment of cosmetic products, but again, he hardly listened to her. His eyes watched as Naoto talked to an excited Teddie. The blonde boy cheered as the bluette blushed. "Yu-kun?"

"I'm sorry, Yukiko, but I'd rather work alone on this. Maybe you can help Chie with Yosuke?" he suggested. His tone was soft, considerate, even helpful, but it felt on deaf ears.

She saw the way his eyes traced around the room, chasing after something she couldn't see. But she could guess. He wasn't looking at her, not even bothering to glance her way. "But I want to help you!" she protested.

"I'm okay." He was already walking away from her before he even spoke. He was walking after Naoto, who had just run out the door with Teddie.

"I want to help you!" She grabbed his hand, but all that earned her was a look of momentary frustration. It hurt to have him look at her like that, but how else could she get his attention? He kept ignoring her. He wouldn't give her even a moment of his time. He pretended he wasn't angry with her, but she could still see the strain in his eyes. Trying to look happy that she was holding his hand. Trying to look like he wasn't bothered by her.

Trying to hold back his frustration with her.

"I appreciate that, but I don't need your help." He pulled his hand from hers. He was blind to the shimmer in the corners of her eyes as he walked out of the room.

The girls left their friends to their own devices. Naoto imagined the others had put the boys under enough punishment, but it seemed all four boys were still going through with the pageant. She was sympathetic to their plight, feeling herself in a similar situation. She gave the four boys a solemn nod of camaraderie before leaving with the other girls. Now they waited for the show to begin, Rise, Yukiko, and Chie all standing closer to the front while Naoto stood alone in the back of the audience.

It wasn't that she did not feel comfortable with the other girls, though Yukiko-senpai was behaving rather oddly, she merely wished to have some time alone to examine some facts. The subject of her thoughts? The silver-haired snake that led the team, Yu Narukami...
Narukami...

What was it about the young man that led Naoto's mind to chaos? Her walls, built over the years, crumbled within moments of speaking to him. Her mind, usually so articulate and stoic, fell apart into embarrassed gibberish around him. He had an effect on her, turning her from the hard-boiled detective she sought to be to a... a... frivolous girl!

*You are a girl,* a voice chided her. *More importantly, you're his girl.*

*I'm not his possession!*

*No, you're not his possession. You're his friend. Would it really be so bad to be something more?* The voice teased her like her Shadow had. Perhaps this was its' echo? Perhaps Naoto was merely losing her mind. Perhaps Narukami was merely driving her insane. *Would you rather be crazy or in love?*

*As if the two are any different,* sighed the detective.

The lights had turned on and music blared. A loud pop filled the air as confetti fell from above. Naoto rolled her eyes and brushed some of the paper and color from her shoulder. The announcer ran onto stage, his pink afro swaying in the air as he greeted the audience. The detective assumed he was some student with a wig on his head, or perhaps a hired MC. Whoever he was, he spoke with a heated passion at the show that was about to begin.

Naoto did not pay much of what the announcer said much mind. The way he acted was rather grating on her senses, to be honest. Far too loud and explosive for her liking. All the same, when she heard the name of one of her classmates, she turned her eyes to the spotlight. Even her stoic mask was broken as she physically cringed at the sight of Kanji Tatsumi dolled up like some movie starlet.

"What's up?!" he proudly declared, flexing his muscles for the crowd.

"Ewwww!"

"He does not make a pretty lady!"

"Whoo! Go, Kanji!"

That voice piqued Naoto's curiosity. Her cobalt eyes scanned over the crowd, gliding over them as her ears honed in on the voice. It took her only a moment to find a pair of raised arms, bouncing up and down in praise for Tasumi. Rise Kujikawa was throwing her hands into the air, vocal about her support for their mutual friend. It was odd seeing the retired idol so invested in Kanji-kun's performance, but Naoto found herself thankful for it.

With all of the insults and jeers being thrown his way, Kanji needed someone on his side. *Especially considering recent events.* Naoto bit her lip and scowled at the bubbling memory. She tried to push it aside and focus on the obnoxious voice of the announcer. He was in the midst of introducing the second contest, building them up as some sort of heiress to a massive company. To the disappointment of many, the heiress in question was far from a graceful princess.

Yosuke-senpai looked ready to die as he stood on the stage. His arm raised to pointlessly wave at the crowd. Naoto could only imagine the near silence of the crowd was far worse than the jeers and indignity Kanji-kun elected. There were a few quiet mutters and whispers as people simply wished for the pageant to go on.
"Looking good, Yosuke!"

"Go to hell, Chie!"

Naoto rolled her eyes at the couple's hissy-fit. It was clear the two were attracted to one another. Their heated debates and fiery discussions were just an attempt to mask it. They were a pair of children drowning in a hormonal ocean and neither seemed willing to accept it for what it was. She had no idea how they could live with themselves acting so immature and frustrated.

_Cause you're so mature._

Naoto really needed to do something about her second train of thought. It was growing more and more annoying to have a voice announce her inner thoughts. Not that she was thinking what it was saying. Naoto let out a quiet sigh as the show went on, moving to introduce the third victim of this accursed contest.

"Give a round of applause for Miss Yu Narukami!"

"That's Mistress Yasogami, thank you very much." The crack of a whip silenced the crowd. The sight of Narukami kept them silent, mouth agape; even Naoto found herself stunned by the sight of the leather-clad man.

Yu Narukami was... he was... He had dressed himself up as some sort of dominatrix-esque character. His body was held together tightly by a leather corset, accenting his hips and making him appear more curvaceous than his body would typically allow. The top was loosed towards the top, the thread holding the two sides together loosened to the point where they exposed the smooth, firm chest Narukami often hid under his shirt. A pair of leather shorts hung tightly to his lower half, zipped together. Naoto tried not to pay any more attention to the noticeable bugle than was acceptable as a fire began to rise from her neck. Finally, a pair of black high heels accented the already tall boy, making him look practically amazonian as he looked down on everyone.

Naoto felt warm.

Very warm...

Narukami wore a wig that perfectly matched his silver locks, but the hair was unkempt, messy, draped over on one. Rather than make him appear uncouth, it merely enhanced his image of a dominance and passion. The crack of the whip in his hand caused a united reaction. Fear, followed by confusion, followed by shortness of breath from staring at the beautiful image. He gently brushed some hair from his eye, only for it to flow back into place like a stream of silver water.

It wasn't just that Narukami passed off as a girl. It was that Narukami passed off as a beautiful woman. The confidence in his eye when he looked over the crowd, it was as if a tiger had found a pack of gazelle and, hiding behind his silvery locks, he inspected the crew to pick out which would make the most delicious meal. Naoto swore she saw the boy lick his glossy lips.

_Is he wearing lipstick?_

"T-that's a guy?"

"W-wow, Senpai looks really... Wow."

"I feel funny..."

Naoto felt her throat dry up, but she quickly dispelled herself of whatever effect Narukami was...
having on her. She took a slow breath in, before exhaling. She opened her eyes to the sight of her upperclassmen staring down at her, specifically her, and smiling coyly. She did not grant him the satisfaction of watching her squirm under his predatory gaze. Instead, she glared back with cobalt eyes, ignoring the rosy glow to her cheeks.

"Wow! What a babe!" The announcer pumped his fist into the air as the stunned masses finally began to applaud and cheer towards the contest's first real 'success.' "Sounds like your entrance is causing quite the stir! Tell me, did you sign yourself up?"

"Damn straight," he admitted. Yosuke-senpai and Kanji-kun looked at him, confused with what they perceived as a lie. Naoto had to fight the slight tugging in the corner of her lips. He was, after all, up there in her honor...

"Oh my! And tell me, what is your best feature?"

Narukami's eyes shimmered with a sharp light. "Well, I'm smart, handsome, beautiful, strong, fast, I've got an amazing personality," he answered, counting off on his hand as he recited his supposed traits. "I'm basically the complete package, but if I had to pick my absolute best feature?" His eyes fell on Naoto again, and she felt her throat tighten under his stare. He smiled. "I just want to be a good friend. Be a better person than I was yesterday." His voice lost any trace of arrogance and deceit. He spoke with an almost vulnerability. It was enough to make Naoto smile in pride for her friend. "That, and my utter perfection."

And then he ruined the moment.

---

Yosuke was so freakin' confused.

He was pretty embarrassed and pissed off, but yeah. Confused. He was really confused.

He didn't think much of his partner leaving him and Kanji behind while the girls 'prettied' them up. Yu Narukami was a lot of things, but he never went against his word. He wouldn't leave Kanji and him hanging. That just wasn't the kind of guy his partner was.

But neither was he the self-titled 'Miss Yasogami' either! Yu Narukami wasn't the kind of guy who dressed up in tight, leather and winked at the audience! He wasn't the kind of guy who enjoyed this sort of crap! He wasn't the kind of guy who cracked a whip and savored all the panting stares he got from both guys and girls! So what the hell was going on?!

"Can't believe I lost to Teddie."

"I mean, he was dressed pretty cute."

"Yeah, and I'm hot. I'm just saying, there's a gross stigma that guys who crossdress have to be cute. They're not allowed to be sexy." Yu flipped his head, and grinned at the falling silver waterfall of his wig. He fluttered his eyes flirtatiously, before he laughed at Kanji's embarrassment.

Yu and Kanji continued to speak and trade comments with one another, which was just another thing Yosuke knew his partner wouldn't do. Yu was treating Kanji like his best friend, and Yosuke like... like he barely knew either of them! It didn't make any sense! It was like Yu's personality had done a complete 180 since last night!

"You're upset you lost?"
"You're not? I mean, Rise did promise to make you pretty. I'd be calling her a liar right now if I were you," ridiculed Yu. He lightly jabbed the taller boy with his elbow. "Next time, come to me. I'll make you look good."

"Yeah, yeah..." Kanji's azure eyes drifted away from the older boy, but it seemed obvious he had a question on his mind. He kept glancing at the silverette, his eyes becoming shifty and erratic. "Hey, Senpai, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"How'd you get to be so good at dressing up like that anyways?"

_That's not a bad question, but figures Kanji would be the one to ask it_, thought Yosuke as he looked towards Yu as well. He was curious about this question too. Maybe it'd help him figure out just what was up with his partner. But the answer Yu gave only made him more confused.

Yu's smile turned aberrant, completely unlike the soft smile or stoic grins Yosuke knew. Yu's smile coiled and twisted into a toothy smirk as he answered. "Kanji, I'm me. I'm good at everything."

Okay. What the hell? That settled it. Something crazy was happening. Not only was Yu acting like a completely different person, Kanji was just rolling his eyes and shrugging it off like Yu hadn't just gone crazy! "S-so, Kanji, excited for the girls' turn?" Both of the boys looked at him as if they had just remembered he was there too. Yosuke tried to brush off his irritation at the idea. "Sounds like we're gonna see Naoto in a swimsuit."

Instead of the stuttering, red-faced shock that he was expecting, Kanji just looked away. His warm cheeks seemed to slowly drift away as his shoulders fell. "Yeah," he muttered.

"Okay, that's weird. You know, Kanji, I never got a chance to hear. How'd your date go?" His tone was meant to be teasing. He was just trying to give Kanji a hard time, and he was genuinely curious, but if it was possibly, Kanji's mood seemed to plummet ever further.

"It went fine. I'm going to go get changed. I'll see you later, Senpai." Kanji walked away with as much dignity a dress-wearing, blushing thug could, leaving Yu and Yosuke alone.

"Hey, Yosuke?"

_What? No Hanamura-san?_

"Try not to mention Naoto around Kanji, alright?" Yu's voice lost the light and mirth it had earlier. His smirk was completely gone, replaced with a more neutral frown. He almost resembled his usual self, but he still spoke with more fire and heat than Yosuke was used to. "It's a long story, and it ain't my place to say, but just go easy on Kanji, okay?"

"Um... Y-yeah, no problem, partner."

"Good." Yu nodded his head. "I'm going to go. I got to do some stuff before the show. I'll see you later."

And then he left too, leaving Yosuke alone with only his own confusion as company. There was a lot of confusion. He was very, very confused.

"What the hell is going on?"
Naoto felt mortified. Utterly mortified.

It was bad enough having Narukami look at her like some slab of meat on a hook, it was even worse to know some hormone-laced part of her mind was almost enjoying the silver ogling, now this accursed pageant she was a part of it was going to have a swimsuit section?!

Naoto desperately wished she could go find Narukami and sit down somewhere quiet. No one watching. No announcer. No stage. Just them. She cursed under her breath and massaged the bridge of her nose. The silver-haired man continued to plague her mind like a virus. Damn him.

"I've got to ask Senpai where he got that outfit. He was rocking it," Rise laughed, skipping by Naoto's side.

"Yeah, it was... something," uttered Chie-senpai. She glanced towards her raven-haired friend, who was leaving the other girls behind. "We'll see you guys in the classroom," sighed the martial artist as she chased after Yukiko. They both slipped around the corner and through the doorway, leaving the two first-years to themselves.

"Is... is something wrong with Yukiko-senpai?" wondered Rise. "I've never seen her so upset."

"Hm. It is rather strange. Perhaps we should-"

"Hello, ladies!" Both girls nearly jumped as an arm fell on their opposite shoulders. They both turned their heads to see the grinning, toothy smile of Narukami. He winked a silver eye to them, before pulling away and posturing before them. Naoto felt her cheeks flare up as her collar suddenly tightened against her neck. Rise laughed, putting her hand over her mouth as Narukami posed for them, still dressed out in leather.

"W-why are you still wearing that?!"

"What? Don't hate, appreciate," he joked, brushing some hair from his eyes as he placed a hand on his raised hip. "What do you think, Rise? Ten out of ten, or a hundred out of a hundred?"

Yu leaned his body closer to Rise, who didn't share the same fiery cheeks and labored breaths as Naoto did. Instead the girl reeled back, snorting and laughing as she pushed her hands against the older boy. "S-Senpai! Quit it! I can't take you seriously when you're dressed like that!" Narukami joined her chortling, the two laughing together. Afterwards, the taller boy gently pushed Rise aside and smiled at Naoto.

"Hey, Rise? You mind if Naoto and I talk privately for a bit?"

The copper-haired idol glanced between the two. It didn't take long for a small, knowing smile to form on her lips. "Sure thing, Yu-senpai. Just don't hold onto her for too long!" she teased.

"W-wait!" Naoto's plead fell on deaf ears as the third party left, skipping down the hall and entering the classroom after the others. "Darn it, Rise," she muttered. She had her head turned away from Narukami, hiding her rosy cheeks behind her hat.

"Hey. You okay?"

Naoto's eyes widened at the soft touch of his voice. He lacked his usual mischievous char- Ahem. He lacked his usual mischievous tone, meaning this was a rare moment of seriousness from the young man. "I'm-" She froze, hearing the high-pitched tone of her voice. Once again, Narukami caused her to lose control of her walls and armor. She cleared her throat and let out a low sigh. "I'm fine," she responded, her tone controlled and even. "How are you?"
"Well, worried that things are awkward now between the two of us." She could feel his iron gaze
lock on her head, but she couldn't bring himself to return the stare. "I don't want things to be weird
between us. Nothing's changed, Naoto."

"I beg to differ..."

"You can, but I like to think things are cool between us still. I mean, it sure would suck if you
hated me now." She heard him laugh as she stared at the tiled floor, quietly counting the rows to
distract herself from the conversation. "Um... You don't, right? I mean, we're still friends?" Naoto
detected the slight strain in his voice, breaking her from her quiet distraction.

"Narukami, of course you are my friend. I simply..." She could feel her fingers twist and squeeze
the rim of her coat as she tried to articulate the words. "Do not know how to respond to last night."

"Then don't. Case isn't over. You've got time to think this through. All I care about is making sure
you're okay."

"You mean that, don't you?" Yu didn't answer the question. Naoto didn't give him the time to.
"You wish to simply leave this elephant in the room?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't compare my feelings as a fat, ugly animal, but yeah." Her eyes finally
rose to meet his and she saw the playful smile adorned on his face. Despite that, his eyes showed
her the glimmer of anxiety and distress in his eyes. The fear that the two of them were no longer
friends had actually seemed to effect him... It shouldn't have surprised her, but it did.

He always did.

"I'll try to, Narukami." She took a deep breath and let it sit within her, before flowing out of her in a
steady breeze. "I'll try. All of this is new to me, and I feel as though my body is in the midst of a
tornado. Like I am lost as myself. The mystery, the other world, and now the realization that you
harbor... an interest in me. There are so many new experiences and feelings within me that I just
feel out of my element."

"Totally understandable. I'm here if I can help." The earnest, altruistic tone of his voice brought a
smile to her face and a chuckle to her voice. "What?"

"It's just interesting. The contrast between the present and past. I truly believe you mean what you
say, Narukami, but to see you acting so caring to me without any ulterior motive is a fascinating
sight."

"And how do you know I don't have an ulterior motive?" he teased, flashing a toothy leer at the
bluette. The sleuth's lips just curled into her own confident grin. Her cobalt eyes shined with a fire
of their own.

"Because I know you don't, and you know I know. I believe I see through your deceits easier and
easier with every passing day."

"I certainly hope not. A little lie every now and again can be fun." He winked at the Detective
Prince, but Naoto could see the surprise in his shimmering, silver eyes when she didn't blush and
trip over herself. Instead she smiled at him with a matching spark in her eyes.

The slight shock in his eyes was a sight Naoto found rather... easy on the eyes. "Perhaps you are
right, Narukami, but I find some truths to be rather entertaining as well. Such as the truth of what
you are currently wearing."
Narukami laughed at the retort. "Wow. Heh. I must be rubbing off on you. That was a hell of a burn."

"Yes, well, I find myself rubbing against you just as much, Narukami."

"...

Darn it! Narukami’s couldn't hold back the fit of laughter that soon came over him. Naoto felt her already red cheeks turn several shades darker as his laughter echoed down the halls. She resisted the urge to hide behind the rim of her hat as she hissed at the silverette with clenched teeth. "It is not that funny. You know what I meant!"

"I do. That just makes it funnier," he snorted.

The detective considered simply walking away from the chortling crossdresser, but instead focused on another plan. Any defense or argument she could craft for herself would only end in defeat. Her own embarrassment and nervousness spelled that out, clear as day. So instead she decided to go on the attack.

"I shouldn't be surprised you would find this so comedic, Narukami. Only you would be so immature."

Narukami paused at the gentle taunt, before he chuckled, a much softer and lighter laugh than before. "You're really one of a kind, detective." He shook his head from one side to the other as he smiled. "So, are we okay?"

"We are well enough. I cannot promise that I will be able to act around you as I had before last night, but I can at least promise to try."

"All I ask." His fingers combed through the silver locks of his wig as he glanced at the clock on the hall's wall. "Almost time for your time in the limelight. Guess I should get out of your hair, huh?"

"I assume you'll be in the audience, watching the show?"

"And cheering on the prettiest girl there, obviously. That's you, just so you know," he teased, adding a flirtatious wink to goad her further.

"Jokes about how inappropriate I am in this pageant are hardly uplifting, Narukami."

"Who said I was making a joke?" The silver-haired boy placed a finger under her chin and lifted her up, smiling at her with a raised brow. He smirked at her as she felt his warm breath touch her cheek. Her cheeks caught on fire for the millionth time, and just like all the times before, it was because of Narukami. "Good luck out there, Naoto."

"What?" But by the time her rosy face was released, her silver-tongued friend was walking away. She could just see the arrogant grin on his face. She considered calling out to him, but decided against it. She placed her fingers on the rim of her hat and fixed it, pulling it tightly onto her blue locks. "Lecherous liar," she sighed.

There was no way Narukami actually meant what he said. Looking forward to me on a stage? Saying I am on the prettiest girl when Yukiko-senpai or Rise-san is on the stage?! Preposterous. Ridiculous. Inconceivable! Naoto took a deep breath and sighed, her shoulders falling slump as she turned in the opposite direction that Narukami had walked down.
"What did he say to you?" a voice hissed.

_Yukiko-senpai?!_ The raven-haired woman was stomping her way from the classroom, her eyes alight with anger and fiery passion. "What?"

"What were you two talking about?" she growled, standing in front of the detective. She leaned closer as her hands trembled, her long nails scratching against the palms of her hands as her chest rose and fell with labored breaths.

"N-nothing!"

"It didn't look like nothing!"

"I-"

"You two are always talking to each other. What, were you laughing about the case together or something?! Why did he need to talk to you?!!" Yukiko roared, her voice straining from the uncharacteristic rage Naoto heard in her voice.

"Y-Yukiko-senpai, I-' Naoto didn't know what was happening. She'd never seen the other girl like this before! Not even in the midst of battle when they went to the other world to train! Naoto had never seen such fury in those ebony eyes.

"Why is it always you?!" Her actions shocked the bluette as Yukiko extended her arms and shoved Naoto, knocking her onto the floor as she huffed. "He always talks to you, he always wants to be alone with you, he always picks you! Why?! What makes you so special?!!"

Naoto didn't know what to say. Understanding others' feelings was never her strong suit and now Yukiko-senpai, who was typically a very calm and charming woman, was suddenly exploding at her like Naoto had somehow slighted her.

"Ever since you joined our team, he's been acting like a completely different person! Why? What did you do to him...?!!"

"Yukiko!"

"Senpai! Stop!"

Rise and Chie heard the violent wails and shrieks of the inn-keeper. Chie grabbed Yukiko's hand, pulling her away from the fallen detective was helped up by Rise. Both girls shared frightened eyes, but Chie seemed focused almost entirely on her friend. The two whispered something to one another as Rise held Naoto's arm.

"Are you okay, Naoto?"

"I'm fine..."

"Come on, Yukiko. Let's go." Chie tugged on her friend's shoulder, trying to reel her back into the classroom. "Please, Yukiko, just leave it alone... Let's go."

"Fine," she spat. Her black eyes glared daggers at Naoto's dark-blue irises, before she turned away and storming back into the classroom. Chie watched her go with limp arms, before turning to the other girls.

"I'm really sorry, guys. She's not usually like this! I-I'll talk to her..." Without another word, the
martial artist followed after her best friend.

"What was that about?" Rise wondered. When both of the upperclassmen left the hall, she turned back to Naoto, finding the girl staring at the ground. "Naoto? Hey? Are you sure you're okay?"

"I-I'm fine, Rise-san. I'm just fine." But while Naoto's mouth said one thing, her mind raced with her true feelings. Yukiko-senpai had been so angry... Her questions, her fury seemed centered around Narukami and herself spending so much time alone, as well as the fact that Narukami was now acting more true to himself instead of hiding behind a mask.

All of this equated to one, simple idea.

Yukiko liked Narukami as more than a friend.

And for reasons Naoto did not understand, or chose not to understand, the idea of another caring for Narukami so intensely left her... It left Naoto with a sick churning in the pit of her stomach.

END
"Where is he?" sighed Yosuke, his eyes darting around the audience as the crowd packed in front of the stage.

"Where's who?" Kanji asked, crossing his arms and standing beside the older boy.

"Yu. He left earlier and I haven't seen him since." Kanji quickly avoided his senpai's stare. He opened his mouth to try and brush off Yosuke's confusion, only for the other brunette to speak again. "Man, what's up with him? He's been acting so weird lately..."

"Maybe he's just happy?"

"Huh?"

Yosuke looked at Kanji with a confused, raise brow, but the younger boy just shrugged his shoulders as he continued. "Y'know, like... I wasn't always comfortable with you guys. Now I am."

"Psh. Nice try Kanji, but I know my partner. This isn't like him," explained Yosuke. The boy raised a hand to his lip, pondering the situation his partner must be in. "There's gotta be something wrong with him."

Oh boy, Kanji scratched at his mind for the right words to say, only to fall short as the lights turned on and a booming, shrill voice screamed out at them.

"Who here is ready for the real beauty pageant?!" A wave of applause and cheers answered the pink, afro-haired announcer. "Alrighty! Let's begin with our first contestant! Chie Satonaka!"

The brunette martial artists walked onto stage, her body trembling under the warmth of the spotlight and the bone-chilling gaze of the crowd. "H-hi, I'm Chie Satonaka!" The audience let out a wild applause of approval, which only caused the girl further embarrassment. Her cheeks were practically glowing scarlet as the announcer goaded her to continue. "Oh, well, my favorite food is... uh... Pudding!"

"Ya big liar, it's meat!" Yosuke shouted, electing a heated growl through the girl's teeth.

The announcer seemed to notice the sparks between the two and stepped in, smirking as he shouted into his microphone. "Whoa! Quite the spitfire, isn't she? Let's see how she ranks up against her best friend and beauty pageant rival, Yukiko Amagi!" Chie handed the mic to her friend and stepped aside as the raven-haired girl walked forward.

She glanced at the crowd, her eyes darting over the sea of people, before she took a deep breath and exhaled. Almost instantly, Yosuke and Kanji noticed something off about their friend. She stood differently, with one hip jutting out as if she was mimicking the cover to an adult magazine. She had a look of flirtatious glee on her face, with a fire burning in her eyes. "I-I'm Yukiko Amagi! And I-I'm looking for my Prince Charming!"

"Huh!!"

"What the hell? That again?!"
"Are you the one for me? Only way to find out it to vote for me! I promise a reward fit for king if you do!" she declared, as she continued to channel her Shadow's insanity. She blew a loud kiss to the audience to the wild applause and approval of the boys.

"W-what the hell?"

"Uh... Is Yukiko-senpai feeling alright?"

As if she was switched back to normal, Yukiko handed the mic to Rise and scurried away, hiding by Chie's side as her rosy cheeks threatened to set her aflame. Rise took to the stage like a fish to water as she winked at the audience, not even bothering to be introduced.

"Hey hey, everyone! It's Risette! I haven't been in town long, but I already love it here! I'm one hundred percent excited to be here!" she declared, practically hopping with glee. "So sorry that I'm not working as an idol right now, but Risette's gonna do her best, so I hope you'll all cheer for me!"

"Oh, man! Risette's so cute," Yosuke cheered, quickly distracted from his previous confusion.

The boy next to him was less enthralled. "Hmph," he grumbled, crossing his arms again. "That ain't Rise."

"Huh? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm saying that ain't Rise. She's faking."

"And since when did you become a Risette expert, dude?"

"I ain't. All I'm saying is that a man knows his bro, even if that bro just happens to be a lady."

"What...?" Yosuke stared at Kanji with a furrowed brow, utterly baffled by the statement his friend gave. "Dude, what the hell's been up with you lately?" The older teen glanced at the stage, before smiling. "Here, this'll cheer you up! Naoto's next!"

"Whatever," the blonde sighed, turning his head away. He kept his eyes off the stage as Naoto walked forward, her iconic hat missing from atop her head. Yosuke saw the boy's disinterest and briefly wondered if everyone had gone crazy...

Yu Narukami stood in the backstage, with a devilish grin. He saw the way Naoto stood on stage and he couldn't deny how adorable she was. He loved seeing her so confident and cool, but that didn't mean he wouldn't love seeing her shy and adorable any less. He loved all sides of Naoto Shirogane, it was as simple as that.

"I-I'm Naoto Shirogane," she greeted. "It's hard to believe I'm up on stage at a pageant like this... This is... beyond my wildest imaginings. I-I really don't know what to say..." There was an audible pause as she stood there, her cobalt eyes pointed down to her shoes. She could feel the weight of the crowd's stares on her, and she instinctively reached for her hat to hide behind, only to find her own blue locks.

"C-Can I step back now...?"

**Perfectly imperfect**, Yu smiled. Naoto watched her flee out of the spotlight and retrieve her hat from Rise. She pulled it onto her head and fidgeted in place, her fingers pulling and squeezing the hem of her coat. Her discomfort was easily seen by Yu, whose smile slowly fell as he watched her.

"Hm." The announcer and Teddie stepped forward and started talking, but the silverette was
already gone.

Naoto cursed Teddie's name to the high heavens as she stood within the changing tent. She cursed him and his stupid desire to have them prance around in bikinis. She cursed him as she glared at the thin, aqua-colored fabric in her hands. There were two halves of the outfit, the bra that was meant to cover her breasts (and was a size too small, Naoto noted) and a glorified thong.

_Damn that bear!

"Naoto?"

"N-Narukami?!” For some reason, Naoto moved her arms to cover herself, hiding her exposed body with her arms and legs as her pink cheeks turned a vibrant crimson. It took her a moment to remember she was in a tent and he was outside... She glared at the thin walls of the changing tent, her skin tingling with embarrassed heat. "W-what are you doing here?! You're not allowed back here!"

"Well, what I'm doing here is entirely dependent on how you answer this question," he explained, his voice flowing through the cloth. She could see his shadows behind it, standing there with a no doubt smug grin on his face...

"I'm not in the mood for your teasing, Narukami. Please, return to the audience. You can see my humiliation then, like everyone-"

"Do you not want to do this?"

"W-what?"

"Going out there." She saw his hand motion to the side, lazily. "On stage in a swimsuit. If you don't want to go out there, I just want to know."

Naoto considered asking why he cared, only to mentally kick herself. Being in such a... tense predicament with the older boy made her forget that he had changed. She had thought of him like the old Narukami, a simple pervert, not the present Narukami, her best friend. She took in a steady breath through her nose, before sighing out through her mouth.

"I would much rather not. Standing out there is one thing, but exposing myself to everyone out there like this is... it's just-"

"Then don't." She saw movement from his hand, and she watched as something pressed against the blank-white cloth. For a moment, she feared Narukami's head was going to pop into the tent, but he proved her wrong and surprised her again. A hand slipped out from between the closed, fabric door. His hand. He opened it out to her, and she heard his voice call out to her. "Get dressed, and let's get out of here."

"Ms. Naoto? What do you mean she's not...?” The announcer glanced at the confused audience and coughed, clearing his throat as he tried to save face. "Well, sad news, everyone, but Ms. Naoto won't be coming out for this portion!” There was a collection of groans and boos from the crowd in response.

"Oh, well, I had a feeling that would happen," Yosuke muttered. "Wonder where she ran off to..." He briefly glanced to his left, noticing the stranger beside him, before glancing back at Kanji. "Man, where the heck is Yu? He's still not out here...?"
Kanji's eyes were on the stage, though, staring at the bikini-clad Rise. They both had a short moment of shared confusion, but her eyes widened in understanding and her lips bent into a sympathetic smile. Kanji realized it only a moment after her, nodding his head in acceptance. He felt his legs buckle a bit, but the link he had with Rise helped keep him standing. He let out a small sigh, before he returned a smile back at her, silently telling Rise that he was okay.

"I've got a feeling where he could be..."

"So what exactly is your plan?" Naoto asked as Narukami and her walked down a random hall of the school. The young sleuth was also happy to note that they were both in their in their typical 'casual' garb, without any bikinis or leather anywhere on them.

"Just hang out. We're friends, after all, aren't we?" he replied with a smile.

"I'm afraid I am not very experienced in casual recreation," she admitted, glancing at the taller boy.

"That's okay, neither am I. Didn't have a lot of real friends growing up. Plenty of lackies and suckers, though," he admitted with a shrug. He stopped and she stopped with him, brow raised in curiosity. "Let's just walk around and find something to do... Like how about this?" he inquired, pointing above the two of them. Naoto followed his finger and saw a banner hanging from the wall behind her.

Her eyes widened into the size of saucers as she recognized the words on it, stylized to resemble bloody stains. The words 'Horror of the Haunted Halls' printed in scarlet smears stared at her. Naoto mentally cursed her luck, before glancing at Narukami. She tried to speak, only to curse her misfortune again as her words stumbled. "P-perhaps not?" She cleared her throat, hiding the weakness and girlish tremble that had afflicted her. "It seems rather dull, d-doesn't it?"

But Narukami merely stared at her with his accursed silver eyes, a knowing glimmer forming in them. "Wait, you're scared, aren't you? Like, actually scared?"

"I am not scared!" she growled, glaring daggers at the smirking man. "I merely do not want to waste my time on such a juvenile venture!"

"Yeah, cause you're scared," he countered. Most friends would stop poking at another friend's nerve when they discovered it. Narukami was not one of those friends. Instead, he seemed even more inclined to poke at the subject. "Never thought I'd see the day. The great Detective Prince terrified of some silly haunted house. Disappointing," he sighed, crossing his arms and shaking his head like a dejected parent.

"I am not scared!" she growled, her temper flaring for a moment. Pride overshadowed common sense and self-control as his leering smile taunted her.

"Prove it," he requested. He knew from the fire in her eyes that he had caught the little detective in his web.

I can't believe I let him goad me into this...

"You know, you can hold onto me if you get scared," he teased, grinning slyly as she glared at him. "Come on. Adventure awaits." Narukami knowingly stepped faster than Naoto did, leaving the girl in the dimly lit entrance way as he walked down the decorated path.

Naoto's eyes darted left and right as she picked up her pace, trying to stand side by side with the
taller silverette. She looked over the walls, and shivered slightly at their worn down appearance. The walls were dark, not helped by the flickering of the light above them, but disturbingly enough they seemed smeared with blood that had long dried on the surface. She took in a shuddering breath and exhaled, trying to keep her eyes on the ground. This only resulted in her running into the firm backside of her compatriot.

"W-why did you stop?"

Narukami glanced behind him, staring into the dark-blue eyes of the girl. She tried to read his eyes, but found the task difficult with the sound of footsteps trailing behind them. She spun around, trying not to tremble as the older boy watched her, analyzing her.

"Naoto?"

"Huh? W-what is it, Narukami?"

"Watch." She observed the young man gaze at the left wall, before rubbing his fingertips against a still wet smear. His fingers picked up droplets of blood from the wall, and to her disgust, her licked each digit clean.

"N-Narukami!"

"It's ketchup."

"Huh?"

"And these walls are cardboard with paint and Halloween decorations on them," he continued, gently tapping on the wall with his knuckle. He was silent, letting the audible, 'thunck' echo towards her.

"I..."

"You're scared. That's why you don't pick up on all the little clues around you, but look at it like a mystery. Find all the little details that prove you don't need to be scared." Narukami's voice was analytical, logical, and kind. He never once sounded like he was trying to insult or undermine the sleuth. Instead, he merely wanted to guide her to see what he saw. "Like the fact that this is still school. It may not look like it, but there's no way they're going to do anything actually damaging. No threat to our lives."

"I know that, it's just..." Naoto's eyes widened, her navy eyes darting behind them again at the sound of approaching footsteps. She felt her body fill with a pang of terror and a moment of shame. She was acting like a child! A stupid, ignorant child! She should have more control of herself, she shouldn't be jumping at every sound this accursed hall had to terrify her with... Her fingernails dug into the palm of her hands, only for a new hand to dig itself in between.

"Naoto. Focus... Analyze the area like a crime scene," he advised. Naoto blinked for a moment, before she felt his hand gently squeeze her own. "I've got your back, partner." No arrogance. No reprimand. Only one friend supporting the other.

"You're right." She sighed. "I've just never... I've never enjoyed the idea of threats that go beyond what I can see. The idea of ghosts and other paranormal superstitions have always been ridiculous, but as a child it terrified me..." Her eyes didn't dart this time. This time, she had them gently glide over the hall. She felt his hand tighten around hers for a moment, but she didn't speak up regarding it. She feared he'd remove it if she did...
"My parents would always tell me how ridiculous my fears were. They were baseless, they'd tell me. Impossible. I was safe from them... I suppose, with my recent discovery of a world beyond the one I knew, those fears aren't so baseless." Her eyes stopped when she saw what Narukami did. She gave his hand a reaffirming squeeze, before pulling away. "There's a speaker hidden under the cowwebs by the exit."

"Yep."

His hand finally slipped from hers, but she accepted it without remark. Naoto turned to face the silverette and he offered a sympathetic smile. It was only now that a rosy blush began to form on the sleuth's cheeks. She stepped away from the taller boy, realizing how little space there had been between them. "I'm so stupid," she mourned, hiding from his gaze with the rim of her hat. "How could I have fallen for such childish ploys?"

"Hey, I spent the last fifteen years of my life being stupid and childish. You were only stupid for a couple of minutes. Trust me, you'll bounce back. Now, come on. Let's reach the end of this hall."

"Hm..." Naoto felt the corner of her lip rise for a moment as he touched her back with a comforting hand. "Very well. Lead the way, leader."

Narukami did just that, thankful that his back was facing Naoto. That way she couldn't see his own blush. The two continued to walk, and every few steps he would point out another flaw or fallacy that would make this 'Hall of Horrors' seem all the more mundane. It was odd... The more he spoke, the more he tried to help her, the more at ease she began to feel. She would never want to admit this aloud, but it was nice...

Nice enough that neither noticed how close the two were, fingers and knuckles occasionally brushing against the other as they walked. They continued to walk down the haunted hall, only slowing when Naoto noticed a new 'horror' rising to scare them, but each time Narukami would find the strings of the puppet or explain how to pick apart the illusion.

"I'm surprised at how knowledgeable you are about these things, Narukami."

"I've pulled a couple of pranks in my time. I wasn't always the paragon of virtue you see before you."

"Hm. Is that so? Surprising," she chuckled, her voice laced with a pinch of mirth and laughter. This side of her, this side of her that so freely smiled... only Narukami could lure it out of her. Only he would see it from her, for now, at least. Despite the momentary joy, Naoto let out a solemn sigh. "I still feel rather humiliated... Being scared of such a juvenile attraction... How mortifying."

"Hey, don't be yourself up. Everyone's afraid of something. The most important thing is that you're facing your fears. Or, that's what I hear, at least." Narukami gently elbowed the girl, giving her a toothy grin.

The Detective Prince frowned, despite his efforts. "Perhaps you are right."

"It's me. I'm always right," he joked.

Naoto rolled her eyes in response, before a question piqued her curiosity. She glanced at the smiling man. "I have a question."

"I have an answer."

"You stated that everyone has fears. What are yours?"
Narukami seemed taken back by the question, and for a moment, Naoto wondered if she had overstepped her boundaries. Her fears were put at ease as he offered a small, if cautious smile. "Let's see if we can find it here. Come on."

"Wait- wha!" Narukami's hand latched onto her own and she was suddenly tugged forward, pulled faster down the hall as the silver-haired teen scanned the walls and halls. "N-Narukami, what are we looking for?" She held her hat against her head, a rosy glow forming on her cheeks once more as she realized their hands were hooked onto one another.

"Something that terrifies me."

"Perhaps a more specific answer?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I just told you, so- aha!" He came to a sudden stop and Naoto nearly stumbled into him as he did. She barely avoided falling against his back as she straightened herself out and pulled her hand from his. "There's one. Figures one would be here. It's a classic horror trope."

"What are you talking about, Narukami?" growled Naoto, trying to position her head around the taller boy, only to have him stand in the way each time.

"Now, Naoto, I want you to know that I haven't told anyone this. This is one of my greatest fears, and has terrified me ever since I was a child." That certainly played to Naoto's curiosity. She opened her mouth to say something, before her dark-blue eyes met his light eyes. He looked at her with something in his eyes... Kindness? Kinship? Trust? It was hard to put a word to it. "This doesn't go beyond us, okay? Last thing I need is Teddie or Rise hearing about this..."

"I won't tell anyone, Narukami."

"Alright. Here it is." The silverette turned his body to reveal the wall he hid from her. There was a shelf sitting against the wall, painted and decorated to look old and decayed. Beyond that, the shelf was naked, devoid of anything Naoto could call 'scary.'

"Narukami, I-" Her eyes finally spotted something. Laying on the ground, probably discarded or planted there, was a small, plastic, baby doll. It laid there on its' back, one eye missing, and light, plastic skin faintly dented. "The doll?"

"The doll."

"You're afraid of dolls?"

"I'm afraid of creepy, plastic, baby dolls."

"You're joking." Naoto stared at the taller boy with a sharp gaze, picking apart his expression, digging into his eyes, doing everything she could to pick out the truth from him... only to find herself shocked by what she found. "You're not... You are... This is... Really?" Once again, the detective seemed at a lost of words for her silver-haired compatriot. The boy only glanced at her, his eyes returning to the children's toy laying on the ground.

"Don't sound so shocked. They're creepy." Despite not looking at her, he could feel the girl's eyes on him. There was disbelief in her cerulean pools, as if she was expecting him to smirk and laugh it all off as a joke. Instead, Narukami walked forward and crouched down, staring at the fallen doll. It continued to lay there, staring at him with a single, faded eye. "I'm not kidding. There's just something about dolls like this that creep me the hell out," he sighed. "Just makes me nervous. Like it's gonna start moving or something..."
"That's... May I ask where such a fear came from? Have you always had it, or...?" The thought of not asking for fear of it being a sensitive subject was crushed under her curiosity. She watched the way Narukami’s silver eyes drifted, only to dart back to the doll as if he was afraid of taking his eyes off it. His fingers twitched, as if he was reacting to something brushing against them. His every breath was quiet, controlled, and subdued. He’s actually afraid of it... He's scared of a toy.

"I was young. Just bored one night at home. Just a little seven year old, maybe six, looking for something to do. My parents were both busy with work and were too busy to do anything with me, so my dad suggested I go watch a movie. He said he still had a movie in the VHS player upstairs and that I could watch it. So I did, without a second thought."

"I fear I may know where this story leads..."

"I started the movie. It was about a creepy doll, one that looked like this, coming to life and killing people. No one expected, no one believed the kid who saw it, no one tried to stop it until it was too late... It killed over a dozen people." To Naoto’s confusion, the boy began to laugh. "It was probably incredibly fake-looking. Not to mention stupid. But I was a kid... and I was probably equally stupid, if not more so."

"I ended up crying to my parents that night, telling them how scared I was. I ran in on my dad while he was on the phone and he got pissed at me, throwing me into my room and locking me inside. I hid under my blanket, terrified a doll was hiding under my bed, about to kill me."

Her friend shrugged his shoulders, lazily lifting and dropping them as he looked at her. "It's dumb, not to mention immature, but I had nightmares about that movies for weeks after, and I've been creeped by them since. Pretty dumb, huh?" He awaited Naoto's response, but it never came. He lifted his head to glance at her again, and was surprised to find her staring at him with an unreadable look in her eyes.

Pity? Disbelief?

Her hand fell on his shoulder as she sighed. "I'm sorry." She sighed, squeezing his shoulder with her hand. He gently placed his own hers, and nodded silently. Their eyes met, and Naoto saw a new side to Yu Narukami staring at her.

"It's not your fault."

"No, it isn't. But I still care." Narukami's eyes widened as she felt her soft, warm fingers slip between his. Their hands locked together, perfectly in sync as she avoided his curious, silver stare. "Let's leave this place behind. I would like to choose our next location." Her hand seemed to tremble in his own for a moment, before he gave a comforting squeeze.

Nothing's wrong, he silently told her, and when she met his gaze and allowed him to see her flushed cheeks, he knew that she heard him. "Lead the way."

The two walked out of the haunted halls with smiles on their faces. They talked and mingled, offering little things, their minds focused on better things than fears and the past. They focused on one another, and that was all that was needed. He never asked where they were going, only following along dutifully. Eventually, their hands fell apart from one another, but their distance never did. They were close, almost side by side as they walked down the halls of the school together. Eventually, Naoto led the young man to her destination of choice.

"The library?"
Naoto, for a brief moment, expected some kind of argument or childish protest about her choice of location, but she was wrong. Narukami smiled at her, before leading the way inside. She quickly followed as he spoke, eyes glancing left and right as he took in the room. The library was mostly unchanged, save for a few decorations hanging from the walls and ceiling. It was kept as a rest area, with some students sitting down to read or just speaking to their friends as they planned where to go next.

"My family has an amazing library. Mother, despite all of her problems, is an avid reader, and wanted the same for me. I assume you'll be in the mystery/crime novel section?"

"Um... Y-yes, I will." Naoto cursed her tongue and her own rosy cheeks. Narukami smiled at her again, a gentle and pleasant curve to his lips as he nodded his head.

"I'm going to grab some books for myself and meet you there. Be right back." The blue-haired sleuth watched him walk off, his hand tracing a line of books on a shelf as he walked. He seemed focus on his own search...

"R-right..."

It did not take Naoto long to find a book for herself, and a place for them to sit. Instead of sitting at a table along with strangers, she had chosen a quiet little corner of the library to sit in, planting herself on the floor and quietly awaiting the company of her best friend. She hoped sitting on the floor wasn't too much of a bother... A scarlet warmth, once again, washed over her cheeks as she sighed.

*Why do I care what he thinks? He'll be fine sitting on the ground.*

*He likes to read. He's smart. Super-nice. He's even funny! He's kind of amazing,* Naoto cursed the unprecedented thought. She stomped on it, kicked it down, and silently demand her mind never have a thought like that ever again. She took a deep breath and exhaled, shaking her head from left to right and back again. She was losing her mind. Narukami was making her lose her mind...

*This must be what falling in lo-* Naoto crushed the thought before it could even finish, opening up her book and immediately diving into the words within. As she turned the page, she heard a pair of footsteps approaching her. She glanced up from her book to find her silver-eyed compatriot greeting her. He said nothing, not wanting to break her concentration on her book, merely waving at her with a genuine smile on his face. Naoto stared at him, before nodding her head in acknowledgement, before glancing at the books he placed on the ground.

Narukami sat across from her, leaning his back against a bookshelf, but what caught her attention was the small pile of books he had brought with him. There had to be at least five of them, each filled with over two hundred pages each. She blinked, perplexed by the sight. "You will not be able to read all of those books in one sitting."

"Probably not, but I couldn't pick just one." Narukami picked from the pile like a child picking what game to play. His hand hovered over one choice, only to move to another. He picked up two, glancing between the summaries on the back, before putting both down and selecting another novel. Finally, he opened one of the books and began to quietly read from it, instantly enthralled by it.

"Naruakmi, do you... are you honestly enjoying yourself?"

"Hm? Yeah. I told you I like reading."
"Apologies, but I know when it comes to you, you don't always mean what you say."

"Hm. Fair. I promise I do enjoy reading. It's nice. I did it a lot as a kid when I wasn't manipulating people and breaking hearts," he admitted, shrugging his shoulder. "Probably one of my genuine good qualities before you came around."

"Hm." Narukami returned to his book, not noticing the Detective Prince's scrutinizing gaze. She chewed the inside of her lip, before glancing down at the printed words of her own novel. She tried to focus on it, tried to dive into it once more, but her eyes kept being pulled at. It was as if they were pieces of metal, and the magnet was Narukami. She opened her mouth, only to close again as she sighed through her nose.

He must have heard, as he lifted his head to glance at her. He flashed a friendly smile, nodding his head at her this time, before returning to his book. Narukami seemed so... content. He seemed so at ease. Just glad he was there, near her, accepted by her. If she said nothing, would he? Would they just sit here, together? Until the real world pulled them back in?

If they solved this case, could they do this again...?

Naoto dug her fingers into the hardback cover of the book. "Narukami," she sighed. "What are we doing?"

"Huh?"

"What are we doing here?"

"Reading. I mean, I am. You've just been kind of glaring at me for the last-"

"I mean, what are we doing with ourselves?" He continued to stare at her, without judgement, but desperate for clarity. "Even if we solve this case, you're going to be gone in a few months. So will I. We'll leave each other behind, surely you've realized that, yet you said it yourself you want to pursue a relationship with me?! That makes no sense."

"When."

"Excuse me?"

"When we finish this." Narukami placed his book on the ground and scooted over to Naoto. The detective shied away for a moment, but relaxed as he sat down beside her. Their legs brushed against one another as the silverette gazed at her. "Not if. When." He lifted a hand, but he couldn't bring himself to place it on her shoulder. Instead, it fell between them, her dark eyes staring at it silently. "We're going to solve this case, and then whatever happens will happen. I don't care."

"But."

"You're worried about the future. I get that. You can worry about it as much as you want, I'll always be right here to tell you it'll be okay."

"Why are you so stubbornly insistent that everything will be okay?" she growled, glaring at him.

"Because-"

"Do not say it's because you're you."

"I wasn't going to. I was going to say, you're you." Naoto's brow rose as Narukami grinned, a hint
of pride in his eyes, glittering like a diamond. "I know we're going to catch this killer because I believe in you, Naoto. You're smart, clever, cool... I don't know if we'll bring him in dead or alive, but we will catch him. Then you and me will figure us out. Until then, let's live for the now. You're my friend, and I'm yours. Tomorrow can bring whatever it wants to bring. Let's enjoy our lives together. Live life in the moment."

"I'm sorry to say I have little experience with such a thing. I've always worried about the future."

"Then let me help you. Just listen to your heart and speak your mind. Within reason, of course," he teased.

Within reason...? I'm not sure I can make that call anymore, she sighed, staring at Narukami. Her eyes traveled up and down his slender form, taking in the young man's athletic frame. Listen to my heart? I don't know what I'd do, were I to do such a thing... Naoto said nothing as she inched closer, pushing her body against him.

Yu Narukami stared at Naoto with an honest-to-God smile on his face. He meant every word that he said. If it was Rise or Kanji, he might have made a dumb joke. With Naoto, all he wanted to see was her smile. He stared into her navy eyes, losing himself in them...

That's when he realized her hand was squeezing his, and she was inching a little bit closer...

Wait, what...? Yu wasn't even sure if Naoto realized it. She leaned a little closer, and he felt her warm breath kiss the side of his neck. He felt his heart skip a beat as her hand squeezed his.

"Naoto...?" Memories of their kiss returned to him. They struck his body like lightning, and had a similar effect, making his skin tingle and burn as it became harder and harder to focus.

"Narukami..." He placed his free hand on the soft, smooth surface of her back. He pulled her in a little tighter as her hand fell on his chest. Naoto kept them apart as their faces inched closer. "You're very close..."

"You pulled in first."

"No." The remark was remarkably childish for the detective, a fact that was lost on neither of them. Naoto dipped her crimson face, hiding behind her hat, only to feel the cap being lifted off of her, revealing her natural sapphire locks. "N-Narukami, my hat-" The boy kept it out of her reach, dropping it beside them as she leaned in even closer. "S-stop that," she stammered as she felt his minty breath brushing against her lips.

"If you want me to leave, then just say the word. I will." She said nothing. Yu swore he heard the pounding of her heart as they leaned against the other. Maybe it was his heart, actually...

"I... I want..."

"Naoto..." He moved forward, but stopped as his lips hovered over her own. He wouldn't push her into this. If they were to kiss, it would be because she wanted to. This was her choice.

"Yu..."

"Big bro?"

The words shattered the little world Naoto and Yu had made. Their eyes widened as someone began to approach them, a familiar voice calling to them. Naoto pulled away, standing up and
quickly fixing herself as Nanako walked out from behind a bookshelf. She beamed at the sight of the two as Yu stared at Naoto’s back.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you! Yukiko invited us to her inn! Can we go?!! Please!" she pleaded, running towards her cousin and hugging his side.

"Oh, uh..." Yu glanced at Naoto, who was picking her hat up and placing it onto her head.

"I-I'll go find the others." Without another word, the blue-haired sleuth began to leave, her movement just a micron slow of running away. Yu watched her vanish behind the bookshelf and let out a heavy sigh. He rubbed his face, feeling the warmth and heat that his cheeks tingled with.

"Sure, Nanako. Let's go get the others..."

END
How could she not fall for him when she saw him?

When he led the charge to save her from her demon, when he risked life and limb for a stranger? He did it for her. He wanted to save her.

She remembered how he stood over her, concern in his silver irises. "Amagi-san, are you okay?" The monster that had her face, her so-called Shadow, had fallen. It fell apart within a fire, crumbling into ashes as a hand was held out to her. He stood before her fallen body, the fire radiating behind him, giving him a halo of light that shimmered and glimmered before her dark eyes. His eyes, though, his eyes were a beautiful silver, like the armor of a knight who had climbed the tallest tower of the tallest castle... For her. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay now... I promise."

How could she not fall in love with him?

And how could she not feel jealousy when she saw the way Naoto looked at him? She and Yu had only just met, and suddenly they were sharing eye contact and acting like best friends? It didn't make sense.

Yukiko and he had known each other longer. She knew the real him, like how he knew the real her! They had spent days together, as friends, on countless dates and ventures together. It didn't make sense...

What did make sense was that Naoto had done something to the man she loved. Why else would he suddenly change? He didn't like her Prince Charming anymore. He acted like Teddie and Yosuke instead. He'd act like a fool, he'd make off-color jokes, he became a different person, ever since Naoto came into their lives.

Yukiko didn't understand it... Why did Naoto take away Yu's true self...? What was happening to her prince...?

Yukiko Amagi stared at the water, her gentle fingers creating ripples in the warm liquid. She watched the water flowed and waved, distracting her mind from the problem that stood behind her.

"Wow! Naoto, is that you?!” Her best friend gasped.

She could hear little Nanako do the same, before cheering in that sweet, naive tone only a child could speak in. "Wow! Naoto's so pretty!"

"P-please, both of you, I-"

"Wow! Your skin is so smooth! What lotion do you use, Naoto?"

"R-Rise! Please, stop!"

"I wanna feel! I wanna feel!"

"N-Nanako-chan, please! Do not follow Rise's example! P-please, stop touching me!"
"Yukiko? Are... are you okay?" Oh. Her best friend remembered she was there. *How considerate.* Yukiko rose up from the edge of the pool, staring at the starry sky that flickered above them.

"Yukiko-senpai? I-I was hoping we could talk about what happened earlier? The altercation at school...? I don't understand what I did wrong, but I apologize for it and-"

"N-Naoto, maybe you shouldn't-"

"No, Chie." Yukiko rose up from the edge of the water, her back to the other girls. "Why shouldn't she ask? I mean, I have questions for her." Her tone was harsh, biting, scathing like hot water being flung at the girls. "Like why she's always hanging off of Yu's arms like some eye candy."

"W-what?! I don't-"

"Or how about how you're always running off with him to God knows where!?!"

"S-Senpai, calm down!" Rise pulled Nanako close to her side, trying to shield the poor girl from the growing tension. She pulled her towards back to the changing room, but the small brunette refused to move. Her feet were planted as she trembled in terror.

"Or why you're always stuck to him like some kind of leech!" Her words struck Naoto again as she finally turned around. Yukiko's dark eyes, typically warm and gleaming, were sharp and spiteful. She stepped forward, the towel hugging her body as she stomped towards the younger girl. "Or what the hell you did to ruin him?!"

"Yukiko!" Chie placed a hand on her friend's arm, only to be smacked away.

"Ever since you joined our group, he's been a completely different person! Why?! What did you do to him?!"

"N-nothing! I haven't done anything to him! He and I are simply-!" Naoto tried to argue, only to go silent as Yukiko's hand slammed into her cheek. The detective felt a blistering pain infest her body. The sound was audible, deafening almost as the bluette nearly stumbled onto the ground. Her hat fell to the ground, laying forgotten on the warm, stone floor as Naoto lifted a hand to her stinging, scarlet cheek.

Her cobalt eyes lifted up from the floor, staring into the ebony eyes of the older girl. Yukiko's eyes, for a moment, betrayed her. Naoto could see the regret in her eyes. She saw the tears forming in the corners of her dark pools, revealing the pain that anger hid. Despite the pain in her eyes, Yukiko's voice dripped only with hate. "Don't you dare try to tell me you're just friends with him. Why would he want to be friends with you...? Why would he pick you...?"

"P-please, stop!"

Nanako's tearful plea fell on deaf ears Yukiko glared into Naoto's eyes. The raven-haired woman's hand just trembled as she lifted up her hand again. Naoto stood her ground, her hands tightening into fists as she stood ready to defend herself. She fought the urge to close her eyes, the sight of someone she cared about looking at her with such hatred and fury... It stung almost as much as her red-marked cheek.

"Stop!" This time, Chie was the one begging them. Her hands fell upon them, one on Yukiko's shoulder, the other on Naoto's. She pushed the two apart, but neither lost the tension in their muscles. They stared at one another, a cacophony of emotions in the air.

"Hey! We heard yelling! Are you guys okay?"
The thump of footsteps forced Chie and Naoto's head to turn. The boys were quickly approaching them. Kanji ran to Rise, placing a hand on her shoulder and glancing between her and the crying Nanako. Yosuke, Yu, and Teddie rushed to the other girls. The four boys were still in their robes, having ran down straight from their room to the girls.

Yu's eyes quickly took in the scene, analyzing and taking in the details. He soon understood the situation, not even needing to hear what Chie was trying to say. He saw the spite in Yukiko's eyes, her glare darting between himself and Naoto. He saw the way Naoto stood, her body rigid and alert, as if she was in the middle of a fight. Her eyes refused to meet his silver orbs, avoiding the questioning looks. Finally, he saw her cheek. The skin was still red, a stark contrast from Naoto's moonlight-kissed skin. He saw the way Naoto seemed to shy away from anyone even standing close to the discolored cheek. His eyes slowly drifted from Naoto, slowly staring at the quaking hand Yukiko had raised.

"What did you do?" His voice dripped with venom, like a snake that seemed ready to strike. Yukiko didn't answer. She turned her head away, as if she could just ignore him. "I asked you a question." His hand shot forward, biting down on her wrist and tugging her closer. His other hand turned into a blur, latching down on the raven-haired girl's face, nails stabbing into her cheeks.

"What did you do?!"

"You're... hurting me," she gasped.

"I'll hurt you a lot worse if you ever touch Naoto again!" He twisted his hand, bending her arm painfully. He turned his body, pulling Yukiko down and onto the hard ground.

"Narukami, stop!" Naoto placed her hands on his chest, pushing him back as he tried to approach the fallen girl.

"Why did you hurt her?!" Yukiko stood up on shaky legs, her back to the infuriated man. He felt two more pairs of hands on him, trying to pull him back again as he glared at the girl. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

"Narukami!"

"Dude, stop!"

She said nothing as she skulked away, holding her towel tightly against her body. She walked past Kanji, Rise, and Nanako. She walked through the open doorways that led into the spa. She kept walking, seemingly blind to the enraged glare Yu gave her. She retreated away, leaving the others to feel the void she left behind.

"Naoto." Yu pushed Yosuke and Chie off of him, ignoring the hurt in their eyes to focus on the bluette. "Are you okay?"

"Narukami." His hands fell upon her shoulders, gently turning her so he could inspect the mark. "I'm fine," she sighed, pushing his hands away. "You should-"

"What the hell is wrong with her?" hissed the silverette. "Why the hell would she hurt you? Has she lost it or something?!"

"Hey!" Yu and Naoto turned their head to Chie, her eyes now seething with the same outrage Yukiko had worn. Her hazel-eyes burned for a moment, glaring at the team's leader. Instead of the wisdom and compassion she had come to expect from him, all she saw was contempt. "Look, Yukiko was wrong to hit Naoto, but she's right. You've been acting weird ever since Naoto joined
Without another word, Chie walked away from the others. She marched after her friend's trail, leaving her friends with the two voids they left behind.

Yu's eyes narrowed into a glare as Naoto tugged on his shoulder. He glanced at her, watching as her eyes returned to the stoic detective she trained to be. "You should go talk to her," she whispered. His eyes narrowed, and she could read the emotion in them like a book. "She needs to understand."

"Dude?" The near silent conversation ended as Yosuke called out to his friend. "Maybe you should go talk to her? I mean, she thinks there's something between you and Naoto." The brunette scratched the back of his head, his fingers combing through his hazel locks. He missed the slight flush on his two friends' cheeks, and the shared look they gave the other. "I've never seen her so pissed..."

"I'll go." Naoto's dark-blue eyes narrowed slightly, not out of anger, but concern. Her eyes met his as she silently asked him if he was prepared to do this. He could tell she was ready to follow and offer her support, but he rejected the other with the slightest shake of his head. He walked away from the group, leaving them in search of Yukiko and Chie.

It was not an especially difficult task to find the the two, or at least, find Chie. The girl had taken the time to adorn her emerald, green jacket and skirt, leaving the towel behind. She stood outside a room, Yukiko's bedroom, he assumed, calling out to her friend.

"Yukiko, please! Let me in." Yu walked towards her with a grimace on his face as the martial artists continued to knock on the door, despite the futility. "Yukiko!"

"Let me try." It sounded more like an order than he would have liked to admit. Chie turned to him with a scowl on her face, her hazel eyes filled to the brim with blame. His own eyes reflected a mix of shame and frustration, but also a driving force behind him. "Please?" She glanced at the silent, closed door leading to her best friend and sighed. She stepped back, allowing him to take her place. Without another word, she walked away, leaving the two to their own privacy. "Thanks," he muttered to her retreating figure.

He placed a warm hand upon the cool, wooden surface and sighed. This door, unlike most in the inn, was more modern. It wasn't the paper-thin doors the old-fashion inn was filled with. He only hoped she could still hear his voice as he called out to her.

"Yukiko." No response. Of course, no response. "I've come to talk." You'd think I'd be used to this by now. "I know why you hit Naoto. I know what's probably... I get what's probably going through your head." He paused a moment to sigh, his fingernails gently scratching against the smooth wood. "There isn't anything going on with me and Naoto. Nothing real." He spoke quickly, stabbing her with his words as painlessly as possible. "But there won't be anything between you and I either. I'm sorry."

"You probably fell for me thinking I came out of a storybook or something. I'm not. If fact, I'm nothing like the man you saw." Yu chewed the inside of his cheek as he slid down, soon sitting in front of the door. "I smiled at you and made you think you were special to me, when in truth, I just thought you were easy to trick. You bought my act and filled in the blanks, making you think I was this perfect man. I'm not a good person. I manipulated and lied to you..."

Silence.
"Yukiko, I'm sorry." He sat there, his voice filled with remorse and sympathy, but he couldn't fight the growing frustration as his only reply from Yukiko was silence. "Say something? I mean, I just want some kind of idea of where we sta-" The door opened, creaking open just a crack to reveal her cracked and dried eye. He stood up, meeting her eye as he tried to think of what more he could say. "I'm sor-"

And then her fist connected with his face, knocking him back and nearly sending him onto the floor. He stumbled back, using the wall behind him to support himself as his eyes spun. "Okay... I deserved that," he sighed, rubbing his cheek. He felt a sharp pain when he touched his lip, scowling when he realized her fist had pushed the back of his lip into his tooth. "Ow."

"Why?" He looked at her still trembling form. She had traded her towel for a scarlet, long-shirt and raven-colored skirt. She glared at him with tears in her eyes, her teeth ground against one another. "Because I was a bad person." He rubbed his face and straightened his body out. "It's just that simple."

"I don't understand," she admitted, eyes falling to the floor.

"I wouldn't expect you to," he muttered. "We need to talk, though. Will you listen to me?" He extended his hand out to her, but she refused to even look at it. She began to walk, travelling down the hall, leaving the silverette behind her. He let out a quiet sigh, before following after her.

The two walked until they found a place to continue their conversation. They eventually ended up on a balcony, overlooking the path leading to Amagi Inn. The stars and moon offered them all the light they needed as their eyes adjusted to the dark. A cool breeze blew by, but while Yu shuddered at its' bite, Yukiko felt nothing. They stood on the balcony together, blanketed by cold winds and a starry night sky as they talked.

Yu spoke about his past, and explained his feelings and experiences, but she still hardly spoke. She nodded her head and offered the barest, most emotionless words to show that she was indeed listening. It was impossible to talk about his life and not mention Naoto, sadly. When the topic came up, he watched her already deflated mood fall even further.

"I... I don't... You lied to me?"

"Technically, I lied to everyone." Yu did not need to think long to realize how poorly that sounded. *Man, this being honest thing still gets me...* "But yes. I lied, because that's what I did. I manipulate and take advantage of others, and I would have done the same to you, had Naoto not come around and gotten me to change..."

"So, really, I should be thanking her...?"

_Huh, never thought about it like that._

"I feel like such an idiot." Yukiko's hands fell upon the wooden railing, trying in vain to crush them as she stared down at the distant ground. "I... I can't believe I hit her. She didn't deserve that, she... she must hate me..."

"Hey, look, if it weren't for me, you'd never have been in that position anyways." Yu moved to her side, placing his own hands on the railings as he glared into the night sky. "And don't worry about Naoto. She doesn't hate you."

"That doesn't make me feel better," the girl lamented. "She should..." Yu was about to speak out...
against the statement, only to find her shadow-colored eyes staring at her. "You love her, don't you?"

"Huh?" He blinked in response, staring at her with wide, uncharacteristically hesitant, eyes. "I... never said that."

"You didn't have to. It's obvious." Her gaze fell back to the ground below them as he heard her mutter, "Painfully obvious."

"I... Yeah," he sighed, nodding his head. "I love Naoto." He could tell the words stabbed at Yukiko's heart, but there was nothing he could really do to numb that pain. Was he supposed to offer some sort of consolation prize? Tell her that if Naoto wasn't around, she would have had a chance? He wouldn't say that; he knew that no matter how hard Yukiko tried, he would never have cared about her as much as he did the detective. It was a painful truth, but one they could both see. "She makes me happy. She drove me to be a better person..."

"And I didn't...?" He wished she hadn't asked him that, because he knew the answer would just cut at her already broken heart. Instead, he was silent, which was more than enough to answer her. "Is... is there something wrong with me?"

"No. You just... You saw something that wasn't there, and it's my fault you ever thought he did exist." He shook his head from one side to the other, then back again. "You saw this amazing, princely guy. You thought I was this stoic, but compassionate hero." He didn't see it, but there was a flicker of light as Yukiko's gaze drifted off. His words still reached her, but her heart put the words he said on someone else...

"You saw someone and fell in love with the mask, not the person wearing it. You filled in the blanks with this perfect fantasy, but that's not who I am, and I'm sorry for that. I-"

"I'm not who everyone thinks I am." He looked at her with confusion in her eyes. She stared back at him with a new glint of understanding in her raven orbs. "I think I understand." Her eyes dug into his silver orbs, peering into his very soul as he watched her. "Yosuke-kun hasn't asked me out since May." Now Yu was staring at her like she had lost it, obviously not following her train of thought.

"I remember him telling me he wanted to ask me out. Before the case, he seemed... infatuated with me. A lot of the boys were like that. They'd all ask me out, but I'd never... I mean, I just couldn't say yes."


"R-right. Well, Yosuke-kun hasn't asked me out for months, and I think it's because he's seen the real me. He knows the girl he had a crush on, the one he wanted to take out for dinner and date never existed." Her hands tried again to crush the wooden railings. "He heard me laugh, he heard me joke, he realized I wasn't the wife-material he thought I was. I couldn't even cook curry," she cried. Her vision began to blur as tears formed in the corners of her eyes, only continuing after a sympathetic hand fell upon her shoulder.

"He wasn't the only one. There was this boy, Takeshi, who saw Chie and I eating lunch together. I never even noticed him, but he said he spoke to Chie about me. He said..." The words obviously pained her to recall. All Yu could do was squeeze her shoulder in silent compassion, quietly motioning for her to go on. "He said, I was better gloomy. That I was prettier when I was sad, and not doing that 'weird' laugh. He only saw me as this quiet, but beautiful princess. A faraway prize for him to seek, not a person."
"They fell for the me they saw, not the me that I really am." She lifted her eyes to look at him, finding only sympathy and understanding in his eyes. She prayed it was real as tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. "I-I did the same to you, and I hate it. I hate everything about this...!" She pulled away from the railing and fell forward, into his arms. He caught her, placing his arms on her back as she wept into his chest, burying her head in him. It pained her to realize how nice it felt to be held and comforted by him. "And I think I hate you."

"That's... understandable." He didn't ask her to forgive him. He just held her in his arms as she felt her insides being cut apart by the shards of her heart. Her fingers dug into his back, digging in through the fabric to pick at his skin. He said nothing about the slight stinging sensation. "I hope you can forgive me one day." She didn't say anything in regards to that. "Do you want to hit me again?" He meant it partly as a joke, but he was ready to give her the chance when he felt her pull away.

She looked at him, her eyes once again returned to a state of discoloration, cracks of scarlet and crimson ruining her once beautiful gaze. She stared at him for a moment, and he prepared himself for another blistering punch, only to feel nothing as her head fell back onto his chest. "Can... can we just stay like this for a little longer?"

"Sure. Whatever you want..."

Maybe one day they would be friends. Maybe one day she would forgive him for breaking her heart. Maybe. For now, he accepted her feelings towards him, both romantic and spiteful. They stood there for a long moment, drawing out the hug for as long as Yukiko needed it to be.

"There you two are!" They lifted their heads, and Yukiko wiped away the last remaining tears that soiled her face. The doors had been slid open, and both saw the familiar faces of Yosuke and Chie standing in the doorway, basked in the light of the Inn. They walked out of the illuminated hallway and towards the two, who began to pull away from one another.

"Yukiko, are you-?"

"I'm okay, Chie," she interrupted. She didn't sound very convincing, but the brunette didn't even have time to argue the point. Yukiko fell onto her, wrapping her arms around her friend's body. She squeezed her as Yosuke walked over to the silver-haired boy.

"Dude, I saw you hugging her. You two together now or what?" he teased. Yu could see the corners of his grin from the light of the stars and moon. He couldn't return the gesture, merely meeting Yosuke's smile with a slight frown.

"No, we're not." Yukiko and Chie were already walking back into the inn, and Yu did not give Yosuke another moment of attention. He followed after the girls, a weight off his shoulders, but a sense of guilt in his heart.

Naoto had returned to more appropriate garb after the incident by the spa. She sat in the guest lounge, quietly clicking her pen as she tried to calm her nerves. Her eyes glanced to Rise-chan and Tatsumi-kun, watching them play with and entertain Nanako-chan. Both seemed adept at caring for the innocent youth and helping her forget about the recent incident. Naoto's hand briefly touched her cheek, feeling the phantom sensation of Yukiko's slap across her face.

What she said... She must think Narukami and I are-

"Naoto?" The sleuth silently cursed her distracted mind, lifting herself up from the cushioned chair
to meet the speaker. To her shock, she found Yukiko Amagi staring at her, the older girl's eyes aimed downwards, towards the tiled floor below them. "Can I... talk to you?" Her eyes glanced towards Rise, Kanji, and the giggling Nanako. Neither seemed to notice she had returned.
"Please?"

"O-of course. Please, lead the way, Amagi-san." Naoto quietly cursed herself again, this time for referring to Yukiko improperly. *Then again, it is doubtful we are friends after this incident.* The sapphire-haired girl followed her senpai, until the two of them stood at the end of an empty hall that branched off from the lounge. Naoto fixed her hat for a moment, nervously awaiting for Yukiko to begin speaking. *Or am I supposed to speak? Should I apologize? Perhaps ask how she is doing? Ugh... Grandfather, help me, I don't know what to do in situations like this!"

"I'm sorry."

"E-excuse me?" Naoto blinked, nearly floored at the words she heard. Surely she had misheard...? But no, Yukiko stood in front of her with her hands over her lap. The raven-haired woman bowed her head, eyes refusing to meet Naoto's.

"I'm sorry for hitting you. It was stupid and selfish of me. I... I hope you can forgive me," her voice nearly broke when she spoke, and Naoto could detect the hoarse and soreness her voice carried. She had obviously had a long, difficult night. Rather than inquiry about it and sate her growing curiosity, Naoto merely bowed her head.

"Please, Amagi-san, you have nothing to apologize for."

"That's not true. I hit you," she growled, more out of her own frustration than any malice towards Naoto.

"Be that as it may, I..." Their eyes finally met and Naoto, despite her tin ear, could feel the silent plea in her eyes. She begged for her to accept the apology and let this night be left in the past. With a small sigh, the detective nodded her head. "If it is what you want, very well. I accept your apology."

"Thank you," she sighed, her voice dripping with gratitude. "I should probably go..."

"Of course, Amagi-"

"Yukiko. You can still call me Yukiko, Naoto."

"O-of course, Yukiko-senpai." The navy-haired girl thought the conversation had officially ended and she took a step to begin to leave. She was surprised when she felt the older woman's hand clamp onto her wrist.

"Naoto?" The sleuth swiveled her head so she could look at her senpai, who had a look of command in her raven eyes. "Be careful, okay?"

She paused, unsure why the young woman requested this of Naoto, but decided against asking. She nodded her head, instead. "I promise, Yukiko-senpai..."

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Yu Narukami sighed as he fell upon an empty seat, resting his body on the soft, cushioned surface. His head fell back, resting on the chair as he mulled over tonight's events. *Here's hoping I was able to get through to Yukiko... And Naoto...* The young man's eyes traced over the room, sighing again when he realized the detective was nowhere to be found. *Of course.*
"Senpai?" Yu lifted his head and to his surprise, he found Rise and Kanji looking down at him. Both of them appeared concerned for their mutual friend, and it was at this moment Yu realized something. He had friends, actual friends, who cared about him. *Friends. Plural. Huh.* "You okay?" asked Rise.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Just been a long night," he muttered in reply. The two nodded their heads in understanding, before Yu glanced at the child that stood away from him. Nanako looked back at him, before glancing at her fidgeting hands. "Nanako, are you okay?" he inquired, standing up. He walked towards her and kneeled down in front of her. She lifted her timid gaze up to him, meeting his silver eyes.

"Is Yukiko okay? She sounded really upset."

"She was upset, but she's okay now," he said, gently stroking the girl's hazel locks.

"What happened? Why was she so mad?"

"It's complicated, and it wouldn't be right for me to say," he added, shooting down the question that he knew his little sister was going to ask.

"Oh... Is Naoto okay?" wondered Nanako.

"Why don't you go make sure? I'm putting you in charge of helping her, okay, sis?" Yu smiled at the girl, giving her his blessing as she nodded her head, excitedly. She quickly dashed away, leaving the three teenagers to their own company. "How was Naoto while I was gone?"

"Quiet," answered Kanji, shrugging his shoulders as he sighed. "But you'll never guess what the hell she said while you were gone." A smile pulled at his lips, confusing the silverette. Yu was only more confused as he saw a similar expression form on Rise's face.

"Yosuke said that Junes was holding a Halloween party tomorrow night."

*Halloween? Shit, that is tomorrow...*

"And Naoto was actually insistent we all attend!"

"Wait, Naoto? Our Naoto?" Yu blinked, staring at his friend with wide, surprised eyes. "She wants us all to attend a party? A dress up party?"

"Yep! She said, it'd be good for all of us to try and have some fun."

"You must be having a hell of an effect on her, man," Kanji commented, elbowing the older boy. Despite the smile on his face, Yu could see the traces of jealousy and sadness in his blue eyes. All the same, he appreciated the effort. Yu returned the smile with a nod of his head, before his silver eyes stared across the lounge. Naoto was walking out of a hallway, Nanako by her side.

The detective was smiling, but Yu could tell it was for Nanako's sake. The silver-haired youth watched her try to be strong, doing her best to not let the young, empathetic girl see her true feelings.

*A Halloween party, huh...?* Yu knew what he needed to do. He waved at Naoto, offering a wryly smile. She saw it and clearly hesitated, before waving back. She didn't approach the three. Instead, she seemed to bid Nanako goodbye and walked up a nearby flight of stairs. It looked like Naoto was off to bed. He briefly considered following her, but decided against it. From the pageant, to the Haunted Halls, to this... The day had been utterly draining.
He needed sleep, and he would probably go to bed soon, but before he did he made an oath to himself. Tomorrow was Halloween, and he swore to himself that he was going to make sure Naoto was going to have fun. He would see the girl smile and hear her laugh, even if it killed him.

"Hm... The Priestess and Fool have forged a new bond with one another," Igor acknowledged. He picked up the card, admiring the sheen and complexity of the artwork. His gloved fingertips stroked over the card's smooth edge, admiring the new strength that flowed from it like a river.

The bond was new, even weak, but unlike the bond before it, it was true. It felt different to hold it now. Before it was cold, and touching it almost felt like grease leaking through his gloves. It would have felt repugnant, almost as much as the Fool that had infected it in the first place. Now, though, it shimmered with a brilliant light and felt warm to the touch. He swore he could feel a light, rhythmic beat flow from it.

He placed it back onto the table, admiring the way it glowed with the Emperor, Lovers, and Fortune tarot cards.

"He continues down the path of healing."

"But is it enough?" Igor lifted his head, his eternal grin meeting his assistant's scowl. Her ruby lips bent downward, betraying her typically stoic soul. "Dark days are coming. Is he ready?"

"Perhaps." His shoulders raised and fell in a simple shrug. He picked up the Fool card and admired it. Truly, he was nothing like the previous guests that Velvet Room had the honor of housing. He was different. Rougher. More enigmatic. Odd. But certainly one of the most interesting guests he had met. "Dark days are indeed coming, but for now, let him enjoy his youth. Let him fall in love. Let him forge his bonds. Time will soon tell if he is strong enough."

"A liar seeking the truth, I cannot tell if fortune smiles upon us or not," Margaret lamented. Instead of commenting on her words, Igor just dropped the Fool back onto the table. It laid there, crooked and uneven atop the Fortune card as the Velvet Room traveled on through the fog.

END
Halloween Night and Inaba was alive with life and holiday spirit. Children were excited for the adventures the night would bring and parents were preparing to accompany them. Despite all of the fear and dread the town had experienced in the previous months, people seemed happy and excited for the holiday.

Yu Narukami understood why, of course. Most people thought the killer was caught. He was sure that Halloween was doubling as the chance to celebrate the end of the terror they had all felt. They were safe now, and they had nothing to worry about.

Idiots, he sighed. Oh well, might as well enjoy this while I can. He glanced towards the sunset and watched the sun continue to fall, signalling that the night's activities were going to begin soon. Yosuke had told the group that Junes was going to hold a party for the holiday, and Naoto's insistence had been the final nail that ensured the Investigation Team's attendance. Now he waited for their arrival, patiently sitting at their 'secret headquarters.'

"Hello, Narukami-kun..." Yu lifted his eyes from his phone and felt a pang of guilt as he saw the girl that stood in front of him.

"Hey, Yukiko..." And cue awkward silence...

"Have you been waiting long...?" Her eyes couldn't meet his. She just stared at the table, looking for anything to focus on that wasn't him.

"No," he replied. "Um... Excited for the party?"

"Yeah. Seems like it'll be fun..." Neither spoke and both avoided the others' gaze as they waited for something to break the tension. It seemed neither of them were ready to act upon their new link, a fact that left Narukami rather frustrated with himself. He made a silent promise himself to try again later, but for now, he gave her space.

The two were left waiting for several more minutes before any of their friends showed up.

Despite Naoto's insistence that the group attend this party, the young detective lacked a costume. In fact, several members of her social circle lacked proper attire. It seemed that most of them simply outgrew the spirit of Halloween, save for Teddie, who happily arrived with a large Jack-O-Lantern themed mask atop his bear costume. Thankfully, Hanamura-senpai assured Naoto and the others that he would supply costumes for each of them.

Unfortunately, Naoto had failed to predict the kind of costume Hanamura-senpai would give her.

"I refuse to go out there dressed like this!"

"What? What's wrong with it?" asked the brunette from beyond her changing tent. "It doesn't have a skirt!"

"T-that's not the point!" Naoto glared at the thin, cardboard flap that hung on the outside of the costume. "I refuse to be seen in public as some kind of cat girl!" If she had been insane enough to actually wear the costume she would have been exposing far too much skin for her liking. The dark
blue shorts exposed her knees and thighs, and the small shirt left her midriff and shoulders open to view. There was even a pair of cat ears that were meant to sit on her head.

"Huh. There's an interesting idea," a voice chuckled.

"Be quiet, Narukami. A-and stay away from my tent!" The voice laughed at her, just beyond the thin, white fabric.

"Right, right."

"Come on, Naoto-kun! I bet you look super cute!" Rise's arms reached into the tent to try and pull the detective out. Naoto rolled her eyes and merely stepped out, glaring at her companions with flushed cheeks. The sleuth noted Rise's small pout when the detective stepped out in her usual clothing. "You didn't even try it on?"

"There was a picture on the front." Naoto motioned to the picture that decorated the cardboard. "That was more than enough for me."

"Man, I knew I should have removed that thing," grumbled Yosuke, earning himself a harsh glare from the younger girl. "Aw, come on, Naoto! It's just for fun."

"No. I'll merely attend the party as myself," the girl argued.

"Can't do that. Junes actually posted rules that they wanted everyone attending to be in costume," countered Yosuke. He grinned at her, as though he had just seized victory with his own two hands.

"T-then I'll simply find another, more practical costume!"

"Um, Naoto? It's Halloween night. Most places are sold out by now," Chie reminded.

"Oh. Yes, that would be likely... In that case, perhaps-"

"I'll walk you home." Naoto blinked, and each head of the Investigation Team turned to the speaker. Yu Narukami watched them, with hands in his pockets as he shrugged. "If Naoto isn't able to attend, then she shouldn't have to just hang outside the party watching us have a good time, and I would hate for her to have to walk home alone. After the recent murders, I can't help but imagine some people will try to pull off some dangerous stunt or prank. It would simply be safer if I accompanied her."

"But dude! Then you won't be able to have fun either!" Yosuke groaned. "Do either of you know how much your costumes cost me?!!"

"And we appreciate the gesture," replied the silver-haired leader. Naoto's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing the young man. He was speaking with a different inflection, making himself sound more charismatic and polite than he needed to be. That only meant he was up to something malicious, if not immature. "But Dojima-san wanted to know if I could stay home tonight to watch over Nanako-chan. After accompanying Naoto, I will stay at home to do that."

"You sure, Senpai?" inquired Tatsumi. Naoto glanced at the blonde boy, silently noticing the Frankenstein's Monster costume he was adorned in, before glancing back towards Narukami.

*Does Tatsumi see through his deceit as well? Or am I the only one picking up on his subtle inconsistencies?*

"Oh, Senpai," sighed Rise. "You're too nice for your own good." The young woman stepped closer
to the silverette's side and gently elbowed him, glancing into his eyes. The two shared a silent
discussion that left both of them grinning, and Naoto with a slight frown on her lips.

*Rise-chan knows he is planning something... But what are you planning, Narukami?* Whatever it
was, Naoto knew she was going to end up as his partner in crime. The possibility of speaking up
and denying Narukami's offer did come to mind, yet when she looked at his shimmering, silver
eyes, she recalled their time together yesterday...

Together, they braved those accursed, 'haunted' halls. They confessed to one another their fears and
secrets, enjoying one another's company. He truly was her closest friend. An intellectual equal, but
with a personality vastly different from her own, yet their were similarities. They both staved to find
their true selves after years of deceit and masks. They smiled at one another, they had even held
hands in the past, and they had even ki-

"Naoto? Are you coming?" He was looking at her with the slightest smile on his face. If he saw the
scarlet cheeks that tainted her pale skin, which he most certainly did, he did not remark upon them.
Instead, she took a deep breath and exhaled. Naoto tipped her hat down slightly, hiding her flushed
cheeks as she silently accompanied Narukami out of the changing rooms.

The two walked out of Junes, Narukami silently smirking as the detective followed, equally quiet
for the moment. Her patience did not last forever, and she broke their silence as they walked into
the Northern Shopping District. The young woman came to a stop and crossed her arms, frowning.
The older boy noticed she had stopped and turned to meet her frown with a smile.

"Do you want to tell me just what exactly it is you have planned?"

"It's a surprise. Don't you like surprises, my dear Naoto?"

"Not particularly, no. My very profession is finding out secrets, after all."

"Ah. Fair point," he chuckled. Her glare sharpened, and he held up his hands in a mock motion of
surrender.

"I already know you have no intention of walking me back to my home, Narukami," the sleuth
deduced. "So what exactly do you have planned? Something mischievous and juvenile, no doubt."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Narukami chuckled at the girl, shaking his head. "As for what I have
planned, it is a little mischievous, and a bit of a white lie, but it will be fun, I promise you that."

"Is that so?" She did not sound convinced.

"Enough to put a smile on that pretty, little face of yours, I bet."

Pretty...? *Stop that!* she scolded to herself. Despite her internal conflict, Naoto just glanced away
from her friend and grunted in a quiet response."Hrm."

"There. Come on, we're going into Aiya's," he explained, motioning her after him. The two walked
into the restaurant, finding only a few patrons inside, and a young woman at the counter. "Aika, do
you still have the bags?" The navy blue-haired girl glanced at the two, her face stoic and strangely
monotone. She nodded her head as Naoto watched her bend down under the counter. She handed
two bags to Narukami, who took them with a quick "Thanks." He motioned Naoto to follow him to
the back, who did, her eyes on the plastic bags.

"What are those?" she asked, following him down an empty hall.
"Costumes for us." He stopped at the bathrooms and knocked on it, awaiting a reply. "Okay, looks like the lady's room is empty. Hurry up and get changed," he declared, tossing one of the bags to her. She caught it, but her eyes widened as he began to enter the men's bathroom.

"Wait, you intend for us to simply change here?!"

"Don't worry! Aiya's keeps it clean!" His teasing, mocking smirk faced her. "I'll meet you back out here in a few. Try not to take too long. Party's probably starting."

"Narukami-!" The door closed, and the distinct click of the lock told her he would not be answering her questions. "Darn it..."

Yu could make a clown suit look good. Most people didn't realize this, but good looks weren't all about the physicals. You didn't need to look good to look good. True, Yu was a handsome man already, but it was his confidence that really made him the heartthrob women lusted for. He smiled at the mirror, admiring himself for a moment. He looked good, even in the skintight spandex.

Hell, he looked amazing.

He heard a soft knock on the door, followed by a voice calling out to him. "I-I'm finished."

"Alright, I'll be out in a second." Yu glanced back at his reflection and his smile grew. *Okay, Narukami. Time to make her night amazing.* He stepped out of the bathroom, helmet safely held under his shoulder as he greeted the girl. "So, Naoto, how do you like the...?"

*Good God...*

*She's so cute!*

Naoto wore her costume well, and his silver eyes traced over her frame as she glared at him. Her anger fell on ignorant eyes as he framed the sight of her like a painting, hanging it within his mind like a work of art. He opened his mouth, only to feel it hang loosely. Just like him, she was stunning in the superhero garb. His eagle eyes noted that her chest was pushed flat, her bandages clinging to her skin underneath the blue spandex. He could see the slightest bump on her chest...

He swore his heart drummed just a little faster at the sight of her.

And her eyes... Her cobalt eyes glared at him, yet all he saw was the beautiful passion they held. Like watching a fire through sapphires, her eyes entranced him. Even her hat was gone, letting her short, blue locks hang freely. Her bangs just barely blocked the sight of her shimmering eyes.

Finally, he saw her cheeks and the sight of the rose-tinted skin brought his hanging jaw into a soft smile.

"Narukami?" Naoto's voice snapped him out of his daze. He watched her hand wave in front of his face, before she crossed her arms over her small, near-flat breasts. "What were you staring at?"

"Uh... N-nothing?" He quickly shook his head and coughed into his hand. "So, what do you think of the costumes?!"

"Phoenix Rangers Feathermen R... Why?" Her eyes returned to glaring at him, though he could see she was using it to hide her true feelings.

"We both like Phoenix Rangers. Why not?" He shrugged his shoulders, his confident smirk returning to his lips as she looked away.
"Why not, indeed," she repeated.

"I won't force you to wear if you really don't want to." And he meant it, much as that pained him to admit. She looked amazing in the uniform, like the character came to life, only hotter and cuter.

"No." She was quick to shoot down the idea, a fact that only widened his smile. "You went to the trouble of acquiring this outfit, a feat that could not have been easy, I suppose I can at least wear it for the night before returning it."

"You sure?"

"As long as we avoid anyone I respect knowing it's me in this costume, I suppose it will be fine. For the holiday, of course."

"Of course." He motioned his head to the main room of the restaurant, where the navy-haired girl waited for them. "Aika will take our clothes and hold them for us. You ready to have some fun, detective?" He held his hand out to her, and she glanced down at it.

She stared at his hand for a moment, before her eyes softened. The corner of her lip was pulled into a wryly smile as her hand fell into his, firmly squeezing it. "I am."

Yosuke had been asked by his boss to spend the first hour of the party greeting people. So he stood by the entrance, Teddie by his side, forcing a smile on his face as his friends enjoyed the festivities. As he half-heartedly waved at the guests, his ears picked up on a familiar voice. He glanced to the side and saw Rise, dressed as a mad scientist, with large, thick-rimmed glasses on her face, holding onto Kanji's arm. The young, blonde Frankenstein's Monster turned scarlet as he tried to fight off the idol.

"Come, my monster! Let's go terrorize the snack bar!"

"H-hey! Quit it! G-get off, Rise!"

Yosuke watched the sight of Rise pulling on Kanji's arm with a bewildered stare. He crossed his arms over the fur of his werewolf costume, frowning slightly. "Is it me, or have Kanji and Rise been acting really weird lately?"

"Huh? I haven't noticed anything," commented Teddie.

"I mean, Kanji doesn't even like Risette! But Rise's been hanging by his side ever since the Culture Festival!"

"Maybe he has candy in his pocket?" wondered the bear, staring at the pawful of sweets in his own hand. "I know that'd get me! Mmmm!" The short, blue bear threw the candies, wrapper and all, into the black void of his jack-o-lantern mask. Yosuke could hear him happily chewing away, despite his lack of a real mouth.

"Dude, you better brush your teeth tonight. You've been packing the candy." The brunette reached his hand forward, only to be smacked away by the bear's paw.

"Paws off, Yosuke! Get your own!"

"Ow! You little bear bastard! What the hell was that for?!"

"Excuse me? Are we at the right spot for the Junes party?"
"Huh? Oh, yeah! Welcome!" Yosuke's eyes darted back before him, finding a gloved hand offered to him. The wolfman shook the hand as he smiled at the couple. "Hey there, welcome to the party. Cool Phoenix Ranger costumes."

"Thank you so much. My name is Souji. This is my girlfriend, Narumi." The blue ranger turned her head to look at her taller, red partner. She looked like she was about to say something, but Souji interrupted her. "You're the Junes kid, right? Yosuke Hanamura? It's nice meeting you."

"Oh. Thanks?" Souji's hand and the couple began walking by the two boys. The man waved goodbye as they entered the party. "Hey, Teddie."

"Hiya!" Teddie quickly returned to his candy horde as Yosuke's dark brow rose up.

Weird... Who was that guy?

"Souji? Narumi?! Girlfriend?!" Naoto's voice only rose in passion and volume as she glared at her masked compatriot.

"What? You said you didn't want anyone you respected knowing you were dressed up as a Phoenix Ranger. Do you not respect Yosuke?" he teased, chuckling behind his helmet.

"But why the ridiculous aliases?! And..." She was blushing behind her mask, a fact that she prayed he did not realize. "Do you enjoy embarrassing me, Narukami? Or do you just enjoy making a fool out of the both of us?"

"A little of both, honestly," he replied. His hand fell upon her helmeted head, gently petting the hard, plastic material. "Come on, Naoto. The night is ours. No one is going to know that Naoto Shirogane and Yu Narukami are in spandex, partying the night away. Be who you want to be, do what you want to do, no one will know that it's you, no one will judge you," he explained, motioning around them with a hand on her shoulder.

"No one except you," she deadpanned.

"Yeah, but I'm your best friend." He gently elbowed the young girl, before looking around. "So, what do you want to do first?" The disguised detective seemed to glare at him behind her visor, before turning her head away. She did not give an answer, instead staring at the festivities around them.

Everyone was dressed in a costume, some simple, like Rise's mad scientist costume, some more intricate, such as Nanako's Detective Loveline costume. Yet joy and mirth was a constant among most of the party-goers. Everyone looked to be in high spirits as the DJ played another song. Decorations such as cobwebs and ghosts hung from trees as the night sky hung over everyone. Activities lined the outskirts of the party, such as bobbing for apples and face painting.

All of this just made the sleuth feel lost. "I have to admit, I have little experience with events such as these. I'm... rather at a loss of what to do." He could practically hear her blushing.

For a brief moment, Yu considered teasing his friend about her lack of experience, but he decided against it. Instead he placed a hand on the side of her helmet and gently pulled her towards him. She faced him and he leaned close, staring into the darkness of her visor. "Hey. It's okay. Trust me," he suggested, pulling away from the blueette.

Naoto watched him walk away, towards the stage where the DJ played his song. He wasn't the only one as other partygoers walked towards the dance floor. Some were couples holding hands,
some were gangs of friends, and others were alone as they joined on the smooth, stone floor, all of them moving in time to the synthesized music.

The beat of the music started slow, and Yu stood near the center, gently bobbing his head as the speakers trembled from the volume of music. Yu's hands traced over the air, moving like they were flowing through water at first, before moving like lightning down and up, dancing to the beat as his legs stepped left and right. It soon became clear that the young man wasn't simply dancing with the music. His gifted reflexes made him almost seem to control the flow of the song, dancing at a quickening pace as he spun and danced.

He quickly earned the eye of the other dancers, and people seemed to marvel as he moved. Naoto wasn't sure what to think as Narukami fell to the ground, only to place his gloved hands onto the ground and shoot his legs up, into the air. He held the handstand position for a second, before pushing off the ground, almost spinning in the air as he somehow landed back on his feet.

His audience cheered as Naoto just continued to stare, mouth slightly agape as Yu took to the dance floor again, masterfully moving his body. It was clear the young man had experience with rhythm and dance. It almost annoyed the young woman at how skilled he seemed in just about any task he needed to be. He turned his head and looked in her direction, running towards her.

The music continued to play as he held his hand out to her. "Wanna try?"

"I... Where did you even learn to dance like that?"

"There was a girl." And Naoto didn't really need to hear anymore than that, crossing her arms with a slight scowl on her face. Despite her mask, Narukami seemed to pick up on her feelings. "Come on, don't be mad. That was the old me. I'm the new and improved Yu Narukami. So, dance or no dance?"

Her eyes glanced towards the mob of people, then back to her friend, before looking down at the hand offered to her. She weighed the options in her mind, silently watching the red-suited man look at her. "One dance." Despite the mask, she could easily visualize the smirk on his face behind his mask. She walked past him towards the dance floor, leaving Narukami's hand to fall to his side.

"Heh. Good enough, I suppose." He turned his body to follow the Detective Prince, his smirk turning perplexed as he saw her standing outside the dance floor. She gazed into the jubilant masses, hesitant on how to join in. His lips formed a small smile as he approached her from behind. "Follow my lead, okay?" He walked past her and began to bob his body to the music, arms raised slightly as his shoulders bounced. He effortlessly melded into the crowd, but remained at the edge for her. "Come on! Nothing to be afraid of!"

Naoto watched him, studying his movements like he was a file. Her cobalt eyes traced his taut frame, analyzing his shifting feet, even mentally measuring how far he moved his limbs. All of the information and details led her to one conclusion.

She had no idea how to dance like he did.

"Come on!" And he wasn't going to give her the chance to try as his hand took hers and she was yanked into the audience.

"N-Narukami!" She fell into his chest, a fact that seared her face in a scarlet flush. "I was mentally preparing myself," she huffed, pushing him away. He just chuckled in response, giving her space as he danced.
"You were taking too long," he laughed. "Remember what I told you! Live in the moment!"

Naoto felt her cheeks burn even hotter as she recalled when he gave her that advice, and what happened afterwards. She shook the memory from her head and looked at him, watching his body move like water as he effortlessly danced to the beat. He motioned to his arms, and began to simply snap his fingers as he leaned back and forth. Hesitantly, she did the same, trying to match his rhythm as she snapped her fingers.

He grinned, and began to saunter behind her. She watched him go, immediately mimicking his movement, leading to the two walking around in a circle, facing each other. He grinned under her mask, and she masked her scarlet cheeks with a scowl, before his hand caught hers and spun her around. She stumbled in place, nearly falling over, but he caught her hand, locking his fingers with hers.

"D-don't drop me!" she gasped, her voice breaking as she hung from his grip. Her blush only intensified as she realized how feminine she sounded. He just chuckled, pulling her close and letting her back on her feet. Their bodies were close, chests almost touching, and Naoto could hear her heart thumping in her chest as he swayed in front of her. "You're incorrigible."

"Would you want me any other way?" he teased.

Naoto wasn't sure how to reply to the question. Narukami returned to his side of the dance, keeping his distance from her as she tried to match his movements. Despite how little he meant of it, the question continued to plague and distract the sleuth's mind. Would she change the young man, if she could? There was a time where she would have said yes, without a second thought, but now...

The man before her was her best friend. He did more than support her. He challenged her. He struggled with her. He was different than her, there wasn't a doubt there, yet the two were so similar. He was her friend... Her other half, it felt. He was... She l-l... liked him.

"Naoto?" She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she realized he was suddenly much closer now, staring down at her.

"The song ended, but you've been doing the same dance move for over twenty seconds now. You okay?"

"Oh! Y-yes, of course. I'm fine."

"Hm... Well, come on. I won't make you suffer this anymore. Let's-" He tried walking past her, but his wrist was caught by hers.

"Wait. I... I would like to try one more dance... If you would care to join me?" She couldn't look him in the eyes, couldn't even face him. A gentle, soft tune flowed from the speakers as the dancers around them prepared to begin again. She could feel his head turn to stare at her, eyes and mouth open wide most likely, before she heard his snicker. "What is so funny?" she huffed, trying to sound offended. She only accomplished something bemused, she imagined.

"Nothing. Okay. Let's dance." Their arms fell from one another as they turned back to face the other, a soft choir of voices echoing through the night air to make a harmonious whisper...

"Heaven..." The speakers' song was like a breeze against their bodies, crashing against them like a wave of water. It flowed around them, encompassing them as everyone began to dance. "Can't get my mind out of those memories..."
Yu almost immediately saw that something had changed in Naoto. No longer was she trying to imitate his dance moves, instead, her own leg began to move, gently stepping against the stone floor to the beat of the song. She walked around in a small circle, before holding out her hands as if she was carrying something precious to her, then with a grace and beauty that he had thought impossible, she lifted her arms to the sky.

It wasn't like the party, amateur dancing she had done before. She danced like she had years behind her, her movements like a faster paced ballet. He blinked behind his mask, stunned as he watched her dance through the air like she was a autumn breeze.

"Now time to tell them, 'don't take my dream.' Still music keeps on turning me from the words that hurt my soul... Removing doubts from my mind...!"

She was moving with an all new grace and spirit, her body dancing to the beat as she kicked up her legs and moved her arms through the space between them. She turned away, walking away from him and suddenly he felt as though he had been given a drop of cold, clean water... But he was in a desert and he needed more. Narukami followed after her, like a lost animal, only to step back when she turned to face him.

The beat began to quicken, and her foot gently tapped against the dance floor as his heart raced to match the rhythm. But it was more than her foot, her hips were moving side to side, almost grinding against the air as Yu felt his suit tighten around him and his breath fall short. Her bound chest gently bounced as she moved her body, dancing to the fast paced beat.

Her movements were more than just arousing to the young man. She was like a modern day ballerina, a mix of a fast, modern dancing and the slow, methodical grace one would find in a ball room or on a stage. Her arms combed through the air as her hips swayed to and fro, her long, thin, flawless legs carried her like angelic wings. When he looked at her, he didn't see the costume or the mask. He saw the woman he loved, the one he saw in Junes. She danced with such radiance, such fluidity, such... sensuality.

Yu Narukami had never met a girl like Naoto...

She stretched out a hand to him, and a single finger teased him, motioning closer.

He was happy to obey, even if he moved like a lumbering, stunned beast. He wanted to be with her now, more than ever. The two danced with one another, the rest of the world, the mysteries, the danger, everything just faded away as they became enraptured by one another. There were no other eyes in the world but each other's, no other heart beat.

All they needed was the music and one another...

The song soon came to an end, and Yu framed the last moments of Naoto's dance in his mind forever. Her arms fell against her body and slowly traced up her petite and flawless frame. Her curves and subtle beauty became accented as her arms traveled from her thighs, up her hips, over her sides, gliding over her chest, before reaching to the heavens above. Her hands gently fell back to her as a single finger laid perpendicular to her lips. She smiled at him, her eyes narrowing and turning almost... flirtatious.

"W-where did you... How did... Where did that come from?" Yu stuttered, staring at her as the music faded away. She seemed to blink, and the two seemed to remember they were dressed up as Phoenix Rangers... at a party... surrounded by dozens of people.

Her air of confidence shattered as she looked away. "I-I took some ball room dancing lessons in my
youth. N-nothing like this, but I assumed some of the principles were the same and simply did my
best to employ them in a fitting manner." There was a pause as she felt his eyes drill into her head.
"How did-?"

"Amazing! You were amazing! I mean, damn! You're a natural at this!" he laughed.

"Oh! T-thank you, Narukami," she replied, nodding her head.

The two were silent for a moment, before Yu held up his hand. He motioned away from the DJ
station, smiling as he made a suggestion. "Hey, Naoto? You want to get away from the party?"

"What? We just got here."

"I know, but..." He wanted to be alone with her, but he couldn't find it in himself to speak up. He
looked away, rolling his shoulders for a moment. "I'm getting kind of sweaty in this costume." His
voice was hesitant, an obvious deception that Naoto could clearly see through.

"I suppose that's fair enough."

Huh?

"Lead the way, Narukami."

Rise glared at Kanji from across the table. The young imitation of Frankenstein's Monster crossed
one leg over the other, his arms similarly positioned, and just glared off into the distance. Every
now and again she'd catch Rise staring at him, only to look away when he thought she saw. He had
a faint fluster to his cheeks, but he seemed unable to act on it.

"Kanji." She did her best to sound like she was annoyed. The young man glanced at her, his mouth
sealed shut. "We're at a party. We should be having fun." She pointed at him, leaning over the
table to prod his shoulder. "You are not having fun."

He didn't reply, just letting his foot bounce in the air as he looked away. That just spurred Rise on.
"Come on! You're at a party with an idol!" She hated playing this card, but she hated just sitting
around, waiting for the boy to speak up. "Don't you want to do anything together?"

He turned his head away, and she was almost sure he was pouting, only in a more 'Kanji-like' way.
She returned with her own pout and glare. "Come on, Kanji! I just want you to have f-" She was
silent as he towered over her, a scowl etched into his face. His crimson face stared at her as he
advanced closer, her eyes widening as he took her hand in his. She made a small mental note to ask
him just how he got his hands to be so soft, when he popped the question.

"D-do you wanna dance?"

"Huh?" She blinked, shocked silent by the question. Her eyes were wide, pupils small, face red,
and brain flabbergasted. She opened her mouth, a smile forming on her lips as she took in what just
happened. "A-are you serious? Kanji 'Delinquent' Tatsumi is asking Risette out on a dance?"

"You ain't Risette, I mean... You are, but you aren't just her, I mean... I-I ain't asking her! I'm
asking my bro, Rise. Er..." He couldn't stop himself from blushing, nor could he stop his flustered
stuttering. "I'm asking you. If you wanna... try... try dancing the next song with me?"

Waiting for an answer was one of the hardest things Kanji had ever had to go through. He felt his
heart reverberating in his ribs, a thin, layer of sweat form in his pits and on his face, and his fingers twitched as they sought something to grab. He saw Naoto where Rise stood for a moment. His heart, his true feelings, the words he spoke laid out on the table for both to see and hear. He hadn't wanted to say it, he never should have said anything, to Naoto or Rise. Girls just didn't like him...

But then he saw Rise smile, and Naoto vanished. Her soft, pink lips pulled into a curvy smile. He heard her laugh, and it sounded like music to his ears. He could almost start to see why so many guys liked Risette. Yet, when he looked at the young redhead, he didn't see the idol. Well, he did. He saw Risette, but he also saw his best friend.

"I'd love to, Kanji." Her hand fell into his, and he couldn't help but marvel at how many times he and Rise had held hands. He couldn't even stop himself from wondering why her small fingers fit so well with his. It was funny, actually. They were almost like a couple. Well, they were a couple. A couple of friends.

The idea of them being anything more than that made the boy scoff. Like that could ever happen. Still, he glanced at Rise as they walked towards the dance floor, hand in hand. She was nice. She wasn't like Naoto, in fact, she was about as far from Naoto as a girl could get. Naoto was cold at times, Rise was warm. Naoto made herself look like a boy because she feared being looked down upon. Rise embraced her femininity on TV screens and stages.

Actually, come to think of it, the two did have similarities. They were both kind women. Smart, in their own way. Naoto was book smart, but Kanji saw how Rise had helped him, and how she planned things out for his date with the detective, or how she scanned the battlefield and offered advice. She was smarter than most people gave her credit for, honestly.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, I hope you're ready, cause it is couples' time!" The DJ began to work his magic on his station, changing the song that was ending to something new. A song began to play as those dancing alone filtered out of the dance floor. Kanji and Rise stood on the outskirts of the crowd, watching as couples paired up and a new melody began to play.

"A love song?" Kanji squeaked, his voice cracking as Rise's smile waned. He watched as the many couples laughed and smiled, dancing with one another, arms around the other, with some hands going a bit too low he noticed... "Uhh..." He looked at Rise, who looked back at him.

"We don't have to, you know," she muttered, her eyes averted away from his.

"I mean... I ain't a man if I don't try, right? Besides, I keep my word." His hand pulled on hers as he refused to meet her shocked gaze. "J-just don't blame me if I step on your toes, okay?"

"Heh. If you do, I'll just step on yours right back, Moronji," she teased. Rather than be insulted by the teasing name, he smiled. Rise had a spirit in her that seperated her from the whiny girls he used to know. She was as tough as she was nice.

Naoto wasn't sure how long they had walked together, or how long they had talked. Time just seemed to wash over them, both ignorant to its' passage. Instead, they focused on one another. Both of their helmets were discarded and safely stowed away, underneath their arms, as they walked down the Samegawa River. They were side by side, and Naoto couldn't hide the small, amused smile that shined from her face.

"Hm. A dark room, huh?" She had given him the same riddle her grandfather gave her and she watched him work the problem in his head with a perplexed expression. Her dark brow rose up in curiosity as he snapped his finger. "I got it."
"Oh?"

"Yeah. Just imagine an exit." A smirk pulled the corners of his lips when he saw her face. She looked doubtful, but he explained his reasoning. "The riddle never states you are in a dark room. You told me it was 'imagine you are in a dark room.' Thus, I can imagine an exit, lights, or whatever else I want." Naoto blinked, pondering his answer, before her lips slowly formed a small pout.

"It cannot be that easy."

He just chuckled beside her. "Sometimes the right answers are the simplest, beautiful." She turned her head, trying to hide the hint of rosy warmth on her face. Her hand reached for her hat, instinctively, only for her fingers to find nothing there. Her blush only grew more vibrant as he laughed at her second-hand nature. "You look good without the hat."

She cursed her friend, silently damning his laughter for sounding so nice. She even cursed herself for letting him get to her. She always acted so ridiculous around the young man. "Thank you," she mumbled, accepting the compliment with a subtle nod. "Narukami?"

"Yeah?"

She didn't know what she wanted to ask him first. Why was he so invested in being her friend? Why he made her feel like she finally found something she didn't even know she was missing. Why he made her feel like she didn't need to be a detective or a man... She didn't have to be anything more than Naoto around him.

"Damn you." She hadn't meant to utter those words aloud, but they still found themselves flowing past her lips.

"What'd I do now?" He didn't even sound angry or disappointed. He just tilted his head slightly, staring at her with confusion and... a glimmer of guilt.

"N-nothing." She was quick to wave away the change of atmosphere. "I was merely thinking aloud." She soon realized that statement didn't do much to change his question, if fact, it only rose more queries. "You are simply..." She tried to find the words for her feelings, but her lips seemed to stumble against one another. "I suppose, I was just thinking about how glad I am that I met you."

The confession floored the once-upon-a-time liar. His foot were planted against the ground as he watched her walk past him. "Seriously?"

"Yes." She didn't turn to face him, lest he would have seen her scarlet cheeks. "It is hard to believe, isn't it? Had one told me the man who had annoyed and disgusted me all those months ago would grow into my best friend, I would have called them mad."

"Probably would have shot them," he joked.

"It would have been possible," she replied, and the two laughed together. "Yet, here we are. Both of us are hardly the same as when we first came to this town."

"I wouldn't change a thing." He moved closer to her side, and she quietly accepted his presence. In fact, she rather enjoyed him being by her side. They were equals, neither standing over the other. Partners.

"Oh? Not even my initial distrust of you?"
"Not even you punching me. Some people need to be punched," he grinned. "You knocked some sense into me."

"Hm..."

"But damn," he uttered. "Was all that shit really less than a year ago? Feels like eternity." A feeling that Naoto had to agree with. Her own attempts to hide her true self felt so long ago, it seemed impossible to imagine that was merely weeks ago. She opened her mouth to comment on the subject, only to blink.

"What time is it?" He seemed at a lost for an answer. Narukami quietly watched as the sleuth opened one of the pouches on her belt and pulled her cell phone from it. She gaped at the time, her mouth falling open as she mentally cursed her misfortune. "It's almost midnight!" She snapped her phone shut and silently mouthed another curse as she began to pace. "Darn it! How did I let it get this late?"

"You got somewhere you need to be?" inquired the silverette.

"I try to keep myself to a very strict sleep regiment, Narukami," she replied, crossing her arms and meeting his amused smile with a glare. "This is not a joke."

"Little Naoto's past her bedtime," he snickered.

"Narukami!" She swung her arm at him, a mere jest that she knew he would evade. He effortlessly moved his body around her hand as he continued to chuckle. "Your humor is hardly appreciated. We're miles from my home, not to mention my clothes are still at Aiya's."

"You could come home with me." Her scarlet face and sharp eyes showed that she was not entertained by his joke. He held up his hands to dissuade her anger, explaining, "I mean, my house is closer. You can sleep on my futon for the night, and then we can go to school from there. You can even borrow my school uniform or something."

"Are you being serious with me?"

"What? It's a good idea."

She just stared at him as though he was crazy. Her mind reeled as the implications of what he was saying came to mind. Going home with Narukami?!

There was a danger to him, to the feelings she experienced around him. If she accompanied him back to his home, then... She wasn't sure what would happen, but part of her feared it. The rest of her... She didn't know how she felt, only that her heart continued to race when he stared at her. Her breath was short and her face hot as she struggled to answer.

"Naoto?"

"Okay."

"Wait, what?" She wasn't the only one shocked by her answer. Narukami's eyes widened, disbelief clear in the silver pools. "R-really?"

"You bring up sound logic... Of course, I'm only doing this for practicality's sake! Nothing more." She was furious blushing, but her gaze still met his as a beaming grin formed on his face. "S-stop that, Narukami. There's no reason for you to be so happy..."
"I beg to differ," he joked. "Come on. Let's go home..." He motioned her to follow him, and despite her embarrassment, she followed by his side once more. The two walked together and soon the scarlet hue faded from Naoto's cheeks as the two once more fell into their natural place as friends and partners.

Naoto tried not to think about the fact that she was wearing Narukami's clothes on her petite frame. She tried not to think about how the smell of his body now flowed around her. He tried not to think about the fact that she caught him staring at her body, making her heart race and face flush. She tried not to think about him, but she failed on every occasion.

It wasn't that she enjoyed his stares. It was that she enjoyed him. Some part of her enjoyed being seen as attractive by the silverette. The way he looked at her showed more than just a physical attraction. It showed feelings that terrified the detective. They terrified her, because her eyes might have had the way.

*Stop it,* she demanded herself. *I have time to... mull over these feelings. Narukami swore he would not make a move until this case was solved.* And when this mystery was over and the file closed, what would be next? They would both move back home, away from one another, separated by miles. To think that any sort of relationship beyond platonic friendship could be possible is... was...

She scratched at her head, angrily sighing as she tried to ignore her wandering mind. She didn't need to think about this. She didn't need his smile plaguing her thoughts or his new, kinder nature infecting her dreams. She needed sleep.

So without anymore thoughts regarding a certain young man, she laid herself down on his futon and rested her head on his pillow. She closed her eyes, only to open them against something poked her head. There was something under her pillow. With a sigh of annoyance, she reached underneath the pillow and searched for what ailed her, finding something edgy and hard. She pulled it out, plucking a decent sized sketchbook from under the pillow. The cover was hard and blue, with a single word, 'SKETCH,' written on it in black, bold letters.

*A sketchbook?* she wondered. *This must belong to Narukami. He mentioned he drew in his free time once before...* She moved to toss the book aside, before something caught her eye. She glanced at the pages as the book fell open, slipping from her hand. It fell upon its' spine and opened, revealing a random page to the blue-haired girl. Her eyes widened as she saw the page, finding a drawing of herself on it.

**END**
Broken Spirits

Chapter Summary

The heroes are breaking down.

Broken Spirits

Yu walked towards school with a scowl on his face and eyes that shot from left to right. He examined the river of students traveling towards the school, and his frown grew with every face he saw. None of them were who he was looking for. He couldn't help the slight clench in his jaw as he bit the inside of his cheek. Where is she?

"Hey, dude! What's up?" He turned his head to find a familiar group walking up behind him. Yosuke was leading Chie, Yukiko, Rise, and Kanji up the hill with a smile on his face and his arm raised to wave at their leader.

"Oh. Hello, Yosuke," greeted Yu, nodding at the brunette. "Morning, everyone."

They all offered their own little greetings as the group practically absorbed Yu into their posse. He fell back towards the rear of the group and walked beside Rise, actually moving away and avoiding Yosuke trying to throw his arm over his shoulder. He noticed the slight frown on Yosuke's lips, but resolved to deal with it later. The silver-haired boy was not in the best of moods today, and his so-called partner's presence didn't help.

"You okay, Narukami?" asked Chie. "You seem kind of out of it."

"Rough night sleep."

"That sucks, dude," commented Yosuke. It seemed obvious there was more on the boy's mind, but Yu decided to ignore him.

The silverette sighed and glanced to the side, his feet dragging as his eyes scanned through the river of students again. Still, no sign of her. He fell into the back of the group, only to feel something brush against his arm. "What's wrong?" a voice asked. There was Rise, walking by his side, smiling at him. Yu was ready to brush her away, only to feel someone else bump into him from the other side. Kanji walked beside the older boy, sandwiching him between him and Rise.

"Come on, man. What's got you so bummed?"

"I'm fine..."

"Come on, Senpai. We're your friends. We know when something's wrong."

"Yeah, man! We're here for you. So what the hell is wrong?"

Yu tried to ignore the two, but the sight of even Yukiko approaching him was enough to make him reconsider. Her dark eyes still held a glimmer of sadness and resentment, yet her voice carried a genuine concern. "Narukami-san, you shouldn't keep your problems to yourself. You have people who will listen, you know... You don't need to lie anymore."
Yu blinked once, and then twice, before he finally tore his eyes away from the raven-haired girl. "Heh."

"What is it?" inquired Rise.

"Just laughing at the irony. All of you trying to help me. It's funny," Despite his own amusement, the three failed to share his opinion. They stared at him with confusion in their eyes as Kanji voiced their thoughts.

"Ya got a weird sense of humor, man."

"So? What happened?" Rise poked Yu's shoulder, forcing him to return to the question at hand.

"To be totally honest, I don't know. Naoto was spending the night at my home-"

"Wait, what? I thought-"

"Oh, yeah. I lied. She and I were there disguised as Phoenix Rangers and dancing together."

"Senpai!"

"Scold me about lying later, Rise," he chuckled, placing a hand on the frowning idol's head. He played with her hair like she was Nanako, laughing as she bat his hand away."It was all in good fun. Naoto and I had a great time. I even invited her back to my place."

"You did what?" Yukiko placed her hands over her mouth, her eyes widening in shock. "D-did you two...?"

"What? No. Stop interrupting and listen. I gave her my futon to sleep on, I slept on the couch, when I woke up she was already gone. It's just... weird. I would have thought she'd say goodbye..." Yu felt his smile fade away into a deep frown as the memory played over and over again in his mind. He woke up to find his room empty and the front door left unlocked... Nanako and Dojima were still asleep as he was left to wonder where his friend had gone. He shook his head, shooing the flashback away as he looked at the others. "It doesn't matter. I'll figure it out."

"Anything we can do to help? Maybe Rise and I can talk to her for you?" offered Kanji.

"I'd appreciate that... Thanks, guys." He nodded in appreciation, his scowl vanishing just like his smile had. He wasn't sure what to think of the night before or the morning after, but he was happy he wasn't alone against the problem. "Come on, we should probably stop lagging behind Chie and Yosuke."

Yu Narukami walked towards Yasogami High surrounded by friends. Rise, Kanji, even Yukiko saw the true him and rather than turn away in disgust, they also saw the man he strove to be. But the two brunettes in front of them did not see that. All they saw was a puzzle.

Yosuke hid his scowl with a fake smile plastered onto his face. He disguised his sigh of frustration with a laugh. Chie tried to do the same, ignoring the questions that pestered and prodded their minds.

Naoto's finger tapped against her desk like a jackhammer. The constant, unending symphony of tapping was grating to even her, but it was just the kind of distraction she needed. She took a deep breath and counted a dozen taps, before sighing. She wished the teacher would release them soon. She could hardly stand being here, it was as if everyone knew what she did...
What Narukami wrote in that accursed book of his.

Her face turned crimson just from the mere thought of it. She could still see the drawings in her eyes, seared into her brain as some kind of sick torture. She could see the illustrations Narukami had made of her. They were intricate drawings that looked as though they had been taken out of reality itself. His ability to capture the shading and frame the moment was uncanny, but why did he waste it on images of her?

*Because he lied.*

Much like Alice following the rabbit, Naoto delved deeper and deeper into that accursed book. Her cheeks turned hot and her throat felt squeezed as she recalled the sketches that laid beyond the first few pages. She delved into the sketchbook and found more drawings of her laying within. Some of the drawings were of her passionately speaking, others captured her in the middle of a rare smile, and others were more... provocative.

She had no recollection of Narukami watching her with a sketchbook in hand, so all of those drawings must have been recreated from his memory and imagination... *Imagination...* She shuddered at the thought and squirmed in her seat, trying to dissuade her wandering mind. She failed. Narukami thought of her in position of... of lust. No, more than that, he thought of her in positions of romance.

Late night dinners together, picnics, even a drawing where her her lead-created counterpart wore a distinct ring upon her finger.

*He lied. He doesn't just want to ask you out,* a voice teased, almost giddy with excitement. *He wants-*

"Naoto? Earth to Naoto?"

The sleuth blinked, shaking herself from her stupor to find Rise Kujikawa and Kanji Tatsumi staring at her. Both stared at her curiously. "Oh. Hello, Rise-san... May I help you?"

"Are you okay, Naoto? I mean, class is over and you haven't even moved." A brief glance around the classroom proved the woman right. The teacher, as well as most of the students had already filtered out of the room. No doubt they were attempting to leave the school's premise, while she had simply sat on her seat, staring blankly at the wall like a dunce.

"Oh. Of course," sighed Naoto. She rose up from her seat and reached for her bag, only for Rise to pluck it from her own hands. "Rise-san, please give me back my bag."

"What's wrong? And don't say nothing, because we know something is," the idol declared, crossing her arms incredulously.

"I... It doesn't concern you, Rise-san..."

"Oh? Does it concern Yu-senpai?" Naoto felt her eyes widen and her cheeks flush as Rise smiled victoriously. "Ah-ha! It does. Spill it, missy."

"There is nothing to 'spill,' Rise. Our relationship is purely professional. There is nothing beyond that to tell!"

"We know that's not true." Both girls were silenced by the third voice, firm, yet heated. Kanji's face was unreadable as Naoto and Rise turned to look at him. They saw anger brimming below the surface, yet a serenity that suppressed and held it back. It was like watching a waterfall crash upon
an inferno, leaving only a misty steam to be seen through his eyes, clouding his soul. "So why the hell do you keep saying that?" There was no malice in his voice, no accusation. It was a simple question.

"Kanji...?"

"T-Tatsumi-san?" Naoto felt her fingers curl into fists as she let out a sigh. "My relationship between Narukami and I is of no concern to either of you." Her hand shot forward, catching the strap of her bag and pulling it free from Rise's hand. "It does not matter. We have more important matters to concern ourselves. It will rain soon and we need to focus on identifying and securing the next victim. If we can keep them properly safe, we will be able to prevent another kidnapping and hopefully arrest the killer."

She pushed her way between the two and stomped her way to the exit of the classroom. "We have no time for juvenile gossip, so I suggest both of you cease pestering me about the matter. It doesn't matter."

"You and Yu are our friends. How you guys feel is important to both of us, Naoto," corrected Rise. She sighed, watching Naoto pull open the door. It slammed against the frame, but Naoto could still clearly hear Rise's claim. It made the detective tremble for just a moment, hesitating in the middle of the door. "And falling in love isn't juvenile."

"Goodbye, Rise-san. Goodbye, Tatsumi-san." She stepped out onto the hall and left the two to their own matters.

"Well, that didn't work," grumbled Rise. Her lips twisted into an annoyed scowl as the two stared at the open door. They were all alone now, and nowhere closer to finding out what was on Naoto's mind. Her arms crossed over her chest as she looked to her partner. Her frown only deepened as she saw the lost and forlorn spark hidden in the boy's steely, blue eyes.

"I don't think she's going to talk to us..."

"Yeah... I wonder what happened between her and Senpai?" Kanji shrugged in response as Rise stepped closer to her. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek, but hesitated. You're his friend, Rise. Not his girlfriend... "Hey." The blonde turned his head to look at the girl, raising his brow as the lack of distance between them. "You okay?" Her land fell to his shoulder, gently squeezing it as a sign of platonic intimacy.

"Yeah. I'm alright," he muttered. Rise saw clear through the lie and rolled her eyes. Suddenly Kanji felt himself being pulled down as Rise embraced him. Her arms were wrapped around his neck and her head was rested on his shoulder as she pulled him down to her level.

"I'm here for you," she whispered into his ear. Rise could feel his cheek turn hot against her as she quietly enjoyed the moment. Memories of their dance on Halloween night bubbled to the surface of her mind as she held him. The two had danced together, his hand in hers and their steps in near perfect sync. She felt her lips curl into a smile as his arms wrapped around her small body, embracing her.

"Y-yeah. I know... Y-you can let go now."

"I would, but your arms are still around me."

"O-oh. Right."
The days passed as Yu and Naoto's relationship did little to improve. She barely spoke a word to him, and when they were together, they were never alone. The only times he had a chance to talk to her was when the group was in a meeting, and even then she hardly spared him a glance. The group spoke about the latest victim to appear on the Midnight Channel, but Narukami's mind was hardly in the proper place to offer ideas or suggestions.

He returned home with a frown on his face and a sigh on his lips, and to make matters worse, the kotatsu was broken. He let out a low grumble as he cooked dinner for himself and Naoto, pushing the young girl's food onto her plate from the frying pan.

"The deliveryman came today and he asked me how I was and he was super nice, big bro! He told me a funny joke and-"

"Mhm." Yu hardly listened to his cousin's story. He forced a smile onto his lips as he stroked her head, placing her food onto the table in front of the TV for her.

"Hey, big bro?"

"Hm?"

"Is a girl making you sad?"

He nearly spilled the stew he had made, his eyes widening in shock. "W-wait, huh?"

"I was watching Detective Loveline and she was helping a man find his missing girlfriend. She had ran away cause she was made at him, but he wanted to tell her he was sorry so he called on Detective Loveline to help her! Is that what's happening to you?"

Yu gaped at Nanako with wide pools of silver. He tried to answer the question, but found a surprising amount of difficulty in the action. "Er... Well, I guess? I mean, I'm just trying to make a girl happy right now, but she won't talk to me, so..."

"Did you do something to make her upset?" inquired the girl, innocently.

"I don't know... I guess I must have, but I don't know what." He sighed for what felt like the millionth time. He glanced towards the ceiling as he quietly wondered what to do, only to feel a pair of arms around his waist. He turned his head down to stare at Nanako, who had embraced him in a hug.

"I'm sure she'll come around, big bro! No one can stay mad at you!" Her tiny arms squeezed him a little tighter, earning a chuckle from the young man.

"Heh. I appreciate the confidence, kiddo," he replied. His hand played with her hazel locks as the sound of a door opening caught both of their attention. "Sounds like your dad's home."

"Yay!" Nanako pulled her arms from her brother and ran to the front entrance, grinning as her father walked in. "Welcome home! Dad, that kotatsu's broken! Can me and big bro get a new one at Junes tomorrow?"

"Kotatsu? Huh. It's already that time of year? Alright, you two can go get a new one. I'll leave what kind up to you," he smiled, patting Nanako's head with a smile. Yu returned to serving the food, grabbing another plate from a drawer as Dojima walked up to him.

"Hey, you got a letter marked for you, but..."
"Huh?" Yu placed the plate down and glanced at his uncle, seeing the small envelope in his hand. He took it when offered to him and pried it open with his fingers. Without even thinking about it or understanding the sense of déjà vu that plagued his mind, he took the paper out and mumbled it to himself. "'If you don't stop this time...'" His eyes widened as the rest of the message became clear.

"What's it say?" His uncle stepped forward to catch a glimpse of the letter. Yu flinched and he attempted to hide the letter, but the resistance only made Dojima scowl. He snatched the letter from his nephew and read it to himself. Yu could see his eyes widen as he finished the short message, before reading it again to himself, as if in disbelief. "'If you don't stop this time, someone close will be put in and killed?!'" The paper was slammed onto the counter as Dojima stepped forward, trapping his nephew against the wall. "What the hell is this?!

Yu opened his mouth to try and fabricate some lie, only for Dojima's glare to silence him. "You're involved with the case, aren't you?!

"Uncle, i-it's just a joke. Some stupid joke Yosuke made up!"

"No. It's not," the older man growled. "I knew something was wrong, but I didn't want to believe it... I treated you like family and even kept other people off your back, but that was a mistake." Yu had never seen the detective so infuriated. The older man's brow twitched as he took in a deep, long breath. "I should have done something sooner because I care about you."

"D-daddy?"

"You're coming with me to the station. Give me your phone. You're not going anywhere, and you're not talking to any of your friends until I know what's going on." Yu felt his entire world flip upside down as he tried to muster up some kind of argument. He opened his mouth again, but his uncle refused to let him even speak. "Don't you dare say a word. You've lied to me enough. It's time I finally got the truth from you."

Yu bit the inside of his mouth, trying to think of some way he could get out of this, but nothing seemed possible. His eyes drifted to the soft whimper plaguing the air and he saw Nanako staring at the two men, pools of tears forming in the corner of her eyes.

"Please. Stop fighting..."

"We're not fighting," Dojima replied, but the stress and fatigue was clear in his voice. "We're just going to be gone for a little bit... We'll be back soon, okay?"

She tried to speak, but all she could do was let out a sobbing cry. She gasped for air as Yu pushed Dojima aside and fell to his knee in front of the girl. He brushed her tears away as a hand held her shoulder. "Nanako... Nanako, please. I need you to listen." His voice was firm, unyielding now. "I've never been the best role model to you, even if you didn't know it... But I want you to know that-

I'm not a bad guy...?

No.

"I need you to know that this isn't your fault, and that you are a lot stronger than you think you are." He pulled her into a brief embrace, holding her trembling body in his arms. "Everything's going to be okay, Nanako. I promise." He held her quivering body in his arms until her sobbing turned into a light whimper. He pulled away from her and he smiled into her almond eyes. "You be good, okay?"
"O-okay..."

He gave her one last smile and hoped she couldn't see how fake it was. Without another word he stood up and followed her father out of the house.

The walls of the impromptu interrogation room were a mix of white and grey. It felt like a fittingly sterile and empty place for Yu to be yelled at. He stared at the metal table he was seated at as Dojima shouted at him, angrily berating the boy for his every lie and mistake. The young silverette should have known that telling him the truth was foolish, but what was he supposed to do? Try as he might, he couldn't think of a lie that could explain all that had happened.

So instead of fighting it, he quietly sat in his seat and took the verbal beating Dojima gave him as his uncle's assistant watched with terrified eyes.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" Dojima growled. "Any of that?! It sounds like complete garbage!"

"Look, I know how crazy it sounds, but watch the Midnight Channel! Look at the pattern! Even if you don't believe the other world stuff, that's something!"

"You want me to believe in magic? And ghosts?!"

"No ghosts, Shadows! Look, uncle-"

"Enough!" His hand fell on the metal table, making it shudder as Yu fell silent. "That's enough. I thought you'd finally tell me what's going on here, but I see you still don't trust me after all this time, so I certainly can't trust you. You're staying here for the night while I work out what to do with you... I'll have to give your friends' parents a call. See what they know..."

"Uncle, please... Leave them out of this," Yu pleaded, but it fell on deaf ears. Damn it, this is all my fault... They're going to suffer because of me.

"Enough, Yu. I'm done listening to your lies. Either tell me the truth or nothing at all." Dojima rose up from his seat, the screech of the metal chair on stone echoed through the small room. "I trusted you, and more than that, Nanako trusted you. She's going to be heartbroken when I have to tell her about this." Yu felt a twisting pain in the pit of his stomach. He lifted his head to look at his uncle, and he saw that even Dojima seemed sick to his stomach. The detective opened his mouth to say something, only to let out an exasperated sigh. He walked out of the room without another word.

"D-Dojima-san? Wait!" The assistant was ignored, and fell silent as his shoulders slumped. "Man, I've never seen him so ticked." He turned his head to Yu, who had his elbows on the table and rested his face in his hands. "Um... Y-you okay?" He didn't get a response. "R-right. Dumb question. Sorry." Silence filled the room again as the assistant tried to think of something to say. "Hey, look... Dojima really cares about you. You're like another kid to him."

Yu lifted his head to look at the raven-haired man, raising his brow in confusion. "You're joking. You heard him."

"Yeah, he sounded like every dad mad at his kid," he laughed. "Look, I want to believe you, and I know Dojima wants to believe you too! So don't worry, he'll come around. Until then, maybe you should consider doing the same? I mean, all this talk about magic and stuff... It's straight out of an anime." The man walked around the table and gently patted the silverette's back. "Get some rest, okay, kid? I'll talk to Dojima about letting you out."
Yu was honestly floored by the man's kindness. He glanced at him and saw only a sense of compassion from his dark eyes, and the smile on his face was almost childish in its' simplicity. "Thank you. I'd appreciate that... Adachi, right?"

"Yep! That's me."

Kanji quietly glanced at Rise as the two sat in her room. The young girl had offered to help the boy with studying for their next test, and he was happy to take the offer, but things just felt... weird right now. He scratched at his brain, trying to decipher the code that seemed to bounce around in his skull.

He and Rise had hung out plenty of times before when she was helping him win Naoto over, so being alone with her wasn't too strange. Even after the Culture Festival, Rise stuck by his side. They were friends, so when she invited him over, he didn't think much of it. That's what friends did.

His oceanic eyes glanced to the side, staring at the stuffed animals that sat on her bed. They were the classic kind of stuffed animals he imagined most girls have. A teddy bear, a dog with droopy ears, a penguin... The three were alright, but he could already imagine making a better stuffed animal for her. She'd probably love it.

Not that he cared. Er, not that he cared for any reason beyond friendship. *Friends give each other stuffed animals, right?* His gaze fell upon Rise as he tried to ignore the warmth that tickled his cheeks. The idol was sitting on the bed, her back against the wall and her face deep in a book, scanning over the words and illustrations that filled the textbook. Kanji had honestly given up a while ago, but Rise was still at it. If memory served, while she was no genius, the young woman was able to maintain a B average in her classes.

Really, what was he supposed to do when they studied together? Most of the time she was helping him, and he'd just mutter a thanks as he tried to follow along. Yet Rise kept inviting him over and saying they should study together. *Why the hell does she even want me here?*

"You've been staring at me for the last few minutes, Kanji-kun," commented Rise. Her eyes peeked out from behind the book and glancing at him.

"H-huh? What?" His cheeks burned like a fire as he scrambled to lift his book to his face. "N-no, I wasn't!" He quickly brought the book to his face, only to hear Rise laughing at him. "What?"

"The book's upside down."

"Oh. Uh..." Kanji quietly returned the book to the proper position, before looking away. "My bad."

"It's okay," she giggled, a finger tapping her glistening, pink lips. Kanji's eyes darted back down to the dull schoolwork, desperate to get his mind off of her.

"Hey, have you heard from Senpai?"

"Huh?" Rise's hazel eyes widened, before blinking as she thought. "No, I haven't... He seemed really upset at today's meeting." Her finger tapped at her chin as her brow began to furrow. She noticed the quizzical look Kanji was giving her, electing an explanation. "He was quiet. He's always quiet when he's upset."

"Oh. You know him pretty well," commented the blond. For some reason, the words left a bad taste in his mouth. "You two must be really close."
"Heh. He's like the big brother I never knew I needed," she explained. "Hm... Maybe we should call to make sure he's okay. He's probably brooding in his room or something, knowing him."

But the idea fell on deaf ears. "Huh? Brother...?" Kanji repeated the word once more in his mind, not understanding why the word made him feel so... weird. Happy, he guessed? Rise reached for her phone, but the young man was stuck in his own thoughts. He mentally scolded his brain for jumping to conclusions that Rise was still interested in Senpai 'like that.' What was wrong with him? More importantly, why was he so happy Rise only saw Senpai as a brother?

"Huh. That's weird."

"What is it?"

"He's not picking up."

"Maybe he's not home?" he thought aloud.

"Maybe... But then that means Nanako is home alone," pouted Rise. "Here, I'll call the home line." Kanji watched the copper-haired woman press a few buttons, before hitting speaker. Rise moved herself closer to the boy and held the phone between them as it rang once, twice...

"Hello...?" Kanji could pick up the slight hoarse tone the girl's voice had. She sounded like she had been crying or something recently.

"Hey, Nanako-chan! Is your brother home?" Rise asked, peppering her voice with exaggerated joy. Her eyes told Kanji she picked up on the tremble in Nanako's voice, but she tried to whisk it away with a smile. It didn't work.

"No... He got a weird letter and Dad saw it and got angry. He took big bro to the police station," the girl whimpered.

"W-what?!" Her voice nearly cracked as Kanji's eyes widened. The two stared at one another with wide eyes as they connected the thoughts between one another. "N-Nanako, are you okay?!"

"Y-yeah... I'm home alone, though... I-is big brother okay? Do you know? C-can I see him again?"

"Don't worry, Nanako-chan! We'll get your brother!" Kanji swore, stealing the phone from Rise. "Just you wait, okay? You'll see him again in no time!"

"Okay..." Kanji hung up the phone without another word, too terrified to say a proper goodbye as he and Rise gaped at one another.

"Another letter?! D-do you think it was from the killer?"

"Had to have been! Why else would his old man drag him to the station?! Damn it!" Kanji threw the phone onto the bed, where it bounce harmlessly and landed with a muffled thud. "We gotta go help him! We gotta do something!"

"R-right. I'll call the others. Come on, we gotta get to the station!" Rise grabbed her phone and threw Kanji's jacket onto her friend, before the two made a dash for the door. They said a rushed and barely understood goodbye to Rise's grandmother as the two ran out of the tofu shop.

Yu paced the small room for the fifteenth time. At least, it felt like the fifteenth. He really had no idea how many times he had walked along the walls of the room, nor did he know how long he had
been in this damn room. His skin crawled as his mind raced, imagining what could happen next. Was he and his team finished? Would Dojima keep them out of the case? How many people would die because they weren't there to help?

"Damn it," he grunted, kicking the chair he had sat on. It banged against the table as he struggled to calm down his breathing. His skin felt itchy and clammy, his hands shook and his head felt clouded with anger, but he knew that he had to try calming down. He took a deep breath and exhaled, only for a familiar sound to catch his attention.

The room had a small TV in it, and said TV had flickered to life seemingly on its' own. *It's midnight...* Yu glanced towards the only entrance into the room, before walking towards the static screen. It happened like it had so many times before. A figure appeared, seemingly basked in shadows within a foggy room. His eyes traced the figure, quietly catching all the little details.

*They're small... A child? A lot younger than any of us, that's for sure. Two pigtails imply a young girl.* He felt his heart rise into his throat, his eyes widened as realization dawned on him. *Nanako?* It was more than just the basic shape of the character, it was the way the silhouette seemed to laugh and smile at him with ebony eyes. The figure looked and acted so much like her, it was almost taunting him now. He felt his hands curl into fists as he realized the danger the poor girl was in.

"Dojima! Dojima!" Yu dashed towards the door and slammed his foot against it. "I need to talk to my uncle!" He roared at the door, struggling to catch the attention of any who would listen. "Are you listening to me?! I need to talk to my uncle! His daughter's in danger!"

Naoto fought against the falling rain, refusing to slow down for even a moment. She ran through the rain, the screaming ache in her heart and growing fatigue in her body. She ran against the storm, desperate to save Nanako.

*Please, I can't slow down... I have to hurry!* The rain pelted her, her coat clung to her soaking, wet skin and the cold air battered her body, but she pushed through it. She had been in such a rush that she had forgotten to grab an umbrella. She practically shot out of her apartment and made a beeline to Narukami's home. *Why hasn't he been answering my calls? Surely he saw the Midnight Channel... If the killer comes for Nanako, he'll no doubt try to protect her...*

Waking nightmares of Narukami's body terrorized her mind. She shuddered at the thought more than she did against the cold. *If anything were to happen to Nanako or Narukami, it would be my fault...* She damned herself for being so foolish. How could she have not seen this coming?! Her nails dug into the palms of her hands, bringing a numb pain that she used to push herself onward.

The others respected her for her intelligence and deduction skills, and now Nanako and Narukami would suffer because she failed to consider a possibility. She cursed herself once more as the barrage of icy rainwater fell upon her. Her hands were trembling now as she lost feeling in them, but she pressed on. She refused to give up. She refused to let her body stop for even a moment.

*There!* The Dojima Residence was within sight, and she felt her body revitalized as she dashed towards the front door. Her blood ran as cold as her drenched skin as she saw the door had been left open. "Nanako!" She reached into her holster and took out her revolver, moving forward with twitching fingers. She ran into the light of the home, her soaking wet boots stomping against the ground.

Her body was tired, and trembling, but she forced it forward. She had to, because she saw a figure looming over Nanako's unconscious body. Her mind raced as she saw the man's uniform, but she reeled it back. She needed to focus on the matter at hand, she couldn't be distracted by the
She had studied every detail about the case before she had arrived at Inaba. She knew of the first and second victim, she understood who was suspected, she knew who was ruled out as being unable to have committed the act. Even with the recent discovery of the other world and Shadows, she had never thought to consider that one of the suspects she had written off could share their abilities. Yet she stared at living proof of it, it seemed.

Taro Namatame, husband to Misuzu Hiiragi and the politician that had an affair with Miyumi Yamano, held the slumbering body of Nanako against him.

"Stay back!" he commanded, eyes widening as he stared at Naoto.

"It's... it's over!" Her voice was panting, and her mind was racing. She bit the inside of her mouth, using the pain to focus. "It's over!" she repeated, trying to hide how weak her body felt. She held the gun up, aiming at the older man with shaking hands. It swayed back and forth, before she straightened her aim. "You're not leaving with her!"

"I have to! You won't have her!" he screamed, pulling the unconscious girl closer against him. She let out a quiet whimper, unaware of the danger she now laid in. Namatame breathed in through his teeth as his eyes darted to the table beside him.

"There's no escape!" Naoto declared. "Give yourself up now!"

"No! No, I can't give up! I won't give up!" He pushed Nanako behind him, and picked up a plate that laid on the table. Naoto fired, a bullet whizzing past the man's shoulder. He threw the plate at her and she ducked her head down, shielding it with her arms as the plate shattered. The porcelain broke against the stone wall, and bits of it fell upon her as she stumbled.

If she had been in a better condition, perhaps she would have been able to save Nanako, but her body was tired, her heart still beat like a drum, her body was cold and shaking, her vision blurry... She felt herself being slammed into the wall behind her, Namatame's shoulder lodged into her chest, just below her neck. Her body ached as she slid to the ground, only to be lifted up by her collar.

"You won't stop me. You can't..." Naoto felt a blistering shock of pain as his fist connected with her cheek. She fell to the ground with a loud thud. She struggled to stand back up, but her body refused to listen.

"N-Nanako..." Her head felt like it was being split apart. Her numb fingers clawed at the ground, but it felt like a weight had been placed on her body and it only grew with every moment of fighting it. Narukami... I'm sorry...

Everything went black.

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Yu had been banging on and yelling at the door until his hand burned and his voice choked. After what seemed like an eternity, his calls were finally answered. The door swung open and he was met with the sight of Kanji and Rise standing beside Dojima and Adachi.

"Senpai!" Rise lunged forward to hug the silverette. "Thank god, you're okay..."

"We came as soon as we heard what happened, man... You okay?"

Yu couldn't answer the question as his eyes fell on his uncle's furrowed and scowling face.
"Nanako," Dojima uttered. "Is she in danger?" His voice was firm and his eyes sharp as he glared at his nephew.

"She is! The killer's going after her!"

"The killer has her..." Yu turned his head to the entrance of the room. Adachi was escorting the rest of their friends into the room, but what caught his attention was Naoto. She was being helped forward by Yosuke and Chie, who had their arms on hers as she entered the room. She was shaking.

"N-Naoto?" Her cheek was discolored from the usual moonlight pale it typically was. Her skin was tinged purple, an unhealthy, unnatural violet that polluted her fair skin. The flesh was swollen, even puffing up the skin around her cobalt eye. "What happened?" he whispered.

"Namatame. Taro Namatame. He is the murderer. He kidnapped Nanako! I-I tried to stop him, but..." Her eyes refused to meet his as her teeth ground against one another. She took in a slow, gasping breath as she trembled. She looked so small in front of him. She looked so terrified. "I'm sorry," she whimpered.

It was the second time he had ever heard her so broken...

"D-Dojima-san! Where are you going?!" Yu couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"I'm going to Namatame's house! I have to save Nanako!"

"B-but sir-"

"Adachi, call the traffic department! Tell them there's been a kidnapping!"

"But sir-!"

Dojima stormed out of the room. The others looked to one another, some of them speaking, but Yu couldn't bring himself to answer. He stared at the bruise on Naoto's cheek. It meant she had failed, and Nanako was in the hands of a psychopath. It meant this psycho had laid his hand on the woman he loved. It meant that Nanako could die if they didn't hurry.

He felt his blood run cold as Naoto grabbed his shoulder.

"We have to find her. Narukami, do you hear me? We have to look for Namatame's truck." He nodded his head as Naoto looked to the others. "Quickly, we have to hurry everyone!"

"What about him?" Kanji asked, motioning to Adachi.

The young detective just held up his hands. "Hey, I'm not going to stop you. If anything, I want to come along." Adachi walked forward and gently placed his hand on Yu's shoulder, squeezing it as an expression of friendship. "We're all on the same side to catch this guy, right?" Yu couldn't turn his head to meet Adachi's smile, his lips couldn't even form a wry grin. The young man just nodded his head as Naoto took charge of the team.

"Thank you, Adachi-san." She bowed her head, before looking to the others. "Quickly everyone, we have to hurry!"

Rise kept glancing at Yu with worry clear in her eyes. She could tell he was hurting, it'd be impossible for him not to be, honestly. Her hazel eyes met Yukiko's ebony orbs and the two shared
a silent conversation. Yukiko's eyes darted back and forth between Rise and Yu, who ran in front of them by Naoto's side. The raven-haired woman could see the pain Yu was drowning in, but she didn't know how to help.

Honestly, Rise didn't either. The only thing that could lift Yu from his own depression would be Nanako's safe return, and the idol wasn't sure if they could save her in time. At least with Naoto by his side, he seemed able to focus on the matter at hand. Still, he was disturbingly quiet, a fact that didn't escape any of his friends.

Her fears only doubled at the sound of crashing metal and broken steel. Smoke rose over the stores around them as the group froze in shock and terror.

"What the...?! Is that smoke?" Kanji gasped, staring at the rising column.

"An accident?" Rise could see the way Naoto trembled, before she launched herself forward. The others followed. Despite whatever hope they clung to, they all knew what kind of sight they would find.

It didn't make it any easier to find Dojima's car crashed into the wall of an empty store, or the truck that laid beside it. Both cars were smoking as black marks showed they had swerved out of control. Adachi ran to Dojima's car, gasping as he found the man inside of it, unconscious and bleeding from his head. Rise turned her head away, unable to watch as the kind man she had met was dragged out of the smoking car.

"W-where's Nanako...?"

"D-Dojima-san? Oh, thank god! You're alive!"

Naoto was on the phone, no doubt calling for an ambulance as Chie and Yosuke walked around the truck. Rise felt her blood turn to frost as her eyes look over the truck. She recognized it. She had seen that truck go by her house a dozen times and never thought about it. The memory of her kidnapping came back to her, and she trembled in fright as the memories. Her fingers grabbed onto the closest thing to her out of reflex, and that just so happened to be Kanji's arm.

She looked up at him with wide eyes and she opened her mouth to apologize, but his hand fell on hers. His touch felt cold from the night, yet warm to her. Her small fingers locked with his as he nodded his head. She could see the fear in his eyes, but he tried not to let it out. He fought to be brave for her, for all of them, when Chie shouted out to the others.

"There's a TV in the back of the car! Guys!" Chie motioned the others over as Yosuke examined the driver's seat.

"Hey, I think I see a book in here!"

"Hey! G-get away from there! You guys can't investigate a crime scene!" Adachi scolded, only for Naoto to step in front of him. She was already pulling gloves out of her pockets to put on her hands.

"Then allow me. If it rains again while we wait, the information we need will be lost regardless," she explained. The older detective stared at her, before sighing and nodding his head. Naoto walked past Rise and Kanji, offering them a brief glance as she whispered to them. "Please, keep an eye on Narukami." The two nodded their heads and quickly left to check up on the silverette, who was staring at Dojima's unconscious body, Yukiko by his side.

"Yu...?" The raven-haired woman placed a hand on his shoulder, but he didn't even seem to notice her.
"Senpai, it's going to be okay," promised Rise. She didn't let anyone see that deep in her heart, she feared she was lying.

"We'll get this guy, man. Nanako, Dojima, they're going to be okay," Kanji added, but there was fear underlying his every word.

"I found what looks to be a journal," Naoto announced, stepping out from the car with gloves on her hands. She was already in the midst of reading it, her eyes widening as she reread the contents aloud. "'Yukiko Amagi, Kanji Tatsumi...' This book contains all of the addresses and names of the victims, even the ones who survived and were never released to the public are written here!"

"Whoa... That settles it then," Adachi realized, nodding his head in agreement.

"The last page makes note of Nanako's name and address. He captured her like he did all of his victims."

"Damn it! Why didn't we figure it out sooner?!" Yosuke growled. "We've got to save her!"

And it seemed Yu Narukami was already on the move to. He pulled away from Rise and the others and walked towards the truck, climbing into it and walking towards the large TV that laid within.

"Senpai!"

"D-dude, wait!"

He didn't listen to them, but an unlikely voice called out to him, grabbing his hand and pulling it away from the screen. "Sensei, wait!" Teddie's hands were on Yu's wrists as the young boy stood between him Sensei and the TV. "We don't know where this TV will send us! It could be somewhere dangerous!" Everyone's eyes seemed to fall on Teddie as the small blond tried to talk to his teacher. "It isn't foggy tonight. We should go in tomorrow, the same way as usual."

"Don't you care about saving her?" Yu's words cut like a cold knife as his glare fell upon Teddie. "You're supposed to be her friend, Teddie... Act like it," his voice was harsh and unsympathetic, and his glare showed only fury. His hands grabbed onto the blond's collar, squeezing it as the boy trembled in fear.

"S-Sensei...?"

"He's right, Narukami." Naoto climbed into the truck and placed her hand on the silverette's shoulder. Rise watched as Yu slowly released Teddie. The young boy stepped away as Rise listened to the two talk. "I know you are angry. You have every right to be..." Naoto swallowed her own fears down, forcing her voice to remain even and stoic. "But we can't lose sight of what's right... Please, just wait for another day. We will reconvene tomorrow and save Nanako together."

She was begging him to listen to reason. Rise found herself silently pleading for the same. Kanji, Yukiko, Yosuke, and Chie all silently watched the two, waiting for him to say something.

"Alright." He nodded his head and Naoto returned the motion. She pulled away from him and walked back to the others, gently stepping down onto the ground.

She looked at the others and spoke to them, making no sign of hiding what she was saying. "I would like it if someone could stay with Narukami until we regroup tomorrow."

"I think you should, Naoto." Yukiko was the first to speak up, and her words shocked the sleuth. "He'll listen to you, and right now he needs the person closest to him."
Rise could catch Chie's hushed whisper. "Y-Yukiko, are you sure?" She glanced towards the navy-haired detective, and Rise could only imagine how odd this must have been for Yosuke, Chie, and Teddie. It almost felt like the group was split, with over half being close to Narukami and knowing the true him, and the others seemingly one step behind at all times.

"I'm sure. Yu needs Naoto more than any of us," repeated the older woman, but the Detective Prince did not seem so quick to agree.

"N-no. I'm sorry, but I feel as though I am the last person he needs." Naoto shook her head, sighing as the others stared at her. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I just... I can't.

"I'll do it." Everyone's eyes fell on Teddie. The blue-eyed boy fixed his collar as his eyes fell upon the ground. "I'll watch over Sensei. Yosuke, can you make sure your parents don't worry about me?"

"Y-yeah, sure, dude... You sure about this?"

Teddie's eyes held such sadness, Rise wanted to take his place, but he just nodded his head. "Yeah. Don't worry, I'll make sure Sensei's okay for tomorrow!" He grinned at everyone, giving a thumbs up as his voice sparked with glee. Rise had faked a smile enough times to know when someone else was doing it.

Before anything else could have been said, a loud crash shattered the silence. Their heads turned to the inside of the truck where Yu stood over the fallen TV. He glared at the cold plastic, before lifting his foot and stomping on it. He dug the sole of his foot against the black material, listening to the quiet crunch of glass shards break under the pressure. His face was a furious scowl, brimming with rage and seething with scorn. He lifted his foot off of the TV and walked towards the others, quietly landing on the ground beside them.

He only said one thing, but it was enough to make Rise's blood turn cold again. His eyes showed no deceit, no hesitation, only hatred. "When we find him, I'm going to kill him."
Cruel Heaven

Chapter Summary

Things get worse.

Cruel Heaven

Naoto stood beside Narukami in utter silence. She opened her mouth to try to speak, only to fall short as his uncle slumbered. She wished she could describe Dojima as resting peacefully, but it was quite the opposite. He looked sick. His skin was pale and his veins seemed to protrude through his thin skin. His every breath seemed labored, a battle to stay alive that grew more and more strenuous as the seconds ticked by.

If she was affected so drastically by Dojima's state, she could only imagine how Narukami was taking it. The young man was uncharacteristically silent throughout their discussion with Dojima, leaving her to promise they'd save his daughter. She had known the silverette long enough to know that silence was rarely a sign of positivity. She glanced at him as Dojima fell asleep, and she saw the stone-like state of his face, and the fire that crackled in his eyes.

"Narukami..." What could she say? How could she even think about comforting him when she was the responsible for his and Dojima's suffering? Their pain, Nanako's kidnapping, both were her fault. Their pain was because of her incompetence. Naoto grew silent as he stared at her, awaiting her next word. "We should head home. Tomorrow, we will meet the others and plan the rescue operation." He nodded in response, and the two exited the room one by one, walking down separate paths.

With each step away from him, Naoto's shame and disgust for herself grew stronger and stronger. By the time she had reached her home, in her eyes, she was as responsible for this as Namatame. If Nanako perished in the other world, it would have been as if Naoto had pulled the trigger.

She tried to get her rest that night, but once again, she failed. Her slumber was fraught with nightmares and terror as she tossed and turned.

"Nanako... She's... my reason for living... If I lose her... I might as well be dead."

Dojima's words echoed through Yu's head. The sight of his uncle laying on what seemed like his deathbed, the man's body aching with every muttered word. He could still see the fire in his uncle's eyes.

Namatame... Yu felt his fingers curl and twitch erratically as his brow began to wrinkle and furrow. He was angry. No. He was infuriated. He couldn't remember a time he felt so enraged. He kept trying to ease his mind, to control the inferno in his gut, but every time he closed his eyes he saw Naoto's bruised cheek or Dojima's unconscious body. He could see the dwindling spark in Nanako's eyes as the fog swallowed her up, devouring her and leaving nothing but a corpse behind.

"You can save Nanako, right...? I trust you... Please... save her for me...! You're the only ones I can turn to right now... Please!"
He came home late that night, the cold air brushing past him, but for a moment, he couldn't bring himself to enter his supposed home. The place that he had spent months living suddenly felt foreign. The place felt rented, cheap, temporary, and in the end, artificial. He opened the door and there was no greeting from his little sister. His cousin wasn't there in front of the TV, and his uncle wasn't at the table reading a newspaper.

There was no one there, but a blond boy who was awoke from his sleep by the sound of the door slamming shut. Teddie hopped onto his feet, off the couch, and nearly fell onto the ground, before he stared at Narukami with shimmering, sky-blue eyes. "Welcome home, Sensei! I made you dinner and-
"

"Not hungry," he muttered back, walking past Teddie, towards the stairs.

"Oh." Teddie's face faltered, but he quickly smiled again. "Okay! Want me to get you anything or-"

"I'm going to sleep. You should do the same." Yu stood at the base of the stairs, eyes locked on the steps. In his mind, he saw Nanako walking down them time and time again. He saw his uncle shambling up them, exhausted from another long day. Now he saw the voids they left behind.

"I want to help." Teddie's hand reached for Yu's, but the silverette's hand shot at him like a bullet from a gun. He grabbed Teddie's collar and swung the boy, slamming him into the wall. Teddie cried out in pain as his shoulder ached.

"Leave. Me. Alone." Yu's hand trembled, crushing the fabric between his fingers as the terrified boy stared with shaking, trembling eyes. Yu said nothing more as he turned away, climbing up the stairs to his room. The door slammed shut as Yu walked towards his drawer, opening it to reveal the sword that laid within. He stared at the blade, taking it out and placing it against his futon. He laid on the bed and closed his heads, but he had a restless sleep. Slumber did not come easy to his still racing mind, and every time it did, he dreamed of impaling Namatame on his blade. The sight of Nanako and Naoto staring at him, horror in their eyes, would wake him every time.

The group had assembled as planned, and together they entered the other world. Yu Narukami led them into the dungeon, into the misty bridges that made up the so-called 'Heaven.' They met the Shadows roaming the area with strength and determination, cutting through them as they rose upward. Despite their progress, the Shadows came at them like waves of black water, crashing against their stone-like will, slowly breaking it down as time moved on.

"Dude, hold on!" Yosuke begged, grabbing Narukami by her shoulder. "Chie needs a minute, man. She just needs to catch her breath!"

"I'm okay... I'm okay," the martial artist corrected, supporting herself with the railing of the bridge they walked.

"She's okay," Yu repeated, pulling away.

"Dude, stop!"

"Keep moving. We're reaching Namatame today." His voice held no sympathy. No compassion. Just a cold, iron-clad drive to save Nanako or die trying. He didn't even turn his head as Yosuke grit his teeth and sighed.

"Dude, come on! We all want to save Nanako! But-"
"Then act like it!" Yu's voice cracked through the air like a whip as he turned to them. His silver eye contained a spark of crimson as he stopped in place. "If any of you care about saving her life, then keep moving! Yukiko!" His glare fell to the raven-haired girl. "Heal Chie. I need her at her best."

"R-right..." The woman sighed, moving to Chie's side to heal her.

"Rise, how much farther?"

"I-I don't know... A lot farther, I guess?"

"I need something more exact than 'a lot,' Rise!" Yu's iron eyes glared at the girl, fist tightened in anger. "Distance. Floors. Numbers of Shadows between us and her! Give me something!"

"I-I don't know! I'm trying, Senpai, but this place is a mess! Namatame and Nanako's hearts are all muddled into this place. It's impossible to get a lock on any-"

"Then try harder!" Yu roared, turning to stomp towards the girl. "If you don't, Nanako dies, and it'll be on your hands!" His hand grabbed Rise's wrist, digging into the flesh as his eyes gleamed like a knife. "I need your best, Rise, and if you can't give me that, then you shouldn't-"

"Leave her alone!" Kanji tore Yu's hand away from her, before shoving the silverette back. "She's doing the best she can, man!"

"And her best might get people killed if it isn't enough." Kanji became a shield, much like the one he wielded, standing between the iron-eyed boy and Rise. Silver eyes met azure ones as the two glared at one another, electricity burning the air. Yu shook his head, deciding the battle wasn't worth it as he took his place at the head of the group once more leading them.

"You okay?"

Rise didn't reply, silently cursing herself as her eyes fell on the ground. Kanji glanced at her quivering fingers, before he pushed his hand into hers. Their hands locked together, and he allowed her to briefly dig her fingers between his knuckles. She stopped, but he squeezed firmly as a silent show of faith. She lifted her head to look at him, and he smiled at her. She weakly returned the gesture, nodding her head in quiet thanks.

The two followed the group, their hands linked together as they approached Naoto.

"You need to talk to him." Naoto cringed, flinching awake as if she had been awoken from a trance. She turned her head to face the forlorn Rise, who stared at her with tired eyes. The detective could see the weariness in them, and slight bags under her eyes, all signs that Yu had missed or knowingly ignored. "He's pushing everyone too hard, too fast. We all want to save Nanako, but at this rate we're going to be too tired to fight Namatame."

But Naoto lacked the usual resolve and fire that Kanji and Rise were used to. Instead she shirked away from them, shaking her head. "I-I can't. Perhaps Narukami is right. We should hurry."

"Naoto, he'll only listen to you."

The sleuth lifted her head up, staring at their silver-haired leader as he marched onward, cutting down approaching Shadows with ruthless efficiency. "I-I can't, Rise-san." I have no right criticizing him after failing him. I was there. I was right there, and I failed him. Nanako is here because of me..." She pulled away from Rise, moving faster towards the front of the group.
Yosuke looked at her with hopeful eyes, but his hopes were quickly dashed as she spoke. "We should keep moving. We have a long way to go before we reach Nanako."

"Hm." Yu failed to look at her, sending her heart furthering plummeting into guilt and depression.

"What's wrong with them? Ain't they supposed to be the smart ones?" grumbled Kanji.

"Neither of them are in good places. They both blame themselves for all of this..."

"Only person at fault here is Namatame. He's the one who freakin' kidnapper Nanako!"

"Yeah, but they can't see that," sighed Rise. She lifted up her tired eyes to Kanji, who glared at the two leaders of the group. "Thanks for looking out for me."

"Like hell I'm letting my best pal get shit on by anyone!" he announced. "You okay, though? You're looking pretty tired. You know, you don't even have to be here."

"I'm alright. I can keep up with you guys, no problem!" she replied, forcing an energetic gleam into her eyes that failed to convince. "Really. I am not staying back. I want to help."

"You do help, dummy," he scolded, gently elbowing her. "We'd be dead meat without you," he complimented, smiling gently at the girl with only the faintest hint of rose on his cheeks. Rise chuckled, smiling in return as she brushed some hair from her eyes.

"Psh. Yeah, right... Hey, Kanji?"

"Yeah?"

"You're my best friend too."

The two friends smiled at one another, knowing that they at least had one another to rely on. All the same, their eyes fell to their leader and the sapphire-haired detective, fearing for their health, mental and physical.

"W-wait," Rise gasped, stopping Kanji and herself. She closed her eyes, feeling the air, before opening them. Adreneline pumped through her as she warned the others. "More Shadows are coming. A whole bunch of them!"

"Chie, Yosuke, Kanji, up front!" commanded Yu.

"What?! Come on, bro, you're joking! Chie can barely stand!" the brunette argued, grabbing Yu's shoulder.

"Yosuke! Stop trying to baby me! I'm fine!" Chie threw at the empty air in front of her, trying not to show the strain. "See?"

"You were limping like two seconds ago!"

"Focus!" Yu ordered, spying the incoming Shadows.

Their leader placed a hand on the hilt of his sword, glaring at the others. "Move into position!" Chie, Yosuke, and Kanji moved forward as he commanded, before attacking the approaching horde. Yu watched behind the three as they created a wall, defeating any Shadow that approached them. He saw Yukiko move forward out of the corner of his eye, but he held up a hand. "Stay where you are... Kanji, Yosuke, loosen up. Hold the sides. Chie, take the center!"
"R-right!" The girl ran forward, slicing through a Shadow with her foot as she cried out. "Tomoe!" The Persona appeared behind her, slicing a Shadow in half with practiced skill, before cleaving through another.

"Chie-senpai, look out!" Kanji warned, spying a Shadow approaching from Tomoe's blind spot. "Take-Mikazuchi!" The giant, robotic Persona appeared behind him, swinging his head down on the Shadow, crushing it to death.

"Whoa! Thanks, Kanji-kun!"

"Kanji!" Yu did not share Chie's joy, instead glaring at Kanji. "Focus on your side! Chie's fine!"

"But- Daah!" Both Kanji and Chie were flung back by an especially large Shadow. It wielded a massive stone sword, looming over them as Kanji held his throbbing arm and Chie struggled to stand on shaking legs.

"Told you to focus. Yukiko, heal Kanji."

The raven-haired woman gaped at the command, staring at the silver-haired man. "What about Chie? She's hurt too!"

"Not yet. Heal Kanji," he repeated.

"Senpai, what are you doing?!" Rise questioned, watching as Yukiko reluctantly obeyed the command.

"Using strategy." Yu ignored the idol's glare as Naoto watched with confusion.

"Narukami, what...?" She saw it. Tatsumi and Yosuke-senpai were able to hold their sides well enough, keeping back the wave of ebony creatures with wind and lightning, but Chie-senpai was not so lucky. Her fatigued body struggled to keep up with her mind, wildly flinging attacks into the horde of monsters. Any survivors from the right or left would converge on her, pressing the attacker on her in particular.

They were like vultures. They could see the strain in Chie's eyes, the tremble in her legs, and the beads of sweat that formed on her head. The martial artist's eyes widened as a particularly large Shadow lunged at her, about to cleave her in half with its' weapon.

"T-Tomoe!" she cried, to no avail. She didn't have the strength in her to summon her Persona.

"Chie, move!" Yu ordered, running forward. He pulled out his sword, the blade gleaming as he launched himself into the air, flying over Chie's head and towards the Shadows. "Maziodyne!" His blade sliced through the weakened Shadow, before tearing apart the majority of the horde with his attack. Any Shadow unfortunate to stand in front of Chie, thinking she was easy prey, was reduced to ashes as Yu wielded a powerful storm. Lightening fell from above, roasting the Shadows and wiping out most of them with one fell swoop.

He didn't spend a single moment savoring the victory. He sheathed his sword once more and marched forward, not even glancing at the others. "Let's move." A hand fell on his shoulder though, and kept him in place. He lifted his head and found Yosuke glaring at him, face wrinkling with outrage.

"Were you using Chie as bait...?"

"It made the most sense," answered Yu without a moment of hesitation. "I knew the Shadows
would swarm her when they realized she was hurt. I just took advantage of the situation." His silver eyes darted to the side and he lifted his hand, blocking a punch aimed at him from an infuriated Yosuke. "What are you doing?"

"What is wrong with you?! We're supposed to be a team, but now you're using us as bait?! I get that you want to save Nanako, we all do, but you're acting nuts, dude!"

"You want to get pissy about me throwing your girlfriend to the wolves? Go ahead. I have more important matters to deal with." Yu pushed the brunette aside and returned to his walk, only to be stopped again by a familiar face. Yukiko stood in front him, her eyes burning with the same inferno that haunted Yosuke's.

"How dare you..."

"I don't."

"How dare you!" Yukiko swung her hand at Yu, only to have her attack blocked. "You're supposed to be our leader!"

"And a leader uses his resources. Chie was weak and was perfect bait for the Shadows. I wipe them out with a single attack, saving the group's energy for Namatame."

"And what if you messed up or made a mistake?! She could have died!" Yukiko screamed.

"I don't make mistakes!" His hand grabbed Yukiko's shoulder, making the girl flinch in pain as he shoved her aside. "Back into formation! All of you!" His words were harsh, uncaring as he demanded the others back into place. Everyone was frozen, unable to move as he marched forward. A blast of fire landed by him, shocking him as Yukiko's Persona hovered beside her.

"You aren't acting like our leader! I thought you were better than this! I actually thought you were trying to change!"

"Wait, change? Change what?" Yosuke asked, raising his brow as Chie tried to calm her friend down.

"Y-Yukiko, stop!"

"No! He nearly got you killed, Chie! I just..." Yu could see tears in her eyes, pooling in the corners of her ebony eyes. She wiped them away and sighed angrily. "We should go back."

"What?! You're giving up?!"

"No! I'm not! But I know you're not in your right mind to lead any of us! You're just going to get us killed!" She turned her head to Chie, who stared at her with shocked, wide eyes. "Let's go, Chie..."

"W-wait, shouldn't we stick together?!" Rise suggested, stepping forward.

"Y-yeah! Come on, everyone! Let's take a bear-ther and..." Teddie paused, his eyes widening as he sniffed the air. "R-Rise, do you sense that?!"

"Huh? Himiko, on!" Rise's Persona appeared behind the girl, but it only took a moment for her to realize what was happening. "G-guys! Another wave of Shadows! They're coming!"

"What?!" Yu was thrown to the ground as an explosion knocked him to the ground. He groaned, holding his head as he laid on the ground, while the bridge was swarmed by Shadows that seemed
to fall from the sky above. The bird-like creatures shrieked at them, swooping down to cut at 
Yukiko's arm, drawing blood from it and leaving her sleeve in tatters.

"Look out!" Yosuke yelled, grabbing Chie and pulling her out of the way of another attack.

"T-thanks, Yosuke!" she groaned, nodding her head in appreciation. She was still injured from the 
fight, but she didn't let it stop her. "Tomoe!" The Persona appeared once more, kicking a bird out 
of the air, before slicing another in half.

"Narukami, get up!" Naoto ordered, helping the young man onto his feet. She pulled him up, and 
he stood with shaking legs as more Shadows swarmed over them. A stone golem loomed over the 
two, swinging his stone blade down at the two. It was only blocked by the work of Jiraiya, while 
Yosuke called out to them.

"Move!"

Naoto and Yu obeyed, moving out of the way as the swarm waved over them like a tidal wave of 
ink. The silver-haired boy held up his sword, summoning Izanagi to defend the two of them. A 
second later, he was joined by Naoto's Persona, the sapphire figure zipping and darting between 
Shadows to cut a path through them.

"We need to retreat! There's too many!" Yosuke shouted, flinching in pain as he felt Jiraiya being 
ambushed by another golem Shadow.

"No! We're not retreating! Stand your ground and fight!" commanded Yu, cutting through another 
Shadow with his sword. He felt something grab onto his hand, and his grip on the hilt tightened as 
he turned his head. He expected a Shadow, or one of his cowardly friends to be holding onto him, 
but it was neither. It was Naoto, eyes gleaming, but gaze averted. It was like she couldn't look him 
in the eyes.

"Narukami, we can't stay here. We have to leave."

"I'm not abandoning her!" he replied. He tried pulling his arm away, but Naoto's grip seemed as 
strong as iron. "I made a promise."

"I know you did, but this is suicide. This isn't what Dojima would want!" Her fingers were hot, 
pressed tight around his wrist as her cobalt eyes stared into his iron pools. "You have to see that..."

"I..." He saw her eyes widen as darkness blanketed over them. It was as if a cloud had blocked out 
the sun, but he knew what it had to have been. He could see the dark silhouette on the ground move 
in reflection to the true beast. It towered over the other Shadows, wielding a mighty axe in its' 
hand.

"Move!" Naoto commanded, but she was the only one to try to dodge the attack. "Narukami?! 
What are you doing?!"

The axe was swung downward, cutting through the air like a steel waterfall through stone. It 
clashed against the cold, hard metal of Izanagi's spear. Yu stood beneath his Persona, holding his 
position just beneath the clashed weapons. Yu's jaw clenched and his teeth ground against one 
another as the stone bridge seemed to crack underneath his feet. He was melded with Izanagi to the 
point where he seemed to be the one to hold the spear, rather than the masked figure.

"Narukami, move out of the way!" Naoto ordered, frustration seeping through her voice like a 
cracked dam. "He's too powerful for you!"
"No! I'm... stronger!" Yu growled, pushing against the axe with Izanagi. Naoto could see the mental and spiritual strain the duel was taking out of him, though. Beads of sweat poured down his forehead as he struggled to maintain his footing.

She looked to their teammates and cursed her luck. Teddie and Yukiko were struggling to keep the others alive and healthy, but every time they healed their teammates, they just became weaker. Kanji, Yosuke, and Chie pushed through their obvious fatigue, fighting with all of their might to protect their healers and Rise. Thankfully the swarm seemed focus on them, leaving their most powerful to finish off Narukami and herself on its' own.

"Ahhh!" Narukami cried out in pain as he stumbled, falling onto his knee as the titanic, stone golem pushed him down. Naoto could see the duel was having a dangerous effect on Izanagi's spear. There were hairline cracks forming at the spot where the enemy's weapons and the Persona's clashed. It would break at any moment, but Narukami was too damn stubborn to see that!

"Yu!" Naoto ran forward, dashing towards his side. "Sukuna-Hikona!" Her Persona shot forward like a cyan bullet, throwing itself into the axe's blade. It slid against the spear, thrown off course by the blow. The giant Shadow stumbled in place, stunned by the attack as Yu struggled to stand.

Naoto was quickly by his side, helping her senpai onto his two feet.

He was panting, trying to hold onto his weakened and fatigued consciousness. He looked at Naoto, eyes wide and heart racing. "Naoto?" She turned away, not out of anger, but out of surprise. She could hear the blade cutting through the air, whistling as it swung downwards towards her. Sukunua-Hikona darted in the air, trying in vain to block the attack, but their sword was not strong enough.

Yu watched with wide-eyed horror as the stone sword shattered Sukunua's sword, the shards falling onto the ground like metal rain, and the Shadow's weapon cut through Naoto's body. She staggered back, holding her chest as she struggled to stand. Her eyes widened, pools of tears forming as her body lost all strength. He caught her, and he watched as her clothes turned a muddy crimson, blood seeping onto her torn clothing. He struggled to speak as she trembled in his arms, the color fading from her skin.

"Naoto!"

Izanagi vanished, replaced by another Persona that shined a golden light upon the fallen detective. He held her in his arms, cradling her body as she stared at the golden sky of this dungeon. The wound began to close, but it wasn't enough. Yu closed his eyes, silently demanding his Persona to heal her, only to find that his own energy was exhausted. He opened his eyes to find Naoto's eyes still wide, paralyzed in pain and horror.

"Yukiko! H-help! Please!" he screamed, ignorant of the golem Shadow swinging its weapon down upon him.

"Senpai!" Kanji's Persona saved him, tackling the goliath to the ground. "We have to go, man!" The blond reached down to grab Yu's shoulder, but the young man just shrugged it off.

"I'm not leaving her!" he screamed, shaking.

"I ain't saying you should! But Rise said there's more Shadows coming! We need to leave!" The spiky-haired blond helped Yu back onto his feet, Naoto silently held in the silverette's arms. The two ran to the others, who were slowly retreating from the battlefield. Yu saw the raven-haired healer in the back of the group, and dashed closer to her.
"Y-Yukiko! P-please, help her!" Perhaps if he was in a calmer state, Yu would have seen the paleness in Yukiko's skin. He would have seen the bags that had somehow formed under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept in days. He would have seen the limp in her step and the near stumble she had as she barely dodged a Shadow's projectile.

As it was, he didn't see her exhaustion, nor did he care.

She said nothing as her Persona appeared behind her. Konohana Sakuya's once-elegant appearance seemed to have withered. Her fans looked brittle, and they lost their distinct color. Her helm was cracked, even her eyes seemed duller than normal. Despite this, the Persona held her hands over Naoto and bathed her in a radiant light. The beam only lasted a moment, before it flickered, and faded away.

"T-that's all I can do. I'm sorry, but I just..."

"It's okay," he replied quickly, staring at Naoto. Her pale skin had color again, the slightest bit of red flowed onto her cheeks. Her wide eyes seemed to relax, slowly closing as she let out a shaky breath. "Can you take her...? Please?"

"Of course," replied Yukiko, taking the younger girl into her arms. She held her body, supporting her as Yu turned away from them and towards the Shadows.

He saw his allies: Yosuke was trying to lead the group back, but terror was obvious on his features. Yet he called out orders and led the group.

Kanji was a berserker, swinging his shield against the horde as Take-Mikazuchi fought beside him. They might as well have been punching stone with sticks. Yet they fought.

Chie was on her last leg, as tired as Yukiko and Yu were, yet she pushed on. Tomoe cleaved through the army, bathed in inky, blood-like splotches.

Teddie was giving it his all, screaming at the top of his lungs, yet never stopping the barrage of jokes and bear-puns. Yu knew he was scared, yet the small bear wouldn't let the Shadows see his fear. Even Rise was supporting the group, calling out Shadow locations and warning about attacks from their blind spots.

How easy would it have been for them to fail here? To die? And if they had, it would have been Yu Narukami who sealed their fates. Not Namatame. Him.

He closed his eyes, and he saw Dojima's slumbering, bed-ridden body. He imagined the terror in Nanako's eyes as she begged for her big brother to save her. He saw the agony in Naoto's silent, cold body as she nearly died because of him. He dug deep into the pit of his soul, and he called out to Izanagi. Lighting fell from above, giving the eight their chance to escape.

The eight took refuge at Naoto's home, letting the girl rest on her bed while they planned out of the next move. No one came out of the failed rescue unscathed, a fact that wasn't more obvious than Yosuke's own reflection. He had bandages on his face to hide the cuts and bruises the fight had give him. He had several more under his clothes, all helping to slightly dull the pain he had left the other world with.

Kanji, Chie, Yukiko, Teddie, and even Rise shared his look. They were nursing their wounds, all trying not to think about their colossal failure, but Naoto got the worst. She hadn't woken up since that Shadow nearly cut her in half. Yukiko said she was lucky that only the very tip of the blade seemed to cut her, but Yosuke had seen Rise throwing Naoto's clothes away.
They looked like they were drenched in blood...

Just thinking about the near-death of their team genius brought a shiver to Yosuke's spine. He let out a quiet sigh, before looking at Naoto's sleeping body. He sat across from the girl, silently ensuring she didn't get worse. He promised to, after Yukiko refused to leave the girl's side. She only allowed Rise and Chie to bandage her up if Yosuke took her place by Naoto's side.

Three minutes so far, and she wasn't dead yet, so Yosuke was at least doing that right...

"You okay?"

He turned his head to the door, finding Chie staring at him. She looked exhausted, then again, they all did.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Just thinking."

"Heh. Don't hurt yourself," she teased, leaning against the door frame.

He ignored the insult, too tired to get upset, before he asked, "How are the others?"

"Okay, I guess. Okay as they can be... Rise and Kanji are practically conjoined at the hip. Yukiko fell asleep while we were bandaging her up. Teddie's been... weirdly quiet..."

"And Yu?" Yosuke couldn't hide the fire in his voice. The low, rumbling growl that escaped between his teeth.

"I... haven't seen him. I thought he might have been in here, but..." Her eyes traced over the walls, finding no silver-haired boy. "Rise's worried about him."

"Are you?" Yosuke's fingers balled into fists for a moment as he let out a heavy sigh. He watched as Chie remained silent, unable to meet his gaze. "I can't believe he'd risk your life like that!" He pushed himself onto his sore feet, anger numbing the pain as he began to rant. It was like a crack in a dam that grew and grew, making him angrier and angrier.

"Yosuke-"

"I mean, what the hell is wrong with him?! I know he's been acting weird lately, and I get that this is his cousin, but... God damn it!"

"Yosuke!"

"He nearly got you killed!" Yosuke expected Chie to smack him or yell over his cries of outrage, but instead he felt her hand gently fall on his shoulder. She stood in front of him, their almond eyes meeting one another as they silently stood before the other. "C-Chie?"

"Thanks for worrying about me, but it was my own fault. I should have been stronger," she sighed.

"What?! Chie, that's stupid! There's no way this is your fault!" The girl seemed unresponsive to him, though. "Chie...?"

"I just made a mistake. Y'know, zigged when I should have zagged?" she laughed weakly, trying to end the conversation. "I'll do better next time." Yosuke was ready to argue the point, only to fall silent as she cut him off. "Hey, good job leading us out of there. After Yu killed all those Shadows and blacked out, you were the one who got us out of there. Never thought I'd see the day, honestly," she teased. "Nice one."
"I didn't do anything. Just tried not to die during that whole mess," he sighed.

"That's not what I saw. I saw a brave hero leading us out of danger, carrying our fallen leader in his arms." A smirk formed on Chie's lips as she wondered out loud, "Have you seen him?"

"Who? Yu?"

"No, the brave hero who led us out of danger." There was a short pause, before the young girl began to laugh. She chuckled at her joke, and after a moment of annoyance, Yosuke joined in. The two laughed together, enjoying the respite that felt long overdue. The moment did not last long as a voice called out to them.

"Y-Yosuke-senpai? Chie-senpai...?"

"Naoto!" The two darted to her side, watching as the dark-haired detective tried to sit up. Yosuke averted his eyes as Naoto's shirt slipped slightly on her body, revealing the bandages that covered her shoulder. Chie gently pushed the younger girl back onto her bed, keeping her hand firmly on the sleuth's uncovered shoulder. "Don't move. You were hurt really bad."

"N-Narukami..."

"Naoto, don't try to talk. Here, I'll go get Yukiko and-" Yosuke felt her squeeze his arm. It had darted out from under the covers, and she forced her cobalt eyes into a firm glare at the young brunette. He was rendered silent as her hold on him tightened.

"You must find... find him. He'll... He's so stupid." Her voice let out a weak laugh, her voice dry and hoarse, like gravel grinding against itself. "He'll do something stupid. You... you have to help him." Yosuke and Chie watched tears pool in the corners of her eyes, before cascading down her cheeks. "My fault... This is... this is all my fault."

"Naoto?"

"My fault..." Naoto groaned, her head falling onto the pillow as she struggled to catch her breath. "Hurts," she muttered, closing her eyes as small droplets trailed down her cheeks. Chie brushed them aside, before looking at Yosuke.

"I think she's delirious... I don't even know if she can hear us." Yosuke didn't say anything in reply, his features heavy with contemplation. "What do you think she meant by all that?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," he sighed. He turned away from the two, walking away to pick up his jacket.

"What?! Where are you going?!" Chie questioned, following her friend.

"I'm going to look for Yu. If Naoto's worried about him, we all probably should be." He picked up his jacket, but her hand caught his, stopping him.

"I'm going with you."

"You're almost in as bad a shape as Naoto! No way, you're staying here. I'll give you a call when I find him." Chie stared at him, her eyes fluctuating between anger and something else. "What?"

"It's just... When did you get all leadery?"

"Heh. What's wrong, Chie? Falling for me?" he chuckled, clicking his tongue and snapping his
finger at her. She rolled his eyes at the gesture, but there was a distinct smile on her face.

"As if. Go, ya big dummy."

Yosuke nodded his head, and took off. He rushed out of the room, giving a quick goodbye to the others as he exited the apartment. *Something stupid... That's what Naoto said, right? What would be the stupidest thing Yu could do right now...?*

Yu twirled a final swig of the bottle, tasting the alcoholic burn of the drink. Night blanketed the small town as he walked down the illuminated path towards the store. He stumbled for a moment, but caught himself, pressing his staggering body onward until he reached the store. He placed his fist against the glass door, feeling the cold on his knuckles, as he thought about how he would get in. His sword was sheathed on his back, he could force his way into the dark store with that, but he was shocked to find it wasn't needed.

On a whim, he pushed against the door, and it gave way, opening and giving him passage into the darkness. He entered, diving into the cold shadows as the night's wind followed him inside. The light outside seeped through the windows, outlining the large room. His eyes adjusted, drinking in the darkness and finding the outline of what he sought. The TV laid there, untouched, waiting for him.

The glass bottle fell from his fingers and to the floor with a loud 'dink,' but he didn't pay it any mind. He walked towards the TV and held up his hand, taping the screen and gazing at the resulting ripple effect. He took a deep breath, and sighed, before he was blinded by the lights of the room turning on. He hissed in pain, shielding his eyes as he blinked away the spots in his vision.

"You're really here..."

He recognized the voice before he saw the speaker. "Yosuke?" The brunette stood behind him, walking closer to Yu. "What are you doing here?"

"Dude, I think you know exactly why I'm here." Yu's silver eyes glanced at the TV, before returning to Yosuke. They narrowed as the other boy glared back at him. "I'm here to make sure you don't do something really stupid." His eyes softened, and he held out his hand to the scowling silverette. "Come on, dude. Let's head back to the others."

"And abandon Nanako?"

"We'll get her back! We'll save her."

"What? Like you saved Saki?" mocked Yu.

"W-what?" Yosuke felt like he'd be punched, his eyes widening as he tried to comprehend the sadistic smirk that formed on his friend's face. The sight of it chilled his bones and made his skin crawl, like staring at a twisted reflection of his friend's face.

"You failed to save her. You failed her, and you've been failing everyone else ever since. After all, I'm the one who always has to pick up your mess, to finish your work. You're too stupid and too weak to be the hero of this story, Yosuke, and Saki died because of you."

"Shut up!" Yosuke couldn't control himself, his nails digging into the palms of his hands as rage bubbled in his chest. "Dude, stop. You're just angry. You need to-"

"Does the truth hurt?" Yu laughed, his teeth gleaming in the light as he took a step closer to
Yosuke. The sword on his back fell to the ground as his 'friend' inched away. "You're a parasite. Any worth you have, any good you've done for anyone, it's all because of me!"

"I said, shut up!"

"You were so pathetic when I found you," Yu chuckled, shaking his head. "All I had to do was flash a smile and pretend to care. Then Saki died and you were so eager for a friend... For the chance to be useful."

His hand shot forward, catching Yosuke's collar as the boy stared with wide-eyed horror. It was like he was seeing Yu for the very first time. In a way, maybe he was.

"Really, that bitch dying was a blessing. You should be happy she's dea--"

"Shut up!" It happened so fast. Yosuke didn't even realize what had happened at first. Yu stumbled back, a mark on the side of his face from the other boy's knuckles. The silver-haired boy was silent, before letting out a small chuckle. Yu lifted up his fists, and Yosuke was his reluctant mirror. "Dude, don't make me do this!"

"You weren't man enough to save Saki, now you're not even man enough to fight me? You really are worthless." Yu's smile was twisted, almost psychotic, like something out of a horror movie. "Then just stand there and die like her." Yu ran forward, and like it or not, Yosuke wasn't going to leave without fighting back.

END
Yosuke and Yu face off. Naoto and Yu have a heart to heart.

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**This can't be happening.**

Yosuke stared at the monster in front of him, trembling as it loomed over him like a tower about to fall on him. The abomination laughed at his fear, mocking his attempts at bravado as it neared him. The earth trembled with every approaching step and the air turned cold as Yosuke struggled to breathe.

*I'm going to die... T-this is it.*

The monster that once had his face reached towards him, and he did nothing to fight it. How could he? What could he do against it? It was a giant compared to him, and the long, gangly limbs trembled with barely restrained power, but the worst part of the entity was the voice. Yosuke could hear the monster's voice; a perfect copy of his own, mocking and insulting him, bringing every last buried secret and hidden thought to light.

Yosuke closed his eyes and hung his head low, accepting his fate...

Then came the lightning and a crack of thunder. The creature cried out in pain and Yosuke felt the strength to lift his head up to look at it. He saw the silver-haired student staring at the monster as his Persona hovered behind him. The entity known as Izanagi brandished his spear, twirling it in his fingers as Yu Naruakmi stood beside him. The abomination howled in pain from the electric attack as Izanagi shot forward.

"Yu...? W-why are you...?" Yosuke felt himself being pulled up from his knees. The other boy just smiled at him, dispelling the dread that flooded Yosuke's mind.

"It's okay, Yosuke. You're not alone," he promised him. "Everything will be okay."

That day, Yosuke became indebted to Yu and swore he would help his friend out. That day, Yu shackled Yosuke into being a near-perfect servant. Someone to grind under his foot as he stole the hearts of women and men around him.

---

Yosuke didn't understand how it came to this. He came here to help Yu, and to stop him from doing something stupid, but instead he just joined him. *I've got to stop him!* he thought, before he dodged a clumsy swing from Yu. Yosuke ducked under another attack, before he pushed the silver-haired teen back. Yu stumbled, falling to the ground, only to stand up angrier than ever.

"Dude, stop! I don't want to hurt you!"

"Loser," Yu spat, before moving forward again to throw another punch. It was sloppy and predictable, missing Yosuke's head by a few inches. "Saki's probably glad she's dead! It keeps her..."
With every word, Yosuke's self-control chipped away. He struggled to control himself, begged with his shaking fists not to fight back, but Yu knew every crack in his armor. Every word felt like a knife to Yosuke's heart, making him more and more infuriated. He grabbed Yu's arms and grappled with the spiteful attacker. "Stop it! I'm your friend, dude! Ya-!

"What's next, Yosuke?" Yu's mouth shifted, curling into a twisted smile as his steel eyes glared into Yosuke's own. He laughed at the other boy, mocking his attempt at peace with more goading and shameless sadism. "You going to fail Chie too and get her killed?"

"Damn it, go to hell!" Yosuke lunged forward and slammed his forehead into Yu's nose. The blow not only stunned him, but it drew blood, and Yosuke took advantage of it by punching Yu in the gut, knocking the air out of him. "We're going back to Naoto's, Yu!"

"Make me!" Yu lunged forward, grabbing Yosuke's collar and shaking him back and forth. Yosuke broke free and slammed his fist into Yu's cheek, knocking the boy to the ground with an unsightly welt on his face. Despite the beating, he forced himself up again on trembling legs. "Is that all you got?"

"Stay down, man! I don't want to do this!"

"Ahhh!" Yu ignored any attempt to talk things out, and instead he charged at the brunette. He didn't throw any punches, rather he shoved Yosuke. The attack wasn't even enough to push him to the ground. "Come on! Fight me!"

"Let go!" Yosuke tried to pry his fingers off of him, but Yu's grip proved too strong. Instead Yosuke slammed his fist into Yu's other cheek, knocking him back. There was another welt that tarnished Yu's once handsome face. Yosuke didn't relent, and he moved forward and slammed his shoulder into Yu, sending the silverette stumbling into the wall. He fell against it and slowly slid towards the ground.

Yosuke released a breath he hadn't realizing he was holding. For a moment he thought it was truly over.

Yu forced his body back up and glared at Yosuke. "Saki killed herself so she wouldn't have to deal with the pain of living. Pain you helped cause her." His words had no real rage to them, no passion. He sounded like he was simply stating facts.

His blase, uncaring tone only fueled the inferno in Yosuke's eyes as he ran forward, pelting Yu with more punches. A right hook to his cheek, a jab at his gut, another blow to his face. Yu didn't offer any kind of defense, simply standing there as the brunette's assault carried on. Every time Yosuke's attacks began to relent, Yu mocked Saki's death or threw the blame at Yosuke's feet. The beating went on for what felt like hours for the two boys, but it had only been a few moments.

Finally Yu hit the ground again, his nose bleeding as discolored, purple skin blemished his flesh. His face was a mess, a stark change from the cool and pristine appearance he usually kept. He struggled to stand on withered knees, only to let out a groan of pain as he fell to the ground again. He was panting, trying to catch his breath as Yosuke stared at him. The brunette could see blood drip from his friend's mouth, but it was quickly wiped away.

With the silverette silenced, Yosuke finally had a moment of clarity as he watched the young man strain to even sit up. Unlike Yu, he was completely unharmed. Some part of Yosuke told him to leave. Just turn around and leave his so-called friend to wallow in defeat. Yet he knew there was
something amiss.

"You barely touched me," he muttered.

"What... what the hell are you on about?" Yu tried to stand again, only to fall once more. He landed on his arm, cursing in pain as the bruised skin was crushed between the hard floor and his own battered body. "Fuck...!"

"You didn't even hit me... Why?"

"Saki's dead because of-"

"Enough with the bullshit, Yu!" Yu's eyes widened at the outburst. Yosuke used the silence to speak his mind, forcing Yu to listen to him.

"You keep talking shit every time I stop attacking you. Every time I try to calm down, you just piss me off again, but you haven't even tried to defend yourself!" Yu wiped some of the blood from his nose on his sleeve, trying to look away from the infuriated brunette. "No, look at me! No more of this crap! You're telling me what's going on in your head! No more lies, no more shit, the truth, Yu!"

Silence. Yu stared at Yosuke with an unreadable glint in his eyes, before glancing to the ground.

"When the hell did you start giving me orders?" Yosuke felt his teeth grind against each other, but before he opened his mouth to berate Yu, the silverette interrupted him, scoffing and shaking his head in disbelief. "Damn it. There was a smile on his face, but it dripped with bitterness and blood. "Fuck..."

"Yu...?"

"Dojima." Yu lifted his hand to touch his discolored cheek. He pressed his knuckles against the tender skin, cringing in pain. "Nanako." He grabbed his forearm, and squeezed, digging his fingers into the his flesh. Yosuke's eyes widened as Yu then bent his own finger back, grimacing from the sensation. "Naoto." He released his finger and stared at Yosuke, silver eyes burning with hate, but not for Yosuke, not even for Namatame. It was for himself.

"They're all going to die because of me. I got all of them killed, because I was too brash and too stupid. I failed them, and I even failed all of you. I nearly got us all killed because of my own arrogance. I'm a fucking idiot to think I could have saved any of them. At this rate, I won't even be able to avenge them." He sat on the cold, tiled ground of the store as he lifted his head to stare at the TV. Yosuke followed his stare.

"That's why I have to go by myself. I can't get anyone else hurt that way. You, Chie, Rise... Everyone would be better off without me."

"Yu... Come on, that's not true." Yosuke reached towards his friend's shoulder, only for his hand to be smacked away.

"Dojima's in the hospital. Nanako is being held captive by a psycho. Naoto nearly got cut in half! That's all I have to show!" His voice rose in passion and volume, dripping with volcanic fury and unending guilt. "Everything used to come so easy. I thought I was perfect, but look around! Look at Chie! Look at everything I've touched! It's all turned to shit!"

He rose up, and Yosuke saw his silver eyes shimmer. Tears welled in his eyes as Yu continued to roar, shouting as tears slid down his cheeks. "I can't keep doing this. I can't keep failing. Naoto nearly died because of me... I have to make this right. I have to go alone." He wiped the tears from
his face, scratching his sleeve against his eyes as the bitter taste of salt sparked on his tongue. "I have to."

He looked at Yosuke and there was no hate in his eyes. Only a passing feeling of pity. "Tell everyone I'm sorry. I'll get Nanako back myself, and I'll kill Namatame. Just... just protect her when she comes out, okay? Please?" Yosuke had never heard him sound so broken. "I'm sorry for what I said by the way. I just... I needed to give you a reason to hit me. You actually hit a lot harder than I thought you would," he joked, laughing through the tears.

He turned his body and shambled towards the TV, limping, but biting his lip to keep quiet about the pain. The tears didn't stop, but it was all he could do to hold back his shuddering and raspy breath. He came to a stop as Yosuke moved in front of him.

"The only way you're stopping me from going in by beating me until I'm unconscious, or killing me. You pick, I don't care which," he hissed.

Yosuke looked at Yu Narukami and he couldn't believe what he saw. The man he respected and the leader he followed had been reduced to a sobbing mess. It wasn't like crying in a show or a movie. It wasn't a single tear going down Yu's face. No, he was just a step back from bawling.

Yu struggled to hold back the tears, even as he stood in front of Yosuke, but despite his best efforts, the tears still fell. His eyes were red and puffy, distorting his features as he tried to stop the his bawling. The tears shattered against the ground as they fell from his chin and Yosuke could hear the quiet sound of gasping as Yu failed to control himself.

What was he supposed to do? What could he do? Yosuke had never been in this kind of situation before. He wracked his brain for an answer.

"Move." Yosuke stood in his way. "I said, move!" Yu's growl fell on deaf ears. "Either kick my ass, or move!" Yu limped forward, only to come to a halt as Yosuke embraced him. "What-?"

"Just shut the hell up and listen, okay?! You think this is going to make things better?! What the hell are we supposed to tell Nanako, even if you do save her?! When she finds your body hanging on top of a building, what the hell are we supposed to tell her?! That her brother thought she was better off without him?! And what about Dojima?! The guy practically sees you as his son! You just going to die on him too! He loves you, damn it!"

"And Naoto... She blames herself for all of this, man. She doesn't blame you for what happened! I spoke to her! She thinks this is all her fault! You just going to abandon her and make her feel even worse?!" Yosuke grabbed Yu's shoulder, squeezing it as he tried to reason with the fallen leader. "What the hell do you think is going to happen? You kill yourself and everything turns out fine afterwards?!"

Yu turned his head away, not having the strength to push Yosuke back as the brunette continued. "I get it, alright? You're hurting. You're in pain, and I understand why, but we can do this. We can all work together to fix this, but we can't if you get yourself killed!" He said nothing in reply, just glaring at the television. Yosuke squeezed his shoulder and shook him, tearing Yu's eyes from the screen.

"You're my friend, dude, and Naoto... She really likes you."

"She shouldn't blame himself..." It was a faint whisper.

"And you shouldn't either. This is Namatame's fault."
"You don't get it... I could have saved them. I should have saved them! I'm supposed to be-" Yu stopped as Yosuke squeezed his shoulder again, glaring into the silver, yet scarlet-cracked, eyes.

"What? Perfect?! You're just a guy. Just like me. You make mistakes. I know more about that than anyone," Yosuke joked, offering an understanding smile.

And for a moment, it worked. Yu's face reflected the smile, only to vanish in a near instant. His eyes weighed heavy with thought, before he spoke with a slow, deliberate tone. "Yosuke... There's something I need to tell you." Yu tried to pry Yosuke's hand off of him, and after a moment of resistance, Yosuke released him. "You need to know the truth about me."

"Truth? What truth?"

"When Saki died..." The silver-haired boy struggled to explain his secret, but it was not easy. He kicked himself for hesitating and remembered Rise, Kanji, and Yukiko. He could tell them the truth, he could it again for Yosuke. "When we went to that liquor store in the other world, and we heard all those things she thought about you, I was happy."

"What?"

"I'm not a good person. The person you've known, the one you called 'partner?' Not the real me. The real me is a scumbag who uses other people. I used you. I made you into a stepping stone for my own amusement. It's what I do with everyone. I was going to manipulate Rise into having sex with me, and then I'd just dump after I left town... That's the kind of man I am... Was? I'm not sure which is more accurate, honestly..."

Yosuke's eyes were framed with shock, and he struggled to say something. His mouth uttered little, fractured words, but he just couldn't understand what he was hearing. "W-why would you...?"

"Because that's who I am. Was?" Yu sighed, shaking his head. "I don't understand it either, but I guess it just made me happy. I was bored, and it was all just a game. There was a time I'd sacrifice any one of our friends for more power or excitement..."

He was silent again. Yu glanced towards him and saw the brunette gritting his teeth, hands tightened into fists. "What changed?"

"I met Naoto."

"And... what? That changed everything?"

"Falling in love can do that to a guy, I guess."

There was a short moment of silence that felt like forever to the silver-eyed youth, but even with all of that time he was still shocked by Yosuke's response.

"So there's no problem then."

"What?" Yu felt his eye twitch for a moment, before he stared at Yosuke with a hanging jaw. "What?!"

"It doesn't matter who we were or what we thought or even what we did. What's matter is what we do now," Yosuke explained matter-of-factly, standing up on his own two feet. "I learned that from you."

"What?!" The silverette stood up as well, glaring at Yosuke. "Whatever you 'learned' from me was
based on a lie!"

"Maybe. But I still believe it doesn't matter. You're still our leader, and when you keep a cool head, you're great at it," Yosuke reasoned.

"Are you insane?! I can't lead us! I nearly got everyone killed! I nearly got Naoto killed!"

"Maybe. You're still the best choice to lead us."

"I can't! I-I just can't!" Yu trembled where he stood, but Yosuke's hand on his shoulder helped ground him.

"You're not alone, dude. Come on, we're all here to help you. You need help, we're there, but you're still our leader. Besides, we don't exactly have the time to pick a new one, y'know?" Yosuke tried to smile, hoping one would soon form on Yu's face, but it was a futile effort.

"So what? Just like that we're all back to being friends? No problem?" The very thought left a foul taste on Yu's tongue.

"No." Yosuke's hand fell from his shoulder and he sighed. "I don't know how I feel about all this. Angry? Frustrated? Pissed off at you."

"I get that a lot," the boy remarked with a hint of bitterness. "Granted, it's not undeserved..."

"But I can push all that crap aside, because we need to save Nanako. How I feel doesn't matter. What's important is catching Namatame and finally ending this shit."

The silverette gaped at Yosuke, bewildered and flabbergasted by his admittance. "That's... that's really big of you. Shit." Yu blinked, leaning back as his silver eyes looked over Yosuke's frame. "You're... a lot more mature about this than I thought you'd be."

"Yeah, well... I don't know if we're friends, but I can work with you, least until we can close this case. Sounds fair?"

"Yeah. Sounds fair," the silverette nodded.

"Come on. Let's get back to the others. Agreed?" Yosuke motioned to the exit with his head, and Yu slowly nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. Let's- ah!" Yu ground his teeth, biting the inside of his mouth to hold back the cry of pain. Standing up was difficult, painful in fact. His legs pulsed with agony, forcing him to take slow, deep breaths. "Fuck... My whole body hurts."

"S-sorry. Guess that's my bad." Yosuke offered his hand to Yu, who took it and stood up with trembling legs. The brunnette placed his hand on the boy's opposite shoulder and helped him along, letting Yu lean on him.


It was late in the night by the time the two boys had returned to Naoto's home. The others had fallen asleep, with Chie sleeping on a chair, Teddie on the floor, and Rise and Kanji sharing a blanket on the couch. Yu had a bemused smile on his face as he stared at the two sitting on the sofa, shoulders touching, with Rise's head resting on the blond boy's shoulder. Yosuke stared at the couple with a confused look in his eye.
"Rise and Kanji like each other," whispered Yu.

"Wait, what?!"

Yosuke quickly slammed his hands over his mouth, eyes wide as he watched their slumbering teammates stir. Teddie continued to sleep like a bear during hibernation, but Kanji and Rise's eyes strained for a moment. The idol pressed her body against Kanji, her lips turning into a smile as she held the boy's arm like a stuffed animal. Kanji didn't seem to mind her presence, letting out a quiet, relieved sigh as he returned to a peaceful sleep.

"Shut up, Yosuke," muttered the still sleeping Chie.

"They like each other. Well, Rise likes him, but I'm pretty sure Kanji likes her too." Yu smiled at the sight of the two of them, admiring how innocent and sweet the two were together, before looking at Yosuke. "Naoto's in her room?"

"Y-yeah."

"Do you mind if I...?"

"Sure, dude. Just make sure you get some rest, okay?"

Yu nodded his head in response and bid Yosuke farewell, before walking towards Naoto's room. The door was slightly ajar, so he was able to enter with a quiet push of his hand. Inside the room was the slumbering Naoto, oblivious to his presence, but there was one other as well. A young woman sitting on Naoto's bed, tending to the young woman.

"Yukiko?"

"Yu-kun?" The two stared at one another, shock mirrored on one another's faces, before Yu's eyes glanced towards the sleeping detective. Yukiko followed his eyes and her wide gaze narrowed.

"Yosuke found you?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Stopped you from doing something stupid...?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Naoto was really worried about you." Yu slowly approached the two girls, but Yukiko did not look at him. She just stared at Naoto's peaceful body.

"Yukiko... About last time... When we were in the TV World? I'm sorry for what I said." She did not reply. "And I'm sorry about Chie too! I was out of line. I get that." The raven-haired girl rose up from her seat and turned her body to Yu. She did not even glance at him as she walked out. Their shoulders gently brushed against one another and Yu cringed at the icy chill.

"Goodnight, Narukami."

"R-right. Goodnight," he muttered. The door closed behind Yukiko and Yu placed his fingers on his brow, gently massaging the bridge of his nose as he tried to keep himself focused on one problem at a time. His silver eyes fell upon Naoto's sleeping form and he silently pondered just what he was supposed to do now.

He opened his mouth several times, only to hesitate. He paced from one side of the wall to the
other as he watched Naoto's chest gently rise and fall. Then he turned crimson as he realized what exactly he was staring at. He tries not to think about if they were bandaged or not, though judging by their size at the time, they were not.

*Just wake her up. Just go over there and wake up. Poke her. Wake her. Do something, stupid!*

Yu finally stopped pacing and decided on sitting beside Naoto. He sat on the floor, crossing his legs as he gazed at her slumbering face. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were slightly pulled apart as he listened to her whistle-like breathing. He opened his mouth again, only to find memories bubbling in his head. His eyes glanced at her sweet lips, the ones he had kissed all those months...

It had been one of the greatest kisses of his life, and he hadn't even known her true gender at that point.

*She's so beautiful, and she nearly died because of me...* Yu damned himself once more, before sighing. He sat down on the ground and his back rested against her bed as he thought aloud. "Good morning, sleeping beauty... Hey there, sleeping prince. How you feeling, detective?" He let out another sigh and rubbed his fingers against the bridge of his nose. "Naoto... I love you."

It felt oddly pleasant to declare that fact. It was like taking a weight off his shoulders, even if she couldn't hear him. He released the bridge of his nose and gently took her hand out from under the blanket. She felt like a blazing inferno in his fingers, and they melted the cool tingle that still plagued his skin. He gently caressed her hand, admiring the smooth skin and petite digits.

"I love you so much. You're smart. Brave. Confident. You're like no one I've ever met. You changed my life, and I..." He searched his heart for the truth, before scoffing at he realized just what impact the young woman had on him. "I want to marry you. How insane is that? You and I haven't even known each other for a year, and yet I can't imagine my life without you. I want to spend my whole life with you, I want to be yours, and I... I think I want to be with you forever." He laughed, watching as a single tear shattered against her skin.

"That's why you have to wake up. I can't do this without you, Naoto. I can't... I can't lead the others. I can't save the day. I can't be my usual, perfect self... But worst of all?" He kissed her hand, gently pressing his lips against the fallen tear and wiping it away. "I won't be able to tell you I'm sorry. I won't be able to tell you how my arrogance and stupidity nearly got you killed. I won't hear you yell at me and insult me. I don't need you to love me, Naoto. I just need you to wake up again, one more time."

Naoto awoke to the gently burn of the sun's rays. They touched her closed eyes, shining a painful radiance into her slumbering mind. She rose up from her bed, cringing as her muscles ached and her arms trembled. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she blinked away the blurs and haze slept left her. She uttered out a loud yawn as her arms propped her up.

She was in her room, though she did not remember returning to it. She was dressed in her pajamas, and again, she had no memory of changing into them. She remembered entering the other world with her friends and fighting through a massive swarm of Shadows. Narukami was...

*Narukami!?* Naoto struggled to get out from under her blanket, only to stop as she felt her hand brush against something.

The subject of her thoughts laid beside her, sitting on the floor of her bed, his arms and head laid on her bedside. His head was gently nuzzling against her leg, a faint, content smile etched onto his
Questions plagued through Naoto's mind like the scarlet flush that struck her pale cheeks. She opened her mouth, only to close it and swallow deeply. The more logical part of her mind told her to recount what she remembered and decipher what could have led Narukami to her bedside, but it was hard to hear it through the pounding of her heart.

The schism of her mind was finally quelled when she closer examined her friend's face. There were marks on his face. Discolorations on his skin that was typical of bruising. It appeared as though he had been in a fight lately, and closer examination revealed an abnormal 'puffiness' to his face. Her hand reached out from under her blanket to gently prod the space below his face. It felt slightly wet, as if he had been crying into it...

* Crying? Narukami? But why...? No, you know why, you stupid girl. Nanako-chan and Dojima-san's lives are in danger and it is because of you. You caused him such grief and anguish...

She recalled their venture into the other world, their failed attempt to save Nanako from the clutches of Namatame... They had failed and- Naoto's eyes widened as her hand touched her chest. Her fingers pushed through the cloth, trying to find evidence of the wound that had befallen her. She had remembered seeing so much of her blood... She remembered the momentary pain, before numbness took over her body.

She moved the collar of her shirt and her body shuddered as she saw the faint scarring that now afflicted her body. It was a cruel reminder of her failure, and a constant keepsake of her own stupidity. She looked to Narukami once more, her eyes falling onto his body with guilt and shame. "I'm sorry, Narukami." 

* Has... Has Narukami been with me since that night? Why? He should be with the others. He should...* Naoto lifted a hand to gently touch his silver locks, and she was pleasantly surprised by the tingling sensation his hairs gave her fingertips. *You have no right to even think about what he should and should not do... Stupid girl.*

"Hm... Naoto..."

"Naoto?" he groaned, rubbing his sleeve against his arm. Narukami gazed at her with a sense of confusion and disbelief, and she stared back with wide-eyed perplexity. "Naoto!?!" He rose up, nearly stumbling in place as his body struggled to catch up with his mind. "Y-you're awake!"

"I-I am." She couldn't meet his eyes as she muttered the obvious fact. He sat beside her bed, smiling at her for some strange reason.

"H-how are you feeling?"

"Sore... and perplexed," she answered. "The last thing I remember was being attacked by a Shadow. How long have I been unconscious?"

"About a day, I think."

"A-a whole day?!" Guilt washed over Naoto once more as her fingers dug into the blanket. *An
entire day wasted because of me?! Damn it! Nanako is in Namatame's clutches, and not only did I gift wrap her for him, I am impeding in our rescue attempts! Naoto's eyes lost their fire and they grew wide with shock as a warm sensation pressed against her skin. She glanced at her hand and found Narukami gently stroking it.

"I need to talk to you." She pulled her hand out from under his, but he offered no complaint.

Here it is... He's going to ask me to step back from the team. I can understand why... I'm the one who failed to save his sister. I'm the one who failed them again and again. I deserve his ire...

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

Naoto blinked, lifting her head to stare at Narukami. His eyes had no trace of deceit in them, nor did he wear his synonymous smirk. In fact, it was the first time she had seen them since her awakening and it pained her heart to see him like this. His eyes were puffy and had crimson in them, further implying he had been crying. The skin on his face was discolored, a faint purple that implied it had been a recent fight.

His lips formed a forlorn frown, infuriated, yet caged by depression. "This is my fault. All of this. Everyone nearly died because of me, and no one got it worse than you. Dojima and Nanako weren't the only ones to pay for my mistakes, everyone on this team suffered because of me. I'm so sorry, Naoto, and I-"

"Enough." Naoto's voice was firm. It extinguished the anguish in Yu's voice like a tidal wave to fire. Her hand grabbed his shoulder, fingers burrowing into his shoulder as she glared at him. "Stop. Namatame is the one responsible for all of this. No one else, but him." Her words didn't seem to reach him. Instead they burrowed into her own, staring into her very soul as he pierced her stoicism with a single question.

"Then why do you blame yourself?"

Once again she was floored, and she watched as his silver eyes turned sharp and accusatory, yet there was a gentleness in the steely stare. Yet another conundrum that only Yu Narukami could give her.

"Yosuke told me what you said to him and Chie. You blamed yourself for all of this."

"I... I hardly remember saying such a thing."

"You're an awful liar."

"Narukami-"

"How could you think any of this is your fault?! You're supposed to be the smart one, damn it," he sighed.

There was disappointment in his voice, as if she was some kind of child to scold. The tone of his voice was like gasoline, earning him a fiery glare and a burning heat to her voice. "Nanako wouldn't be in the clutches of a madman had I been stronger! Your uncle would not be in the hospital, if it weren't for me! Your anger towards him might as well be directed at me, Narukami!"

"Bullshit!" The rage in his voice did nothing to put down her own spirit. In fact the two fires seemed to feed off one another. "That's a load of crap! This isn't on you, Naoto!"
"You don't understand! This is my fault, and the sooner you realize that, the sooner we can save Nanako!"

"I understand perfectly. This doesn't have anything to do about saving Nanako. This is about who we are as people. You and me," he growled. "We're used to being the best. Geniuses. Amazing at everything. We're used to putting the weight of the world on our backs without complaint or fear. But when we fuck up, we fuck up bad, and we don't deal with it well." He stood up from the floor and sat on the bed, staring at Naoto as she rested her head against the headboard. She looked back at him, her eyes revealing the conflict in her soul. "We're both more arrogant than we like to think, aren't we...?"

Naoto's eyes drifted away as the words he spoke resonated with her. She muttered a reply, denial and guilt tugging at her soul within. "I had hoped I had grown past such... childishness."

"Change comes slow. I'm still working on being a better person, but I nearly got you and the others killed." Narukami rubbed his head with a tired breath. "Shit, I need to apologize to Chie still."

"I just... What happened to Nanako-"

"Wasn't your fault."

"She was right there! I saw her! And I failed both her and you!"

"And you were right there for me. You nearly died because of me! You don't think that nearly killed me?! I thought you were dead, Naoto!" he cried. He slammed his eyes shut, the strain and wrinkles in his brow shaking. "I did something stupid. Beyond just blaming myself..."

"Narukami? What are you referring to...?"

"I tried going into the other world myself. In my defense, I was drunk," he chuckled, opening his eyes. They lacked any light or spark, not a single trace of life. It pained her to see them in such a manner. They were so... empty. "I was going to save Nanako myself, without any risk to the others, or die trying, and honestly, I don't know which I wanted more."

Her eyes widened at the confession. T-to die...? He wanted to die?

"Is that where the bruises came from...?"

"You noticed, huh? No. Those came from Yosuke beating the shit out of me. We had a heart to heart and-"

He fell silent as Naoto's hand struck his face. His eyes widened as the slap echoed through the small room. It barely hurt, physically, but her words struck a chord in his soul. "How could you ever do something so stupid?! How could you ever want that?! Don't you understand how much the others need you?! How Nanako needs you?!! How I need you?!! "Were you even thinking?! What could possibly...?!" Her words failed her as her teeth ground against one another. She was shaking as she tried to voice her outrage. "What would such an act accomplish?! Nothing! It..."

"So, what? Are you telling me that beating myself up over something that isn't my fault is stupid and that I shouldn't do it?" His voice lacked any kind of excitement or happiness. "Hello, kettle. I'm pot." His eyes stared at her with a trace of that familiar spark she knew so well.

"T-that is different!" she stuttered.

"No, it isn't. We both messed up, we blamed ourselves, and we punished ourselves when we should be trying to punish the real culprit." He held out his hand to her as he smiled. "So what do you say,
"Narukami... I..." Naoto stared at his hand as if she had been offered a gem. There was a desire to seize, to accept it, but fear and doubt plagued her mind. Her sapphire eyes glanced at his as he eased her anxiety.

"I know you'll stumble. So will I. You're scared of making mistakes? So am I, but I think the biggest mistake either of us can make is just ignoring the other." She wanted to take his hand, truly she did, but something kept her arms still. Memories bubbled in her mind, unspoken truths and hidden secrets. She tried to ignore the vexing questions, but the words fought to escape her lips. "I-"

"I saw your sketchbook!"

That broke the coolheadedness of the young man. His eyes widened as his hand fell onto her lap and her cheeks turned scarlet. She cursed herself internally at her own confession, but it was too late. The elephant in the room that had been prodding at her mind was now out in the open. "Is that why you were ignoring me after the Halloween party?" She nodded her head, eyes on the blanket and cheeks turned crimson. "Oh... Well, I guess that makes sense. Huh..."

"I-I saw you had illustrated more drawings of me." _The contents of which I'd rather not say aloud._

"Did you see the nude drawings and the one with the ring too...?" She nodded her head, cheeks turning even redder. "Well, this moment of seriousness just got sidetracked..."

"I-I did not mean to ignore you, it's just..."

"It would have been awkward seeing me after knowing what I think of you.""The entire sketchbook was of me..." she groaned. "A-and I realized that if you had gone to the work of meticulously recreating my appearance so many times that you might... You may harbor feelings for me that were beyond platonic. I-I understand you've admitted to being attracted to me, but those illustrations went far beyond the realm of mere attraction and-"

"Yes." He ended her quickening chatter with a single word. "I like you a lot, Naoto."

"O-Oh."

"And those feelings haven't changed." He lifted his hand up again and his smile returned with a new vigor. "In fact, after all of this? They might have doubled. I like a girl who can call me out for being stupid. Long as she can admit when she's made a mistake too."

"You are completely ridiculous," she muttered bemusedly. Her face was no less red as she lifted her hand up. "I failed to save Nanako. I failed to realize Namatame was at fault for all of this. I promise, I will not fail again..."

"Failure is a part of living. We all fail. What matters most is getting back up again."

She peered at his hand for what felt like forever. "You have to promise me you won't put yourself at risk like that again..."

"This coming from the girl that literally used herself as bait for a murderer?" he chuckled.

"Narukami."
"Fine, fine. I promise. No more unnecessary risks."

Her hand fell onto his, and he stroked it with warm fingertips. "And Naoto...?" He lifted her hand up and her eyes widened as his lips kissed her knuckles. "When this case is over, we have a lot to talk about." His silver eyes gazed into her navy pools and he sealed his promise with another kiss. Her skin felt like electricity was dancing on it as he stood up from her bed. "No more blaming yourself. Okay?"

"O-okay. R-right."

"Good. If you ever feel like blaming yourself, come find me. We'll set each other straight." He winked at her, earning a blushing glare as he turned his body to the door. "It's kind of funny, you know. You finding my sketchbook."

"Funny isn't the word I would use for the situation..."

"Got to look at life with an outsider's perspective, gorgeous."

Damn him... Every time my blushing stops, he just ignites it again!

And judging by the smirk on his face, he knew it.

"I'm going to go cook breakfast for everyone. You take your time. Get some rest. I'll see you later, Naoto... And thanks."

"For what, Narukami?"

"Being you. You're smart, brave, kind, and I just... I wouldn't be here, if it weren't for you. I wouldn't be the man I am now, if you hadn't been in my life. No matter what happens, you mean a lot to me. I hope we'll always be friends," he answered. She could see his own cheeks turn pink. The infamous Yu Narukami, blushing because of her? It almost made all of his antics worth it. He winked at her once more, enjoying the sight of her own flushing cheeks, before walking towards the door.

Without another word, he opened it and closed the door behind him. Naoto stared at the wooden frame for a moment, before a smile finally pulled at the corners of her lips.

I suppose it could be seen as rather comical in a way...

Her eyes fell to her hand, staring at the knuckles he had kissed. There was a promise in them, a silent vow that he would uphold.

"Narukami..." She closed her eyes and slid down the headboard, laying her head on her pillow as she stared at the ceiling. I'm scared of him... Scared of where he could lead me, but at the same time... I've never met a man like him. I... I agree. I hope he and I continue to be friends beyond this case...

---

Yosuke Hanamura couldn't sleep that night. He knew he should, but he couldn't the strength to, if that made sense. His mind was alight with the details of the night and the recent revelations he had regarding his so-called best friend. He leaned against the wall and sighed, not noticing the shuffling sound beside him. He sat on the ground and hung his head low, but try as he might, his mind felt overwhelmed at the new world he lived in.

This world was just the same as it had always been, yet now everything seemed to have changed. The friend he trusted in was a liar, who apparently had been manipulating all this time. Yu admitted to being a bad guy, but what did that make Yosuke? What did the real Yu mean for Yosuke?
The boy looked at his knuckles and stared at the marks the fight had left. They were scarlet, with hints of his blood leaking from the cuts. Punching wasn't like how it was in the movies, he learned. Punching in the real world hurt like hell and left some nasty cuts.

"You okay?" Yosuke turned his head and stared at the closest person to him, Chie Satonaka, staring at him from under her blanket.

"S-sorry. Did I wake you?"

"Yeah. You were brooding so loudly that I just couldn't sleep," she joked. He scoffed at the joke, before her hazel eyes glanced at his hands. "What happened...?"

"Yu and I... It's a long story," he sighed.

"I got time," she replied. "Besides, I won't be able to sleep with you being all pissy about yourself either."

Her attempt at humor fell on deaf ears. Chie saw the depressed frown on Yosuke's face and she didn't know how to react to it. It was rare to see anything more than a simple clown in him, she often forgotten about the man this case had made of him. She remembered seeing anger in his eyes when they finally found the identity of the killer. Heartbreak whenever Saki's name was uttered. Worry when she had nearly been killed.

"What would you do if your best friend wasn't who you thought they were?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, what if you found out the person you thought you could always trust was... not how you thought they were. What if you just woke up and found out everything was just a dream...?"

"I'd figure out where I belong," Chie rose up from her makeshift bed and walked closer to Yosuke's side. The young man averted his eyes, a slight flush forming on his cheeks as he tried not to look at the pajama-clad brunette. She carried her blanket with her as she sat by his side and threw her blanket over the both of them. "And I'd just do my best, I guess."

"When I saw my Shadow, I realized there were some stuff I just hadn't accepted about my world. Then I saw Yukiko's, and I realized how little I knew." She brought her knees to her chest and rested her arms on them. "I always thought Yukiko and I were best friends, and I thought things were fine just as they were, but they weren't. Yukiko's Shadow was so angry, and I was to blame for that. I should have been a better friend."

"Hey, none of that is your fault," Yosuke countered. "You can't blame yourself for that! Yukiko was bottling all that stuff in, you couldn't have known!"

"Still..." She shook her head and looked at Yosuke again. "That's not the point. The point is, after I saw the real Yukiko I... I knew things were different. I had to be different. I needed to be different. So I've been training even harder than usual."

"So... What? You're saying I should train?"

"I'm saying, just because your world is different doesn't mean it's worst, Yosuke." She placed a hand on her shoulder and gave a natural, if small smile.

"So... What should I do?"
"Do what you do best. Be yourself."

"Heh. Wow, Chie. When did you get all spiritual?"

"Shut up, ya big dork," she muttered playfully, gently poking at him with her other hand.

Yosuke chuckled a bit, before growing quiet one more. "And my friend? What do I do about him?"

"I guess..." She hesitated. She didn't know how to give an answer to the question. Chie's hand squeezed Yosuke's shoulder as she thought. He lifted a hand and placed it atop of hers, nodding his head in understanding. The two smiled at one another, before she uttered her answer. "Do what Yukiko and I did, I guess. Wait and see if you're still friends when it's all over."

"I don't even know if I want to be friends when all of this is over..." Yosuke mumbled. His hands tightened into fists and he let out another sigh. "Damn it."

"It's going to be okay, Yosuke..."

Her hand fell from his shoulder and onto his shaking fist. The two looked at another and shared a silent clarity. Neither said anything after that as they closed their eyes and shared the blanket. The rest of the world turned, but whether or not it left them behind, the two had one another at least.

For now, that was all they needed.

END
Chie and the others had awoken to the sound of washed dishes and the alluring scent of bacon and eggs. She opened her eyes and, to her shock, found Yu had prepared everyone a large feast for breakfast. Chie could hardly believe the size of the meal he had prepared, but he brushed the sheer scope of the feast aside like it was some simple chore. He handed everyone a plate of food, before serving himself.

With no table large enough for them, the Investigation Team was simply eating where they sat. Yukiko and Naoto sat on separate chairs, plates on their lap, Chie, Yosuke, Teddie ate on the floor, while Kanji and Rise ate on the sofa together. Yu stood by the oven, placing his plate on the counter as he smiled.

"Wow... Sensei, this looks amazing!"

"Hopefully it tastes amazing too," he replied. "Please, eat. Tell me what you think."

The silverette motioned for everyone to dig in, and Teddie happily did so. He shoved a spoonful of scrambled eggs into his mouth, before letting out a loud moan. "Mmmm... It's bear-tastic!"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Where did you even get this much food? My refrigerator is hardly this stocked," Naoto noted, playing with her food.

"Went shopping," replied Yu. "Junes is open 24/7."

"Dude, you went shopping in the middle of the night? And how long did it take to cook all this?!" Kanji asked.

"Longer than I'd hope, less than I feared," he shrugged, before bringing a spoonful of his food to his mouth. Rise, Kanji, and Yosuke soon joined Teddie in enjoying the meal, but Naoto, Chie, and Yukiko hesitated.

"Is there a special occasion for the meal?" Yukiko inquired. It was obvious the girl could see there was something under the surface of the act, though she tried to control her suspicion. She looked at Yu with a scrutinizing brow, and the young man grimaced.

"Smart... There is." Yu dropped his spoon and crossed his arms. "I owe all of you an apology. I nearly got you all killed. My stupidity, short-temper, and to be frank, arrogance, led to all of you nearly dying. I was stupid, I can see that now." Yu's eyes glanced towards Yosuke, who stared at the silver-haired man with a stern, if curious frown. "I'm sorry. I fucked up, and I fucked up bad. That's why I'm stepping down as your leader."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"Dude, are you serious?!"

"I am." Yu held up his hand, stopping the torrent of questions the others were throwing at him. He
glanced at Naoto, who was visibly shocked by the announcement. She hadn't uttered a word though. She nodded at him, silently asking him to continue, and he obeyed. "I'm always here if this team needs a plan, and I'm certainly not quitting this team, but I just don't think I'm fit to be your leader."

"So... Who is?" Yukiko questioned, hesitantly.

"We are. Primus inter pares."

"Uh... What?" Kanji scratched at his head, looking at Rise for answers. The idol shrugged her shoulders, before Naoto explained.

"Primus inter pares. Latin. It means, 'First among equals.' He means that we do not need a leader." The detective placed a finger to her chin in quiet contemplation, before looking at Yu. "Narukami, are you sure?"

"I am. Yosuke led us out of danger last time. Yukiko practically saved your life. Hell, Naoto, I know you're smarter than I am," Yu confessed. "We all have traits and abilities that help us, and I think it's only right that we all work together to decide our next move. We vote on what to do, we discuss and debate, and we go over plans together."

"You feel strongly about this. Why?" Her face was unreadable as she stared at the silver-haired leader.

"It's obvious, isn't it? I fucked up, and I don't want my ego to ever put any of you in danger like that again."

Naoto stared at the older boy with inquisitive eyes, before a small smile formed on her lips and she nodded her head. "Very well. I am in support of this decision."

"Me too," Rise agreed. "It's... big of you to do this, Senpai," the idol commented. There was a hint of pride in her voice as she and the young man smiled at one another.

"You're still my Senpai, but yeah... I think I get it," Kanji added. He nodded his head, and Chie could see Rise placing her hand on the blond boy's. The brunette stared in confusion as Kanji smiled at Rise, squeezing her hand with his own.

"Yeah... Sounds good, man," Yosuke muttered. While his tone was understanding, his eyes held an unwavering suspicion. Yu just bowed his head, staring dejectedly at the ground.

"Thank you, Yosuke. Thank you, everyone." His eyes fell to Yukiko and Chie, and neither girl seemed able to look him in the eye. "I know I've done terrible things. I understand that, and I am sorry. I know I'm asking a lot, but-"

Chie interrupted him, surprising the others. "It's okay, Yu." Yukiko's surprised eyes were on her best friend, but Chie continued undaunted. "It's okay. I just want to help however I can."

"Chie, are you sure? You're still hurt and-"

"I'm fine, Yukiko."

Even Yu seemed hesitant with the girl's agreement. "If you're still hurt, I understand if-"

"I said, I'm fine!" Chie huffed as she glared into the silverette's eyes. There was a fire in them as she dared him to stop her. He seemed taken back by the firmness in her voice as she repeated
herself. "I'm fine. We can do your whole 'equal among firsts' thing or whatever, but I want to help out. I want to help save Nanako."

"Alright," he agreed. "If you're all in agreement..." He hesitated, giving the others a chance to shoot down the idea. When no one objected, he nodded his head. "We'll leave in a few hours. Get some rest," the young man insisted, before returning to his meal.

Chie sighed and returned to eating her breakfast. The brunette could feel Yukiko's eyes on her, but her friend said nothing. She quietly ate her own food as Chie did the same with her own. Despite the delicious food practically melting in her mouth, there was a bitterness on her tongue that wouldn't go away.

Well, there's obviously something wrong going on there. Should I try talking to her? I'll try to get her to open up later, but I doubt she'll be receptive now... Yu sighed as he left Chie and Yukiko to eat and walked over to Rise and Kanji. The two were quietly eating together and, in a moment of levity he greatly appreciated, Rise was feeding Kanji a spoonful of eggs.

"How risque, Rise. Are you feeding Kanji? What's next? Holding hands?" he joked, embarrassing the two of them. The two blushed and quickly scooted apart from one another as he stood in front of them. "I hadn't realized things had gotten so serious between you two." He chuckled once more as the two's cheeks flared a brilliant red, before his expression turned slightly more serious. "I just wanted to apologize to you both personally, and thank you, Kanji."

"Huh? Thank me? For what?" the young man wondered, tilting his head.

"For nearly kicking my ass. Thanks. And Rise, I never should have treated you that way. You both deserved better."

Both seemed surprised by the heartfelt apology, but Rise was the first to speak. "You're right. We do deserve better." She nodded her head as she stood up, a slight frown on her face. "Will you be better?"

"I'm going to do my damnedest to try.."

Rise crossed her arms and glared at him with sharp, digging eyes. She peered into his own eyes as she picked him apart. Kanji glanced between the two in silent confusion as he wondered just what Rise was going to say, before the young girl smiled and embraced the older boy. "Then, apology accepted!" Her arms wrapped around Yu's neck as she lifted herself up towards his head.

Yu was shocked by the hug, before smiling and returning the gesture. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his cheek against hers as the two embraced. Kanji watched with a tinge of envy, but said nothing as he stood up. The two soon parted and Yu and the blond delinquent looked to one another.

"Kanji, I-"

"S'okay, man. I get it. You were pissed. Lots of guys do dumb shit when they're angry," he reasoned. "We're cool."

"Good... Thanks, Kanji." Yu lifted up his arms, but Kanji quickly stepped back, nearly falling onto the couch.

"I'm good! N-no hugs. I'm good..."
"Awww! Come on, Kanji! Aren't you two 'bros'? No man hug or anything?" teased Rise, gently elbowing her friend. Yu chuckled at the prodding, and at Kanji's scarlet cheeks.

"H-hey! Men got their own way of sharing affection!" As proof of this, Kanji punched his senpai's shoulder in a gesture of masculine intimacy. The blow caused Yu to cringed and he stepped back, holding his shoulder as he nearly cried out in pain. "S-shit, did that really hurt? I barely hit you! Are you okay?!"

"Y-yeah! I'm fine. You just hit one of the bruises Yosuke gave me..." he grumbled, rubbing the aching shoulder. Wait... Shit.

"Huh? Why did Yosuke give you a bruise?" wondered Rise.

Yu winced again, but this was a very different type of pain. He began to slowly explain to the two what had transpired last night, from his own drunken escapade to Yosuke and his confrontation. The two listened with wide, disbelieving eyes. When he was done, he waited for the two to respond. He expected them to yell at him, but he wasn't expecting Rise to smack him across the head.

"Ow! The hell?!"

"Don't you ever try and do something like that again, Yu! What would Nanako have done without her big brother?! What would I have done...?" Her anger melted away under a flood of depression. She trembled at the thought of losing her friend, before moving forward to embrace him once more. "That was easily the stupidest thing you've ever done. Promise me you'll never do anything like it again?" Her voice was a twisted cocktail of anger and fear, and Yu felt a small pang of guilt in his heart.

"Promise us," Kanji added. His eyes were softer than Rise's, but that wasn't from a lack of anger. Yu could see the rage in the young man's eyes, it was just mitigated by compassion. He was certainly infuriated with the silverette, but he didn't throw a punch or raise his voice. It was an anger born of worry and friendship. He spoke plainly as his hand gently rested on Yu's shoulder.

"You got to swear on your honor as a man that you won't pull any stupid shit like that again."

Yu glanced down at Rise, who was still hugging him, then at Kanji. He felt the corners of his lips being pulled into a gentle smile as he realized how much the two cared for him. They were his friends... He mentally kicked himself for scaring them like that, and made a promise to both them and himself. "I promise, no more stupid stunts for at least a week."

The difference between their first venture into the temple-like dungeon and their second was as obvious as night and day. The single factor that changed it was Yu Narukami. In contrast to his earlier, militaristic dictatorship over the group, Yu led the others with a far gentler hand.

"Good work, Teddie!" he complimented, nodding in approval of the bear's fighting skills. The bear smiled back, before fighting with even more vigor and ferocity. Yu turned his head and saw Yukiko and Yosuke vanquishing another Shadow with ease. Yu wordlessly summoned a Persona and used it to heal the two, before moving on. "Rise, how close are we?"

"Close. They're just a floor above us," replied the copper-haired girl.

He nodded his head, before walking towards Naoto. The young woman was reloading her revolver as he healed her of any injuries. She looked at him and nodded in thanks as he spoke. "How you holding up, gorgeous?"
"I'm alright. Your defensive orders-"

"Suggestions," he corrected, with a toothy smirk.

"Your defensive suggestions-" she repeated with a roll of her eyes, but a smile on her lips. "-have been excellent in holding back the assault of Shadows."

"Thank you. It was a team effort," he replied. "Look at me. So humble. Truly, you are blessed to know me," he laughed, posing dramatically with a hand on his head, as though he were fainting.

"Hm." Naoto's lips still smiled at her friend's antics, no doubt used to his eccentricities at this point. Her lips curled downward as she quietly asked him, "How are you really?"

"Terrified," he answered without hesitation as he tossed the mask aside. His hand fell and his arms hung limply at his sides as he stared down their path. Kanji was eradicating a pair of Shadows, with Rise's cheering approval. "What if I mess up again? What if Nanako's already dead?" He let out a trembling sigh at the thought. "What if I'm not strong enough?"

"You are one of the strongest men I've ever known," Naoto comforted, stepping closer. She lifted a hand to his shoulder and gently turned him to face her rosy face. "We will save her, Narukami. I promise."

"I might be packing some impressive guns, but I don't think I'm that strong, Naoto," he bitterly joked.

"I'm not talking about physical strength. You have strength of character. You've changed so much. We both have. Together, we will save her and we will bring Namatame to justice." He gazed into her cobalt eyes and the sight of the sapphire eyes eased his conflicted heart.

"You're right. It's just hard not to be scared."

"Fear is natural. True courage, true strength comes despite the fear, not from a lack of it." Yu's lips curved into a subtle smile, and his fingers tingled as his skin turned warm. She returned the smile as their eyes gazed into one another.

"You are remarkable," he whispered, making the young sleuth blush brighter.

"W-what?"

"What?" Realization dawned at Yu and his eyes widened as he coughed into his hand. Damn her for making me lose my cool... "N-nothing. I'm going to... uh... Lead from the front."

"R-right... Good luck."

"Right. You too. Good luck, I mean. Um... Bye," he quickly muttered, scurrying away. He quietly cursed the Detective Prince for breaking his cool exterior, but a part of him was thankful for it. It felt kind of nice to feel shy around someone he loved. By the time he reached the front of the group, he was smiling earnestly.

"Senpai, check it out!" Kanji shouted, pointing ahead. The bridge was coming to a large staircase made of chiseled white stone and gold, ornate railings.

"That's it," Rise declared. "I'm sure of it. Namamame is at the top of those stairs."

"I can smell it too!" Teddie agreed. "My nose says him and Nanako are up there!"
"What are we waiting for? Let's go," Chie exclaimed, only to be stopped by Yu's hand on her shoulder.

"Hold on." He looked towards the others. "We should think about this. Are we ready to take on Namatame? If he's the one putting people in here, it stands to reason that he might have some abilities we haven't seen before. I just want us all to be in agreement, before we run up there."

"Well, I'm voting we get in there," Chie stated, pushing Yu's hand off of her.

"Me too," Yosuke agreed. "That bastard is right upstairs and we're all at full strength. Let's kick his ass and save Nanako!"

"For Nana-chan!" Teddie cheered.

"For going up." Yukiko didn't raise her voice, but she did speak firmly as she rose her hand.

"Hell yeah!" Kanji lifted his fist up with a toothy grin.

"Agreed," Rise nodded, with determination in her eyes.

Yu glanced at Naoto with obvious hesitation. She placed a comforting hand on his own and gave a solemn nod. Her warm touch comforted the silverette, finally giving him the strength to agree.

"Alright. Let's go." Naoto pulled away from Yu's side, and he frowned at the lack of warmth. Without another word, the group marched upwards, towards their fated battle with the murderer.

They found him at the top of the steps, in the center of a large, golden stadium. He was squeezing Nanako's arm with one hand, and her throat with the other. Yu felt his blood boil as soon as he saw him, and any hesitation he had was burned away. The bastard wore a delivery man outfit, as expected, and his eyes were wide, almost bulging out from his skull.

"Stop it! Stop screaming! I'm here to save you!"

"Namatame!" Yu roared, his voice echoing through the empty, golden sky. "Let go of her! Now!"

"Huh?" The former politician released Nanako's throat, letting the child gasp for air. "W-who are all of you?" He stared at the Investigation Team with confusion, before something seemed to dawn on him. "Wait... I... I recognize you!"

"Big Bro!"

Nanako reached out to her brother, only to be cruelly pulled into Namatame's arms. He held her body with both arms as he began to laugh. "Yes, yes, I recognize you! I saved you. You, and you, and you, and... Who are you?" he wondered, staring at the group's silverette, raising his brow at the young man.

"Let go of her!" Chie ordered.

"No. No, I can't!" he argued, shaking his head vigorously. "I'm going to save her! Like I saved all of you!"

"Save us?! Are you high or something?! You didn't save us!" Kanji growled.

"You nearly killed us!" Yukiko accused.

"Yes. Exactly," he chuckled, pulling Nanako closer. His pupils were mere specks in oceans of white as Yu stepped closer, teeth grinding at the sight of the man. "They called out to me. Begging
"Save this, save that! Did you kidnap people, yes or no!?” Yosuke questioned.

"Yes... Yes, I kidnapped them to save-"

"Shut the hell up!” Yu screamed. He was shaking from the rage brimming inside of him. "Save them, my ass! You're just an arrogant sack of shit who deserves to die!"

"Huh. Arrogant...? Maybe," laughed the deranged man. "But I will save her." He cackled again, raising his head to the empty sky. "Such a beautiful world... Here, I can save anyone! No one will die! I'll keep them here, safe, from the cruelty of the other world! Save from the evil of that diseased place! Do you hear me, Mayumi?!"

Were Yu, or any of the young heroes, in a calmer state, they would have seen the tears pooling in the eyes of the man. Namatame wiped them away as he held his hand out to sky and screamed to the heavens above. "I'm going to save her! I'm going to save everyone! I won't let anyone leave! I-I won't allow it! No more!” He glared at the group with golden eyes as the ground beneath them began to shake.

"B-Big Bro! I can't... I can't brea..." Nanako's body fell limp in his arms as he continued to laugh maniacally.

"What's happening?!” Naoto cried out, feeling the earth tremble. Shadows leaked through the ground and flew into the air, shoving and knocking the Investigation Team aside as they assembled around Namatame.

The Shadows slammed into Namatame like bullets, bending and cracking his body like it was made out of plastic. He cried out in agony as his skin burned and melted. The creatures continued to mix with his body, twisting and writhing his shape as tumor-like growths began to grow from his skin. He rose up, floating into the air as his voice gave out.

"The Shadows... He's merging with them!” Rise gasped.

"Damn it, we've come this far,” Yosuke growled. "We're not losing now!"

"You're damn right we're not.” Yu's fingers squeezed the hilt of his sword.

Namatame's body had transfigured into a horribly deformed entity. The creature had a bulbous head, with a strange ring tightly wrapped around it, to the point where it looked like it was clamping down tightly on the creature's brain. His skin was pure black, with stripes of crimson going along the putrid flesh. The creature's long, thin fingers twitched and writhed in the air like worms as disproportionately small, scarlet wings flapped on its back. The strangest part was the large shirt it wore, with a peace symbol and a cartoonish heart on it. Despite the message, it glared at the group with red and yellow eyes that darted everywhere in two separate directions.

Nanako's unconscious body laid in his large hand, his fingers tightly coiled around her like boa constrictors. He let out a laugh as he opened his arms to the group, laughing wildly.

"That's disgusting," Yu quietly commented. "Come on, let's kick its ass!” A radiant card descended from seemingly nowhere and the young man crushed it in his hand. "Izanagi, attack!” The card shattered, and his Persona shot forward with golden eyes. He held his spear to the sky and called down several bolts of lightning, all of which hit Namatame perfectly.

Naoto summoned her own Persona, and the others followed suit. The Personas flew forward and
attacked the red and black monster with their best attacks. A cloud of dust and smoke formed around the large entity, only for a pair of hands to slither out from it. The hands caught Kanji and Yukiko's Persona and slammed them into the ground, causing both of their wielders to cry out in pain.

"Damn it, he's stronger than he looks!" cursed Yu as Namatame flew out of the cloud of smoke. With shocking speed, the monster smashed Jiraiya aside, before grabbing Izanagi and squeezing him between his massive, spindly fingers. "Ahhh! C-change! Ishtar!" Izanagi glowed within a cerulean fire, before vanishing, replaced with a horned woman clad in white ribbons that barely concealed her more private areas. "Salvation!"

The woman glowed brighter, healing each of his teammates, before Yu commanded her to change again. "Odin!" The woman vanished, replaced by the purple skinned god-king. The Persona let out a loud growl as he freed himself from Namatame's grasp. "Alright! Magarudyne!" Odin swirled his spear in his hand, before firing a wild, green hurricane at Namatame. The blast was enough to push the giant back, giving the group some breathing room. "Everyone okay?"

"Y-yeah. Damn, dude..." Yosuke shook his head as Jiraiya stood back up. "Thank god for multiple Personas."

"Guys! He's about to counterattack!" Rise warned.

The group returned their focus to the rising figure of Namatame, who eyed Yu with his chameleon-like eyes. "You... You're different. Special... Such powerful weapons," he uttered to himself. "But do you know what the most powerful weapon of all is? Do you?!" he screamed, laughing as he held his hands out towards Narukami, before raising two fingers up on each hand, creating dual peace signs. "Manipulation!"

"What?" Yu watched as a scarlet light formed over his head, creating a large cog-like ring over him. It resembled the one fastened to Namatame's head, only much smaller and less complex. It shimmered like a ruby as Yu felt his body stiffen. "W-what the hell...?"

"Now... Help me save her! I beseech you! I command you! Let me save her!" Namatame cried out, and to the shock of his teammates, Yu pulled his sword out to aim at them.

"N-Narukami?! What are you doing?!" Naoto gasped.

"I... I can't... control my body!" The others stepped forward to stop him, but he swung his sword at them clumsily, forcing them back. "What's happening to me?!"

"Attack! Attack! ATTACK! Give me the power to save her!" Namatame screamed, as Yu held out his hand.

A glowing card appeared before it, and despite his best efforts, he crushed the card in his hand, releasing Izanagi on the group."Guys, look out!" Without warning, lightning fell from the sky at the group, only to be blocked by Kanji's Persona, Take-Mikazuchi.

The blond trembled under the attack, but stood his ground. "That bastard's controlling him!" he snarled.

"It's that ring thing over his head! It's letting Namatame control Yu!" Rise explained.

"Then we have to break it!" Naoto loaded her gun and opened fire at Yu. The silverette blocked the bullets with his sword, moving with amazing speed, before he launched another Persona forward at the group. Black Frost let out a maniacal laugh as it rained down hail and balls of fire on the team
of teenagers.

"Rise!" Kanji screamed, pushing the girl out of the way of a fiery torrent. The blast hit him instead, throwing him onto the ground as Yosuke summoned Jiraiya to blow the attacks away.

"Kanji!" the idol gasped, running to her fallen friend's side.

"No! Stop it!" Yu ordered, his eyes widening as he saw Naoto recoil from a chunk of ice nearly crushing her.

"See how easily people are controlled? Like puppets. The cruelty and evil of this world shall be crushed by my will! No one will hurt the innocent again!" screamed the black and red monster. "Attack! Attack! More, more!"

"Narukami!"

"Yu!"

A fan spun through the air and grazed Yu's cheek. He grunted in pain as it cut his cheek, drawing blood. He was distracted by the blow, leaving him open for Naoto to charge towards him. She ran forward and spun around, kicking his sword out of his hand and onto the ground. Yu felt his body lunge forward and he and Naoto began to grapple with one another.

"Naoto... I-I can't control myself," he growled through clenched teeth. "Do what you have to! I won't hurt you! I can't!" Despite what he said, he could feel his fingers tighten around her wrists.

"No!" He struggled for control, and his fingers began to slowly weaken their grip.

"Narukami." His eyes glanced at her cobalt pools and she smiled despite their situation. "It's okay. I trust you. You can fight this!" Yu opened his mouth to say something, only to feel his body lift up his leg and kick Naoto back. She fell to the ground as Izanagi appeared behind him, spear in hand. "Don't let him control you, Narukami!" she demanded, aiming her own weapon at her friend. "You're stronger than him!"

"Silence! Attack! Attack! I must save her! I need to save her!"

Yu quivered where he stood, trying to breathe as his body fought against him. He stared down the barrel of Naoto's gun, hand stretched out to her. Izanagi was twitching behind him, fighting just as hard as his other half against the Namatame's control. "N-Naoto," he whimpered, trembling in place as his eyes widened.

"Fight him, Narukami!" Naoto lifted her arm up, and fired several times at the ring above his head. The shots ricocheted off of the scarlet metal, but her words still rang true within his mind.

He stared at Naoto, gazed into her radiant, navy-blue eyes. His mind focused as his arm twitched violently. I love her. I'm attacking the woman I love. I... I have to stop! I won't hurt her! Yu's eyes burned with an inferno of rage and righteous fury. He screamed and tore at the shackles his body was encased in, until he was able to slowly lift a shaking arm towards the ring above his head.

"I..." His hand caught the floating ring. It seared his flesh, smoke rising from the burnt flesh, yet he didn't stop, nor did he slow down. "I am no one's! God! Damn! Puppet!" With a bellow of rage and rebellion, Yu tore the ring from the sky and slammed it into the ground. He watched as it shattered against the hard, stone floor, breaking apart into dozens of little pieces. "Fuck you, and fuck your damn hero complex, asshole! Izanagi! ATTACK!"

Yu turned his head body towards Namatame, commanding Izanagi to unleash another bolt of
lightning down on the creature. It hit the monster, but the former politician showed no pain.

"Yu did it! He's free!" Rise beamed.

"Way to go, man!" Kanji congratulated, as the others ran to his and Naoto's side.

"Thanks," sighed the silverette as he helped Naoto up. "Glad to know you got my back, Navy Sweet," he teased, winking at her. She actually brushed the compliment off with a proud smile, and only slightly rosy cheeks.

"Arrogant louse..."

"Pesky children. You will obey me! I order you to help me save her!"

Familiar red lights appeared over four members of the Investigation Team, and Yu's eyes widened as he reached out towards the scarlet over Naoto's head. She kicked him in the chest in response, throwing him back as Chie, Teddie, and Kanji all suddenly tried to attack their friends. Yosuke, Rise, and Yukiko cried out in shock, barely dodging their friends' attacks as Yu picked himself up.

"Ah, hell," he growled, as his team was split in half. Naoto struggled to stop her body as she aimed at her revolver at him once more. Yu ran at her and smacked her gun out of her hand, before reaching for his sword. He grasped empty air as he saw the weapon laying on the ground nearby. Oh. Right. She kicked it out of my hands... "Ah!" Naoto's fist slammed into her friend's cheek, knocking him back.

"N-Narukami! I'm sorry, I-"

"I know, can't control your body!" He dodged another punch, taking a quick moment to admire her martial arts skills, before he caught her wrist and kicked at her foot. He was able to trip her, and she fell to the ground, stunned.

"Ahh!" Yu turned his head, and saw Rise in danger. She was barely able to avoid Take-Mikazuchi's fist. Kanji struggled to control himself as his Persona continued to attack the group's navigator.

"Narukami, look out!"

"Huh? Gah!" Yu felt the sleuth's fist against his face again, this time uppercutting him and leaving him dazed for a moment. He stepped back and shook his head, before blocking another punch. Naoto was up again, and staring at him with concerned, pleading eyes.

"I'm sorry!"

"It's okay! Every couple fights," he joked, earning a rosy blush to appear on her cheeks. He dodged another attack, before shoving her to the ground with his shoulder. "Izanagi, break her ring, I'm going after Rise!" he commanded. He shattered the card as quickly as he could, before running to the terrified idol. Izanagi appeared behind him and reached for the ring above Naoto's head, only to be knocked back by Sukuna-Hikona.

The two Personas silently glared at one another as Yu raced off to help his friend.

Kanji couldn't control his body as he swung a fist at Rise. She barely dodged the attack as she fell on the ground. She stared at him with wide, horrified eyes as he held his shield over his head.
"Stop it! Stop it, damn it!" Kanji heard Yu shout. The blond didn't know how, but he was able to steer his swing, angle it away from her. He couldn't stop the attack, but at least he was able to change the target. Unfortunately, as he turned around to swing his shield, he realized that target was Yu-senpai. The shield slammed into his head, and momentum threw him forward and landed him beside Rise. "S-sorry!"

"Ugh... Of course he'd aim at me," groaned the silverette, rubbing his bruised face. "Wait, that's it!" He lifted himself up, and quickly helped Rise do the same. Kanji trembled against Namatame's control as he watched the two, silently hoping Yu had a solution for their problem. "Rise, you're the only one who can free Kanji!"

"Huh? How?" Yu leaned close to the girl and whispered something to her. Kanji watched with confusion, before grunting as his legs began to force him forward. "W-what?!” the idol stuttered, looking at Yu-senpai like he was nuts.

"Trust me. You've got this. I'm going to go help the others!"

Kanji thought as he ran forward.

Senpai really is nuts! How the hell is Rise supposed to stop me?! Kanji thought as he ran forward. Yu was smiling as he abandoned her! What the hell was wrong with him?! Kanji squeezed his eyes shut, unable to look as his Persona swung his bolt shaped sword down on his best friend. The weapon never made contact with the girl though. Instead, the weapon was blocked by a pair of hands struggling to hold back the attack.

"Huh?"

"Hold it, Himiko! You can do it!" Rise grunted through clenched teeth. The young woman was standing below her Persona, straining to hold back the attack. "Kanji! Listen to me!"

"R-Rise? H-how are you-?"

"You're my best friend! Do you hear me, you idiot?! You called me your... your bro! You're attacking me! Don't you get that?!"

"Course I do!" Kanji grumbled, his Persona grappling with hers. Despite the size difference, Himiko was able to stand her ground as the much larger entity crushed her hands. Rise shared her other half's pain, but it didn't stop her.

"Why?!"

"I can't control it, Rise! I-"

"Yes, you can!" Rise assurred. "You're stronger than this bastard! You're tougher than him!" Rise fell to her knee as her Person's grip began to slip. "You beat up a biker gang all on your own! You've been fighting monsters single-handedly for months! You've saved my life, and even got your heart broken along the way! And all you've done is come out stronger for it!"

Her words were making their mark, but Namatame's hold on him was still strong. Come on, man! Rise's counting on you! You gonna let her down?! Kanji screamed at himself to push on, to dig deep, and break free from the bastard's hold. His mind roared, his spirit screamed, and his body slowly began to fall in love. He rose his shaking hands above his head as Take-Mikazuchi began to weaken.

"Kanji, I... I..." Rise fell to the ground as the weight was lifted from Himiko's hands. She struggled
to catch her breath as she watched Kanji tear the ring from the air above him. His fingers squeezed
the ring, uncaring that it burned at his flesh, and with a bellow of rebellion, he tore it in half above
his head.

He dropped the broken pieces to the ground as he ran to Rise, holding her in his arms as he called
out to her. "R-Rise! Are you okay?! Come on, say something!"

"You... you did it," she congratulated. "Knew you could..."

"Heh... Thanks, Rise."

Yu ran into a hailstorm, racing to Yukiko's side as the young woman struggled to withstand the
blizzard. Chunks of ice shattered by her feet as Konohana Sakuya protected the two of them with a
shield of flames. Yu slid to her side and smiled. "Hey? You keeping your cool?" Judging by
Yukiko unamused frown, she didn't appreciate his humor. "Right, sorry. How can I help?"

"I can't get close to Teddie or the wheel over his head! Can you distract him?"

"I'm me. I can do anything," he smirked. His arrogant smile shifted slightly, expressing more
concern. "Yukiko, before I go, I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry for lying to you, and for endangering Chie like I did. I know it's hard to forgive me, and
I'm not asking you to, but I want you to know I really am sorry!" Yu ducked his head as more ice
crashed by the two. "I hope that one day-"

"Narukami!"

"Yeah?"

"We can talk about this later! Go!"

"Right! Sorry." Yu bid the girl farewell, before running out from the cover Konohana Sakuya
offered. "Come on, try and hit me!"

"Sensei?! Look out!" warned the bear as his Persona launched a torrent of ice shards at the
silverette. The young man was able to dodge them relatively easily, moving out of the way of
several attacks, before he tripped. The ground had become cold and icy during the fight, leading
him to slide on the ground.

"Shit!" He looked up from the frozen ground, watching Kintoki-Douji aiming his missile at him.
The Persona pulled back, ready to toss the missile down, only for Teddie to be blasted by a ball of
fire.

The ring above him was hit by a fireball, burning it and throwing it off of Teddie's head. It
shattered on the ground, the pieces burning as the colorful bear danced in joy. "I'm free!
Beartastic!" he cheered, hoping up and down in mirth.

"I'm so happy for you. Hallelujah," sighed Yu. He noticed the shadow over his body, and he
looked up at the source of it. Yukiko stood over him, hand reaching out towards him.

"Need some help?"

"Thanks." He lifted himself back up with her help, before dusting some shavings of ice off his
"I don't know if I've forgiven you." She was honest, and Yu found himself thankful of the fact, at least. "I'm still mad at you. For a lot of things. I don't even know if I'm over you yet..."

"I understand, but I remember yesterday. I just want you to know that I am trying to change, and that I am sorry for the shit that went down. I hope you and I can still be friends." He let out a heavy sigh, before closing his eyes. "And I know that's little comfort. I-"

"It's a start," she reasoned. "I don't know how close you and I are, Narukami, but... thank you for talking to me. And for helping me."

"That's what I'm here for. Being bait," he joked, before several gunshots caught his attention. Yu and Yukiko watched as Naoto fought Izanagi, her Persona knocking the larger entity to the ground as she fired upon him. "Go help Yosuke. I'll help Naoto."

"Right. Be careful!" urged Yukiko as Yu ran to the fight.

"Always am!" Yu ran towards the sapphire-haired detective, only to jump back as Izanagi fell to the ground, grappling with Sukuna-Hikona. "How are you having a hard time with them?! You're three times their size!" The silent Persona glared at his other half with obvious indignation and annoyance, before staring back at Sukuna-Hikona. Yu and Izanagi shared a silent conversation, and the human's eyes widened as he understood why Izanagi was having a hard time in the fight. "Oh. Well, you two would certainly make a cute couple."

"Narukami! Behind you!" Naoto warned. Yu let out a grunt of pain as Naoto's arms wrapped around his neck from behind. He grabbed her hands, barely keeping them off of him as the two fought.

"Naoto, you need to fight it! Don't let this bastard control you!" Yu slowly began to pry her hands away from him, before her foot kicked him and pushed him onto the ground.

"I'm trying!"

"Try harder!" Yu rolled out of the way of Naoto's stomping foot, before he stood up. He silently thanked himself for knocking her gun out of her hand, before he took a fighting stance. He blocked a punch from the shorter girl, before catching her other hand. The two grapple in place, eyes gazing into one another. "You can beat this. You're the Detective Prince! My best friend!"

Naoto's fingers twitched as he held onto her wrists. Her cobalt eyes squeezed shut as she trembled in front of him. "Come on... My strength is yours. I'm here for you," he whispered. He pulled her close, until there was no distance between their bodies. He could imagine her cheeks turning scarlet as he lifted their hands up together. He knew Namatame was trying to get her to kick him again or break free, but the dark-haired woman was strong to fight him. Yu smiled in pride as he began to lift her trembling hands up.

Their hands traveled together, reaching for the ring above their heads. "Naoto, I..." He could feel the words on the tip of his tongue, trying to escape, trying to admit his feelings to her. They were so close. He could smell her vanilla scented shampoo. His every breath was infested with her sweet aroma, as his hands slowly released hers. He silenced his yearning heart, and together, they wrapped their fingers around the crimson wheel. He could see the pain in her shut eyes as the metal burned at their fingers, but neither relented. "Pull!"

The two pulled at the metal, and with their combined strength, they tore the ring in half. They
threw the broken pieces aside and Yu caught Naoto as she sighed in relief. "See? Easy?" he panted.

Naoto rested her head on his shoulder, rolling his eyes with a smile... before realizing their positions. She quickly pushed against him, standing on her own on trembling legs. "I'm sorry, Narukami. I hope I didn't hurt you."

"I'm alright. Not the first time you punched me," he teased.

"B-be that as it may..."

Yu chuckled at the girl's embarrassment, before a cry of pain caught their attention. They turned their heads to Namatame and his sole servant, Chie. The young girl and the monstrous entity were fighting against the rest of their team. "Izanagi, let's go!" Yu commanded, turning his head to his Persona. Naoto followed suit, and both paused as they stared at their other halves.

Izanagi laid under Sukuna-Hikona, who sat on the larger Persona's body, hands placed on his chest. The two were staring at one another, some sort of intent weighing in the air. They quickly pulled away from one another and flew in different directions. They each picked up Naoto and Yu's fallen weapons and returned the items to their other halves, ignoring the elephant in the room among them.

"Not a word," Naoto muttered, tipping her hat to hide her rosy cheeks.

Chie felt as though her body was a puppet, with strings pulling at her limbs. She felt her body fly through the air, swung to and fro as she dodged Yosuke's attacks, before kicking him in his chest. He fell back, clutching hit gut as Tomoe appeared above them. "Yosuke, run!" she pleaded, as Tomoe spun her spear in her hands. The blade fell down towards the boy, but it was blocked by his own Persona, Jiraiya. "I can't stop! You need to run!" she begged.

"No way! I'm going to save you!" Yosuke swore, but Namatame's looming, abhorrent form flew towards them. He smacked Jiraiya, knocking the the Persona aside as Yosuke cried out in pain. "Gah!"

"Yosuke!"

The others ran to his side as Namatame floated behind Chie, his eyes darting at the seven. "No, no, no. D-don't get in my way!"

"Don't worry, Chie-senpai! We got your back! Ziodyne!"

Kanji roared, smashing his card and summoning his Persona to his side. Take-Mikazuchi summoned a storm over Namatame and bolts of electricity shot down towards him and Chie. Unfortunately, Namatame moved his hands and defended his minion.

"Damn it! Chie!" Yosuke ran towards the girl, only to be stopped by Yu.

"Hold on, Yosuke! We need a plan!"

"But...!"

"He's right, Yosuke," Yukiko agreed. "We can't just rush in. He was controlling four different people earlier, but now he can just focus on controlling one. It'll be harder to get to Chie's ring now!"
"Look out! He's attacking!" warned Naoto, pointing to Namatame.

The kidnapper laughed at the group, before aiming his free hand at them. A blast of energy fired from it, and the group struggled to stand their ground as the attack pushed them back. "Unerring Justice!"

*They're getting hurt... because of me...* Chie trembled as her vision began to blur. *They all broke free, except me... Is it because I'm just unlucky? No. It's because I'm weak,* she realized. She moved her eyes, straining to see Nanako. All she could see were the young girl's legs, dangling from the ebony grip of the monster. *Nanako could end up dying because of me.*

She struggled against her strings, but she couldn't do it. Her body was imprisoned. She could only watch as her foot dug into Yu's ribs, or her elbow bashed against Yukiko's shoulder. It was like some sort of nightmare as her body violently flailed and attacked her friends. Tears flowed freely down her face. It didn't matter to Namatame. He didn't need her eyes.

Yosuke let out a furious snarl, before launching a torrent of wind at Namatame. The politician just laughed, moving Chie into the way of the attack. Yosuke's eyes widened and he barely had enough time to steer the attack away. Chie was unharmed, but Namatame crushed Jiraiya under his hand while the brunette was distracted.

"Yosuke!" Rise cried out.

"I-I'm fine!"

*Why can't I beat this?! Why can't I be stronger?!* she asked herself. She bit at her lip, trying to use the pain to break her binds, but all she ended up doing was tasting her own blood. *Think! Think, damn it! I need to help them!* She watched as Naoto and Yu tried to attack her ring, only to be knocked back by Namatame's hands. *They're holding back for my sake... which means...* 

"Guys!" she screamed. "You can't hold back anymore! You need to go all in!" she demanded.

"What?!" Yosuke gasped. "Is she nuts?! Are you nuts, Chie?! That'll hurt you too!"

"Yosuke... She knows," realized Yu. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Chie, hand tightening around the hilt of his sword.

"I know what will happen, Yosuke. I'll be fine!"

"Like hell you will be! What if-?"

"Damn it, just shut up, you idiot!" Chie commanded. She couldn't even wipe away the tears in her eyes as her body continued to fight for their enemy. "This freak keeps talking about saving Nanako, so there's no way he'd risk letting her get hurt! I'm his only trump card! You guys need to go all out to beat him! We're heroes of justice, aren't we?!!" Her nails dug into the palms of her hands as she raised up her fists. "Well, this is what heroes do! They make the tough calls! Hit us with everything you got!"

Chie would be lying if she said she wasn't scared. She was terrified. This could be the end of her life, and she had a million things in her mind she'd never get to do or see. She'd never hear Yukiko's dumb laugh. She'd never have lunch with her friends as they talked about exams and mysteries. Yosuke couldn't complain to her anymore about money or movies or... anything.

She felt it hard to breathe, even as Yosuke fought with the others.
"Don't you fucking dare, Yu! She's our teammate!"

"You don't think I know that?! Do you think I want to see her hurt, Yosuke?!” barked Yu. "You're right, she is our friend, but if we just keep letting Namatame control her, we're betraying her!"

"Narukami has a point, Yosuke-senpai! We can't-"

"Damn it, shut up, Naoto! We can't just-"

"Yosuke." Chie could hear Yukiko's voice as Tomoe grappled with Take-Mikazuchi. "We have to hit them with everything we've got." Her voice was firm, but Chie could still hear the tremble in it.

"Yukiko..." Yosuke closed his eyes and his fists quivered as he quietly muttered something. Yu nodded his head and began to advise everyone of their position.

"Hit him from different angles. Namatame's fast, but if we surround him, we should be able to overwhelm him! Give it all you got, team!"

The others moved in tandem and the young martial artist closed her eyes as Namatame used her body as a shield. This is the only way I can help... I'm sorry I couldn't be stronger, everyone.

They attacked, and Chie's world was enveloped in a bright, white light as Namatame screamed.

END
Chie and Yu have their heart to heart.

Chie lifted her head at the new transfer student. Mr. Morooka had been as eloquent as ever introducing him, but now the man was speaking for himself to the class. He certainly looked like he wasn't the average student. Rather than the black or hazel hair color that most kids in Inaba had, his hair was a stark silver.

_Wonder if he dyes it?_ she absentmindedly wondered.

Other than that, he was a pretty normal-looking guy. Tall, broad shoulders, shirt untucked, but a kind, friendly smile on his face.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Yu Narukami. I... uh... I hope we get along very well!" The silver-haired boy greeted, before bowing his head. Several students, including Chie, chuckled at his embarrassed entrance. It seemed like having everyone's eyes on him made the poor boy feel awkward and embarrassed.

_Can't say I blame him. I'd probably feel embarrassed with everyone looking at me too._

Mr. Morooka had began going on one of his many rants in regards to the youth of Japan. The transfer student cringed at the barrage of insults, stepping away from the older man as he went on and on. Chie couldn't help but take pity on the poor boy. She lifted her hand up, catching the teacher's attention. "Excuse me? Is it okay if the transfer student sits here?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Ya hear that?! Your seat's over there. So hurry up and siddown already!"

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir," the transfer student replied, quickly walking to the seat neighboring Chie.

As Morooka grumbled and spat venom at the class, Chie looked to the boy and leaned her head towards him. "He's the worst, huh? Rotten luck for you to get stuck in this class..."

"Is he always like this?" whispered the other boy.

"Yep," she sighed. "We're all just gonna have to tough it out for a year..."

"Yeah... Thanks for asking me over here, by the way. I really appreciate it."

Chie noticed the young man's eyes were a deep silver, like a katana from one of her action films. _Weird, never seen silver eyes before... _"No problem. I get how hard it can be to be the new kid in school," she muttered back, only for the two to freeze up as a voice yelled out to them.

"Hey! You two! Shut the hell up!"

"Sorry, Mr. Morooka!" Chie apologized, bowing her head.
"Sorry, sir," repeated Yu. The teacher grumbled under his breath, before returning to his rant. He went on and on as Chie and Yu glanced at one another. They exchanged small smiles as their teacher's rant fell on deaf ears.

*He seems nice,* thought Chie. *Wonder if he'll want to hang out with Yukiko and I?* She glanced at the raven-haired girl in front of her, who was propping her head up with her elbow. She didn't need to see her friend to know she was fighting to stay awake. *She looks really exhausted... I hope we can still hang out today.*

She felt a pang of frustration towards Yukiko's family. Lately, the young woman had been working at her family's inn, meaning they had little to no time together. It was almost impossible to even hang out over the weekend, or to study for exams together.

The tomboyish girl could feel a twisting in her gut at the idea of Yukiko abandoning Chie to help her family. She tried to brush the feeling away, but there was still a writhing in her stomach that ached and prodded at her mind. Her brow furrowed as she tried her best to ignore the irritating thought.

"Chie!" Yosuke ran forward, running to the girl as she laid on the ground. The ring above her head crumbled to dust as he stood over her fallen body. Namatame fell behind them, the Shadows melting off of his body, but Yosuke gave the kidnapper little thought. He held Chie's body in his arms. Her jacket was torn up, and her skin was covered in viscous scratches and burns. He held her in trembling hands as he tried to speak.

"No... No, please... Not her too..."

"She's okay, Yosuke. She's breathing," Yu comforted. "I-" He reached out towards the brunette's shoulder, only to have Yosuke shout at him.

"Don't! Just don't..." he pleaded. Chie's unconscious body laid in his arms as Yosuke began to sob. Yu nodded his head in understanding, before changing Personas quietly. A golden light enveloped Chie, healing her of her wounds. Without another word, Yu walked towards Namatame's fallen body.

While he walked towards the kidnapper, Naoto ran to Nanako's side. Chie had been right. Namatame had both of his ebony hands wrapped around Nanako. He had defended her from the attack, and as the hands melted and evaporated away, she laid on the ground, completely unharmed. Naoto approached the girl and checked her breathing, sighing in relief.

"She's alive. Just unconscious. We must- Narukami!"

Yu slid his sword from its' hilt and stood over Namatame. The kidnapper opened his to see Yu glaring down at him, looming like an executioner readying his blade. Namatame cried out in terror, before turning his head to Nanako and Naoto. He struggled to lift himself up, but his legs crumpled beneath his weight. He didn't give up. He dragged himself on the ground, reaching out to Nanako.

"I-I have to save her. I must save her. I-" Yu stomped on Namatame's hand, grinding the older man's bones into the cold ground. "Ahh!"

Yu lifted his foot, only to kick Namatame's ribs, knocking the air out of him. He aimed his sword at the fallen villain and spoke in a low, cold whisper. "You're a sick fuck. A piece of shit!" He kicked him again, savoring the cry of pain. "I'm going to make you suffer, you bastard!" He raised his hands, aiming the blade at the trembling man's back, only to feel a hand catch his arm.
"Stop."

"You're defending him?! Even after all of this?!!" Yu's silver eyes glared at Naoto, and he tore his arm from her grasp. "Mayumi, Saki, Dojima, Nanako, and now Chie?! How many people need to suffer before this bastard dies?!" he snarled. Despite that, he did not attempt to stab Namatame again. He stared at Naoto, allowing her a chance to speak.

"I know. I know, you're angry. You have every right to be, but we can't put the law in our hands. Maybe he does deserve to die, but it isn't our call to make," urged Naoto. "We need to get Nanako to a hospital, and Namatame to the proper authorities. He will face justice, Yu, but not like this."

"We can't lose sight of what's right. That's what you said," he spat. "Right now, the only 'right thing' I see is him suffering for what he's done." Yu's accusatory eyes drifted from the detective. They landed on the fallen body of Namatame, who was now sobbing, clutching his head as he cried.

"We're not the law. We can't be judge, jury, and executioner! You know that." Naoto stepped forward, and Yu stepped back. She stood between him and the sobbing Namatame. "Yu, please. This isn't right, and I know you can see that." Their eyes met once more and both could see the fiery resolve within one another. Both believed in their actions, and neither seemed ready to back down.

Yu's grip on the sword tightened, but he quietly holstered it away. He tore his eyes from her navy pools and released a scalding sigh. "Fine. Nanako probably wouldn't want me killing him anyways," he bitterly mused. "Kanji?"

"Yeah, I got him. Come on, ya sack of shit." Kanji walked towards the fallen criminal and forced him up. "Move." He shoved Namatame forward, showing no sympathy to the murderer. Kanji walked alongside Rise, who carried Nanako's slumbering body in her hands.

"Mayumi... Mayumi," wept Namatame.

Yu and Naoto remained where they stood for what felt like eternity. Her fingers gently brushed against his and he let out a trembling sigh as his fingers combed through his hair. "Narukami, I-"

Her hand fell away from his as he spoke.

"I don't blame you, Naoto. I just... I need to make things right."

"I understand. I'm sorry..."

"Not your fault, beautiful." Yu smiled, but she could see clearly through the mask. It was bittersweet at best. He dropped the mask and his face wore a heavy frown as he looked at Chie, Yosuke and Yukiko. "Go with the others. I'm going to talk to Yosuke about Chie."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Very well..."

Naoto bid her friend goodbye, and after giving him a lingering stare, she walked after the others. Yu steeled himself, before lifting his feet. "How is she?" Chie slumbered quietly in Yosuke's arm. The brunette boy glared at Yu, biting his lip to hold back his seething rage.

"She's okay now," Yukiko answered, after a long silence. "Right now, I'm more worried about
Yosuke-kun. Chie attacked him the most..." She glanced at the boy, who brushed off her concerns. He walked forward, only to stumble as his leg gave out under him. "Yosuke!"

"I'm fine!"

"Yosuke." Yu's voice was firm, but compassionate. "Let Yukiko heal you. I'll help bring Chie back."

"Thought you were done giving orders," Yosuke snapped.

"Yosuke..." Yukiko looked ready to defend Yu, but it wasn't needed.

The brunette tried to walk forward again, only to stumble once more. "You can barely walk," commented Yu. "You're going to get yourself hurt even worse, not to mention you might drop her. I understand you're mad at me. You have every right to be, but please, just let me help," Yu begged.

Yosuke was quiet as he stood on shaking legs. He glanced down at Chie, before sighing. He reluctantly laid Chie onto the ground and stood up. Yukiko healed the young man and his body relaxed, strength returning to his legs. Yu glanced at Yukiko and he whispered to her, too low for Yosuke to hear.

"Yukiko, I-"

"I know you wouldn't have done it if you weren't sure it was the only one," the raven-haired girl replied. "I understand. I'm just worried about Chie and Yosuke," she muttered.

"It's okay to be pissed at me. Lord knows I am," he mumbled. A hand gently laid on his shoulder as she gave a weak, forlorn smile to the silver-haired man.

"I'm mad, just not at you. Just... life, I suppose. I wish none of this had happened," she confessed. Her eyes glanced towards a sharp cry of pain, and she gasped as she saw Yosuke struggle to walk forward.

"The spell just heal anything that's broken, but you're still going to be sore! Come here, let me help you!" Yukiko helped the boy move, letting him lean on her as Yu was left with the unconscious Chie.

The silver-haired boy quietly lifted martial artist up. Yosuke and Yukkiko walked after the group as Yu took the rear, walking with Chie in his arms, bridal style.

"Chie?" No response. "I'm sorry about all of this," he muttered. "I gave up being the group's leader to avoid this shit. People getting hurt because of my own stupidity..." He walked behind the others, listening to the silence that entrapped the group. There was no excited congratulations or cheers of triumph. Just a foreboding silence polluting the air. "You're probably realizing by now that I'm not the same guy you met back during the first day of school. The truth is, I'm not really a good person..."

"I know..."

"Wait, what?!" Yu came to a stop and he looked at Chie with wide, surprised eyes. The brunette was awake, head lifted up and hazel eyes staring at him. Her eyes were crestfallen, barely open as he carried her. "You're awake? Wait, what do you mean you know? How do you-?"

"Yukiko told me. After we all stayed at the Amagi Inn together."
"W-wait. You knew since then?! Why haven't you brought it up with me at all?" he questioned.

The girl lacked a proper answer as her eyes kept themselves averted from his. "I was waiting for you to tell me," she shrugged quietly.

"What... what exactly did Yukiko say to you?"

"She said you were a... A uh..." Chie struggled to recount the words as Yu stood there, effortlessly holding the smaller girl. With a heavy sigh, Chie began to speak up once more. "She called you lying, cheating scumbag... That you were a manipulative womanizer, and that you loved Naoto and not her." Yu cringed at the list of facts. He didn't deny any of them though. Her fallen eyes finally lifted themselves up to look at him. She looked tired. Exhausted, actually. "She said you were trying to change though."

"I am..." Well, shit. There goes that conversation topic. Where do I go from here...?

"I get it."

"Huh?"

"I get why you lied and stuff." Chie shrugged once more as she sighed. "You don't need to try and explain it to me. I get it. So you don't gotta apologize to me or anything, okay?" It was obvious that she didn't want to dive deeper into the matter, but Yu could clearly see there was more to her than simple acceptance. Her mind was being plagued, and he was determined to do something about it.

"What do you mean you get it?"

"What?"

"What do you mean? How do you 'get' why I lied?" He took care not to sound too aggressive, but he was firm in the way he spoke.

"It doesn't matter," she muttered, turning her hazel eyes away from him again.

"I beg to differ. Chie, whatever is wrong, I want to help. And that's the truth." The girl remained silent. One of her arms rested on her stomach as the other dangled limply to the side. Speaking to her would have been like making demands to a stone wall, so Yu racked his brain for a different plan of attack. Think, stupid...

His mind recalled his and Chie's shared history, but unfortunately the memories were hard to decipher for the young man. How much of his earlier life did he spend simply using his friends' insecurities against them? How little of his time did he use to actually get to know them? Chie Satonaka was simply another tool to use and discard when he first met her. Her pain and fears were perfect in controlling her, and she no idea how easily he was manipulating her...

Wait... Wait! That's it!

"Your Shadow..."

"What?" Chie looked right at him, a shimmer of fear and panic in her eyes that told Yu he was right.
"Your Shadow talked about you and Yukiko." His mind picked at the memories, playing through his head like a film. He stared at her, knowingly, as he recounted the details as he brought Chie's past emotions to the surface. "You were jealous of Yukiko. So when you heard Yukiko thinking she was worthless, you were actually happy to-"

"Shut up!" She kicked and struggled in his grip, fighting to escape him. "Just shut up!"

"Chie, stop!" he demanded, glaring at her. He casually dodged a clumsy swing, not even missing a beat as he spoke. "You admitted to your Shadow you were the same. That what she said was true. Why is it still hard for you to admit?"

"Because nothing's changed!" She pushed him away, but her hand had little strength behind it. "Stop it! I don't want to talk about this...!"

"Tough," he replied. "You've been hurting, Chie. Even before Namatame kidnapped Nanako. I can see it in yours eyes," he stated. "You've been in pain. Well, it's time for you to finally pour your heart out. What do you mean nothing's changed?"

Chie once more struggled to escape, but Yu's grip was like iron. Even if he did let go, she'd just be falling onto the floor. Yu doubted she had the strength to run away from this conversation. She just stared off into the distance, hands tightened into shaking fists. Her will to fight was spent, and eventually, she spoke up.

"I hated my Shadow. I knew everything she said was true, but I hated it. I... I really was manipulating Yukiko," she confessed. Yu nodded his head, showing he was listening but refusing to interrupt the girl. "I used her to make myself feel better. Even when she was hurting, part of me was happy, because I... I got to be useful. I got to be the boss, I guess. I was happy to hear she was jealous of me..."

She seemed lost in her own thoughts. Yu spoke, gently freeing her from the fog of her listless mind. "And you accepted your Shadow, Chi-"

"And where has that gotten me!?!" Her response was violent, loud. Yu lifted his head and glanced at the path ahead. None of their friends seemed to hear the young woman. They were too far ahead. Chie didn't seem to mind or care about her own volume as she let out quiet groan.

"I'm not like everyone else... I'm not as strong as Kanji, I can't heal anyone like Yukiko or Teddie, I can't sense stuff, or deduce things... Even Yosuke's a better leader than me," she muttered. "It used to be that the only good thing I had going for me was being Yukiko's best friend. Now, it's like I don't even have that."

She scoffed, and Yu's eyes noticed a small shimmer beside her hazel eyes. Tears were pooling, but she rubbed them away with the torn, burnt ends of her sleeves. "What good am I? I can't do anything right!"

"Chie, that's not true. You're a member of this team for a reason."

"And what reason is that?! I wasn't even strong enough to stop Namatame from controlling me! You all nearly died! Nanako almost died! Because I wasn't strong enough!" she snarled.

Yu placed the girl onto the ground and he sat beside her, staring at her with watchful eyes. Neither tried to stop their friends as they faded away in the amber-colored fog. Chie hugged her legs to her chest and buried her face between her knees to hide the tears. He said nothing as he waited for her to continue.
"Everyone's changing around me," she uttered, her voice racked with broken sobs and tears. "The whole world is changing, and I can't measure up. I'm not smart enough or strong enough. I'm a weak, pathetic loser. I don't deserve to be on this team..."

"Bullshit," he replied. His jaw clenched as his brow wrinkled. She didn't lift her head up when he spoke, but he knew she was listening. "Chie, you're one of the strongest human beings I've ever know."

"You don't have to lie to me. Yukiko said all the compliments you ever gave us were just you messing with us," she grumbled, but Yu continued on.

"They were. Old Yu was an asshole, I'm not denying that. He did say stuff just to get people to like him. I did that," he admitted. "But right here, right now, I am telling you, that you are amazingly strong. You put your life on the line for Nanako. Why?"

"..."

"You were ready to die for Nanako to live. Why...?"

"Namatame had to be stopped," she uttered, shrugging. "I was the one thing keeping us from beating him so I just thought..."

"You were about to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of someone who wasn't even related to you. Weren't you scared?" Yu inquired.

"Of course I was! I was terrified, but Nanako was in danger! I had to do something..."

He placed a hand on her shoulder, and gave her the chance to pull away. She didn't. "The smartest, wisest person I know once told me this. That true strength comes from acting despite fear, not from a lack of it." He smiled as the memories of those words kindled his spirit. They rippled through his soul like a pebble through water. "Do you see what I mean?"

"I... I guess I was brave, but all I did was yell at you guys."

"You said something even I was scared to say. It's like you said, 'heroes of justice make the tough calls.' That's what you did today," he assured. She lifted her head up to look at him, and she saw the earnest, subtle smile on his lips. His eyes held no lie, nor any kind of deceit as he stared at her through his glasses. "I don't know who you are, or who you're meant to be. I don't know what your place in the grand scheme of the world is, Chie, but I know this. The Investigation Team is lucky to have you."

He forced himself off and brushed some imaginary dust off of his legs. "And if you want to become stronger, I'll help you." She watched him hold his hand out to her, his smile never leaving his lips. "However I can. It might be a bit much to call us friends, and that's okay. I don't want you seeing me as a leader either. I'm not the key to your future or your true potential. I'm just here to help."

She took his hand and he helped her onto her feet. When she stumbled forward, he caught her. He chuckled as she blushed, pushing herself to arm's length with the silverette. "All I want is to help you be happy with yourself. Okay?"

She wiped her eyes with her the ruined sleeves of her jacket again. "Do you really mean that?"

"I promise."
They stood there, neither saying anything as gentle winds blew against them. Yu had his hands on her shoulders as she faced the ground, staring at their feet. She quietly released her pent up frustrations and stress, the sense of loneliness and abandonment she had harbored within her, the looming fear that eroded at her will. She wept in front of the young man, wiping her face of tears until she was finally able to breathe and see properly. Her head gently bumped against his chest as she broke the silence.

"Yu...?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." She rested her head against his chest for a moment, arms left hanging by her side.

"Anytime." He patted the smaller girl on the back, before pulling away. "Come on. Let's go catch up with the others..."

The group returned to their world and Naoto notified the proper authorities. Though their bodies and minds were exhausted, they carried themselves to the hospital to await news on Nanako's condition. The others waited in another room as Naoto and Yu entered Dojima's room together. They found the older man laying on his bed in a hospital gown, quietly slumbering. Even in his sleep, his brow seemed furrowed with worry and tension.

"Uncle...?"

"Dojima-san?"

Yu felt sick looking at his uncle. The poor man looked so exhausted. He looked like he had been through hell, and the silver-haired youth was shocked to even see his uncle open his eyes.

"Y-Yu...? Shirogane...?" His voice was like gravel. Dry as a desert, and as painful to hear as it was to use, Yu imagined. "N-Nanako...?"

"Alive," Yu answered. He told his uncle the hospital room number, before smiling. "She's safe, Uncle..."

There was a light that came back in Dojima's eyes. It comforted the two, but it didn't last long. She struggled to lift himself up, but a firm hand from his nephew stopped him. "And Namatame...?"

"Apprehended," Naoto said. "You can focus on getting rest, Dojima-san."

"I can't... I can't rest," he groaned. "I-I need to see Nanako." He tried once more to get up, but Yu's hand was like a rope tying him to the bed. Try as he might, in his current state, he couldn't escape.

"No, you aren't," sighed Yu. "You're staying here. You only get to leave if a doctor or nurse says so."

"Damn it. Who the hell are you telling your uncle what to do...?" Dojima groaned. There was a bitter laugh in his voice, but it was almost impossible to hear through the strain and fatigue. "Thank you..." His eyes fell shut as Yu and Naoto watched over him.

"Think if I let my hand off of him, he'll jump out of bed and run off to see Nanako?" joked Yu, a small smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

"Somehow, I doubt that," responded Naoto with her own not-so-hidden smile. "Come on. The
others are probably waiting for us."

"Right."

The two exited the room together and walked side by side back to their friends. They found them in the hall, the group split in half and staring at one another from different sides. The others greeted them with varying levels of energy, with some asking how Dojima was. They answered with weak, forced smiles. Despite their recent victory, the air hung with a foreboding dread.

*We beat Namatame. We saved Nanako! Then why do I still feel like everything's falling apart...?* Yu cursed within his own skull, trying to keep a cool facade for his friends. Less a mask, more an act of courage, at least that's how he explained it to himself. He sat down with Naoto on a bench and his eyes traveled across the narrow room.

Yosuke and Yukiko were by Chie's side. They were constantly expressing concern over the young woman, but she brushed off their questions and told them she was unharmed. Yu glanced at her tattered and ripped jacket, and mentally considered buying her a new one, but he pushed the thought aside for another day. He caught Chie's eye on him and he smiled at her, and she returned the gesture.

*Good. Hopefully that means she and I are okay...*

Kanji and Rise once more sought comfort in the other's presence. Yu watched the two sit on a bench together, not speaking, but not needing to. Kanji's jacket was draped over the girl's shoulders, leaving him in his tank top. She rested her head on his shoulder as he stared at the ground, foot bouncing against the tiled floor. He was worried, terrified, but Rise's presence gave him some relief.

Yu felt a strange pride at the sight, happy for first, true friend. He knew Kanji would treat her right, and he knew the two were good for one another. *Way to go, Rise...*

He turned his eyes to Teddie. The young boy was trying to sit still, trying not to run his mouth. This whole thing must have been such a sharp swerve to the life he was hoping to find in this world. Yu pitied the poor boy, and in the back of his mind, made a note to speak to him once Nanako's condition improved. He was the only one in the group who didn't know about the real Yu Narukami. Yu watched the boy stand up, pace around, before sitting back down and nervously biting at his nails. This had been his third cycle, and Yu knew it wouldn't be long before he did it again.

*Got to talk to him...*

Finally, there was him and Naoto. The Detective Prince had placed her hat on her lap and was quietly fidgeting with it. Her delicate fingers poked and prodded and squeezed at the fabric as Yu sat beside her, quietly glancing between his teammates. Her eyes were on the navy-colored hat, oblivious to him. There was a noticeable amount of space between their bodies, but Yu didn't find himself minding.

He lifted a hand and gently poked Naoto's shoulder. She turned her head to look at him and he gave a comforting smile to the young woman. After a moment of hesitation, she returned the smile and nodded her head in appreciation. He could see the nervousness in her eyes. Maybe they were a reflection of his own true feelings. They were both scared, but they had each other, at least.

*I love you. Oh, how he wished he could say those words aloud...*
Naoto returned to prodding at her hat as Yu stared at the hospital's walls. Namatame was just a few floors above them, laying in his bed, reveling in his Pyrrhic victory. It made Yu sick, but he tried to calm himself down. *Nanako wouldn't want you so desperate to hurt someone. Even him...* His thoughts traveled, and he saw Nanako, laying in a bed, wires strapped to her body. The thought did little to comfort him and he cursed his wandering mind.

"It's going to be okay," Naoto whispered, glancing at the young man. He looked at her, surprised, before nodding his head.

*SHE KNEW WHAT I WAS THINKING... HEH. I HOPE YOU'RE RIGHT, BEAUTIFUL.*

The group turned their heads as a door was slid open and a nurse stepped out. "E-excuse me? Does Nanako-chan have any family?"

"I'm her brot... Cousin. I'm her cousin," Yu answered, standing up. He felt a warmth pollute his face as he approached the woman.

"Please, follow me. The rest of your friends can wait outside her room, but you should come see Nanako..."

"What about Dojima-san? He's her dad, shouldn't he be there?"

"Dojima-san is being called now. Please, sir, hurry," pleaded the nurse.

"Go on, Yu," assured Chie. "We'll be right behind you." She gave an earnest, comforting smile to the young man and he nodded in turn. He followed after the nurse, praying his own fears wouldn't come true.

Yu Narukami was soon by Nanako's side.

If Dojima was bad, Nanako was somehow worse. His stomach writhed and twisted inside of him as he stared at her. Her skin looked so pale, nothing like the vibrant glow that she usually had. Her skin seemed to hang off of her bones. Her hair was wiry, almost looking brittle as it laid on the bed, cushioning her back on the sterile, white sheets. Yu ignored the soft beeping of a nearby machine as he placed a hand on hers. He tried to ignore the cold pinch of her icy hands...

"Nanako? Can you hear me?"

Her fingers twitched against his hand and her voice groaned, reverberating against the oxygen mask strapped to her face. "Big bro?" she whimpered. Her eyes strained to open and Yu's other hand gently stroked her face, brushing against her eyelid. Her eyes opened, but they had no spark or light in them. They were dull, almost empty as she struggled to see him. "Where's... big bro?"

Her body trembled, and Yu tried to plaster a smile on his face. It ached against his face, and he was sure she could see through the transparent mask. "Hey, Nanako. It's okay. I'm here. I'm right here."

"Is... is she still mad at you?" Her voice was so quiet. Fragile, like a snowflake against battering winds.

"Huh? O-oh." Yu shook his head. "No, the girl forgave me. Everything's okay now. Once you're out of here, I can introduce you to her!" His fingers unconsciously squeezed her hand tighter. "She's amazing. You'll love her. She's smart, beautiful, brave... Like you," he whispered.

"I... I have a big sister?" Nanako's lips slowly curled into a quivering smile as her eyes fell shut.
"I'm glad..." He smiled with her as her voice shrunk and became harder to hear. There was strain in her tone as she struggled to speak. "I-I knew you'd save me, big bro. You can do anything..."

"I..." Yu's hand was shaking. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm it. He opened his eyes and he saw Nanako. She was so pale. She looked sick. She looked like she was... "Your dad's going to be here soon. We'll be together soon. The three of us." She can't. She won't! "And then you can get to know the real me." It was barely a whisper, yet somehow she heard it.

"Real... you?"

"Y-yeah. Heh. I'm kind of a troublemaker," he admitted. "But I want you to know that I care about you. You're my little sister, after all..."

"Yay," she cheered, trying to muster up the strain to smile wider. "You're still my big bro. No matter what, you saved m-me," she groaned. She was shaking and her closed eyes trembled in pain as her jaw tightened. "Ah!" She cried out as her body trembled, pain coursing through her like blood.

"Nanako?! Nanako, please, keep your eyes open. Your dad will be here soon, and then-" The machine's beeping was going faster. The nurse was trying to pull him back, but he stood his ground, calling out to the child. "Nanako! Please, open your eyes! W-we've just barely gotten to know each other! It's going to be snowing soon and-and we'll celebrate Christmas together and play in the show and-"

It was getting faster.

"I'm... I'm scared," she whimpered. "Where's daddy?" she cried, her chest rising and falling as she struggled to breathe. "Big bro? H-h..."

"Nanako! Please, please, I'm right here! I'm sorry! I-"

There was no loud bang. There was no wail, or scream. Only silence.

Yu had never seen someone die before. He had never saw someone close their eyes and never open them again. He never thought he'd see Nanako's body turn still as her voice failed to reach him. He didn't know what to expect after seeing someone die for the first time. All he could feel was a deep, agonizing ache as he found it hard to breathe.

The words of the nurses and doctors, as they pushed him back, fell on deaf ears. The door sliding open and Dojima's cries were nonexistent. The loud drone of the monitor was white noise as Yu was caught in a river. He was pushed out of the hospital room, standing on shaking legs.

The others didn't need to say anything as the quiet revelation dawned on them. They cried and wept, they screamed and raged, and they all fell to despair as Dojima called out his daughter's name.

Nanako Dojima was gone. They had failed to save her.

Naoto didn't know what to do. She didn't know where to go. She just followed the motions. Her legs moved, but she still comprehend what had happened. Nanako, an innocent child, laid dead. Naoto had failed not only her parents' legacy or her best friend, she had failed a little girl who trusted her. Naoto Shirogane failed herself.

The others ran after Dojima. She followed. Narukami was... He was silent. His silver eyes turned a
dull grey as he watched his uncle being dragged by doctors and guards. She watched a respectable detective reduce himself to rage and fury as he screamed for Namatame's blood.

This isn't right. This isn't right. It kept echoing inside her mind. Like a mantra or some sort of spell. Like it would awaken her from this nightmare. But this was no dream. It was reality. It was reality crashing upon their hopes and beliefs and robbing the world of an innocent soul.

Things only got worse when Adachi spoke.

"Dojima-san," he mourned. He sounded a mix of terrified and pitying. He had seen his mentor and friend turn into a savage for a moment, and it had left him shaking. "Damn it, this is awful... First Namatame walks, now this... Damn that bastard!" He slammed his fist against the walls as the group stared at him with disbelieving eyes.

"W-what did you say? What do you mean Namatame walks?!" Yosuke questioned.

"H-huh? W-well, there's not enough evidence! I-I mean, how are the charges supposed to stick when he has an airtight alibi for Mayumi's death? I-Ahhh!" Kanji grabbed Adachi by the collar and pulled him close, the younger man's brow shaking as he glared at the detective.

"What the hell are you talking about?! So he gets out scot-free?! This bastard murders three people and you're just letting him go!?!"

"I-it's not my fault! I'm just as mad as you are, but what are we supposed to do?! I-Ah!" Kanji threw the young cop aside and Adachi fell to the ground with a pathetic whimper. "I-I'm sorry!"

"And you call yourself a cop?! You piece of shit! Nanako is dead because of him!" Kanji couldn't hide the tears that were pooling in his eyes. Rise dashed forward and wrapped her arms around his, pulling him back. He was sobbing by the time she reached him. "Damn it! N-Nanako...!"

"It's okay. I-it's not your fault," Rise consoled, her own eyes shimmering with tears.

"S-she's right!" Adachi agreed, lifting himself up. "It's Namatame's... I... I'm sorry that he gets to walk. I really do wish there was something we could have done," he sighed. He walked forward and the group split open like a parting sea as he approached Yu Narukami. The silver-haired boy was like a statue as Adachi placed his hand on Yu's shoulder. "I'm sorry about your cousin, Yu..."

With silence and a heavy heart, the young detective left the group to stare at the unguarded door.

Naoto felt her mouth turn dry and arid as she watched Namatame's door. A fire burned inside of her body as she tried to ration how it had all gone wrong. Her parents and grandfather had always taught her to believe in the system. That a good detective could arrest any perp. That no evil could escape the arm of justice. Yet beyond that door, there was living proof that evil could get away with murder.

That the law could fail.

Or maybe the fault was with her. That she was just a failure of a detective. Her own ineptitude and pride, her failure as a detective. She was responsible for Nanako's death. The girl was dead, because of her...

Namatame robbed this world of a kind and innocent soul, a child, and Naoto once more felt like she had been accomplished...

"Yu?" Yukiko called out to him, but he did not answer.
The group watched him walk away from them and he placed a hand on the doorknob. He twisted it open and he stepped inside as the others followed him.

Taro Namatame was standing by the window of the large and empty room. The window was open as he stared out of it, trembling. Kanji shouted in anger, but Yu moved faster than he could speak. Narukami grabbed Namatame's collar and slammed him into the wall. The older man cried out in pain as he pleaded for mercy. Instead, the group watched as Yu coiled his fingers around Namatame's neck.

"P-please! D-Ack!"

The others watched in stunned, abject horror as Yu proceeded to choke the life out of Namatame. The silver-haired young man whispered something in a low growl, but everyone heard it.

Yu's voice sent a chill down Naoto's spine. His voice echoed in the small room as the six gaped at him and Namatame. Yosuke and Kanji were the first to close their mouths. They moved to Yu's side and glared at Namatame like executioners preparing their axes. Rise and Yukiko watched, before stepping forward. Words struggled to break through their sealed lips as their terrified eyes watched. Naoto felt Chie's eyes on her as the detective stepped forward. Yu repeated himself as his grip on Namatame's neck grew tighter.

"Die."

This isn't right, Naoto thought to herself again. This isn't right. It isn't right that he lives after what he's done... Narukami was right.

Naoto wasn't going to stop Yu.

This time, justice would prevail and Taro Namatame would pay for his crimes.

He has to die.

END
Namatame struggled to speak, but his every breath came out haggard and choked. Yu's hands squeezed tighter around his neck, ripping the life out of Namatame's eyes with every passing moment. The older man gasped for air and futilely tried to pry Yu's hands off of his neck, but he couldn't match the boy's strength. Namatame's eyes widened and his pupils shrank into tiny, dark dots in seas of white. Yu just held his throat tighter, some part of him reveling in the throes of death Namatame gave.

"Narukami, stop!" Hands latched onto his, trying to pull him away. It was only after his hands were forced away did he realize Rise and Chie were holding onto his arms. He stared at them, and neither saw hatred in his eyes. Only a void. An endless, bottomless pit that sought to fill itself with vengeance.

"You have your life, and now you want your freedom too?!!" Yosuke's fingers dug into the collar of Namatame's hospital gown, forcing the man up and practically throwing him towards his bed.

"It's your fault Nanako's dead!" Yukiko accused. "How could...? How could you?!" There were tears pooling below her eyes as she glared at the man.

"N-no, please," the killer whimpered. "Please, stop. I-I was just scared and I-"

"You were scared? You were scared?! A little girl is dead! Because of you! Because you kidnapped her! Do you think she was scared?! Did you think, even for a second, what you were doing?!" Yosuke snarled.

"Y-Yosuke," Chie released Yu's arm and approached her friend, only to gasp as light filled the room.

The TV came to life, and on it was the face of Taro Namatame, his eyes a sickly, putrid yellow.

"It's midnight," Rise realized with a hushed, shocked whisper.

"I didn't save her. I failed, because of you!" The twisted visage of Namatame smiled a crooked, broken grin as he stared at the Investigation Team. His eyes danced from one member to another, silently mocking at them. "The law can't touch me... I'm invincible! I'll keep 'saving' people until the streets are filled with their bodies!"

"Is that his Shadow?" Yosuke wondered.

"You son of a bitch... You're not crazy! You knew what you were doing the whole time!" Kanji bellowed, picking Namatame up by his collar and throttled him, shaking him back and forth as the Shadow laughed.

"You must hate me for what I did to that child," the reflection mocked. "So small, so innocent, but it's okay... I 'saved,' her!"

"You monster!" Yukiko cried, stepping forward with sharp, infuriated eyes.

"Please, no! I don't-" Yu tore Namatame from Kanji's grip. Despite the Shadow's confession, there was no anger in the young man's eyes. No joy. Nothingness. An emptiness in his eyes that made...
"Killing! Saving! It all means the same to me! But you're all different, aren't you?! You don't have it in you to 'save' me. So I'll keep 'saving' people. After all, it's my mission..." The warped reflection departed the screen with a mocking laughter, eyes widening as his mouth stretched inhumanly wide. He laughed at them as the TV abruptly turned off and the light vanished from the room.

Yu and Namatame stared at one another. Dark-hazel specks reflected against grey pools. Namatame's eyes shimmered with pooling tears as his hands hung limply at his side. The void in Yu's eyes finally revealed his core to the disgraced politician. Yu's eyes revealed the monster he had tried to hide away. He wanted Namatame dead, and the man trembled as he felt Yu's murderous intent.

"I was just trying to save her! P-please! I did it for Mayumi!"

Yu's fist connected with his stomach again, making him cry out in pain, before he wrapped his fingers around the fallen politician's neck once more. Namatame clawed at his hands as he gasped for air. "Mayumi is dead because of you." His silver eyes could see the pain his words caused Namatame. Like a knife straight through skin and bone, he twisted the blade with a growing grin. He didn't care about morality or the reason why. He just wanted to see Namatame hurt.

"Why do you even care about her? You killed her! She's dead because of you, you sicko!" he spat. He slammed his knee into Namatame's stomach, making the older man let out a choking gasp. "You deserve to die for what you did. You deserve to suffer for it." Yu threw him against the wall, finally releasing Namatame's throat. He was smiling when he said that. Grinning manically at the idea of torturing Namatame.

"Mayumi... Mayumi, I'm sorry," the man cried, tears flowing down his face.

"Yu, stop!" Chie pleaded, grabbing his hand. She had never seen the silver-haired boy this mad. Even his fury at Kubo, or his rage in Heaven paled compared to the 'thing' he was now. "That's enough..."

"No. He's right." Chie saw a flame in Yosuke's eyes as he glared past her. His eyes were on Namatame, jaws clenched as he spoke. "This bastard killed Mayumi, Saki, and now Nanako! It has to stop..."

"Yosuke, w-what are you saying?"

"He's saying what we're all thinking," Yu growled. "That Namatame doesn't deserve to walk free. He doesn't deserve to live after all the lives he's taken!" He looked at the others, and his silver eyes sparked with vengeful fury. His voice resonated within each of them as the parasitic tendrils he had woven within their hearts, intentional or not, did their work. "How many more people are going to die while this freak lives?!"

"Yeah... Hell yeah," Kanji snarled, glaring at the trembling politician. "Senpai's right! We can't just let this bastard kill again!"

"Kanji...?" Rise felt her blood turned cold as the blond stood over Namatame's quivering body.

The older man whimpered in fear, sobbing as he tried to crawl away from the group. Namatame came to an empty corner of the room where he trembled, hugging his knees to his chest as he
sobbed, repeating his lover's name. Rise tried to argue, but her voice felt trapped. Her body began to shake as she felt like a prisoner within her own body, as if all she could do was watch as Namatame was put to death.

Was it because some part of her saw Narukami and Kanji as right? They Namatame had to die to prevent anymore death? Or was it because some part of Rise just wanted to see the man suffer? After all, Namatame had killed Nanako, the sweetest, kindest girl Rise had ever met. She could only watch with shimmering, wide eyes as the others argued.

"Guys! You can't be serious..." Chie seemed to be the only one able to speak up. She sounded horrified, like she couldn't even begin to comprehend what was running through her friends' minds. Her legs were trembling as the atmosphere in the room turned colder and more oppressive, like ink clinging to her bare skin.

"C-Chie... Maybe he's right," Yukiko whispered, standing behind the girl.

"Yukiko...? Come on, you guys, y-you can't be serious!" Chie looked around the room, trying to find someone to speak up against this. In the end, the only one she saw fighting this decree was her own reflection...

Yu was Namatame executioner, walking with slow, deliberate footsteps towards the murderer; savoring the desperation in Namatame's cries.

"Please! Y-you have it all wrong! I-Ack!" Yu's hands found their way around Namatame's bruised, scarlet throat. He tried futilely to pry the hands off of him as he stared into Yu's apathetic eyes. Even as the familiar sensation of a lack of oxygen overcame him, Namatame pleaded for mercy. "I'm sorry...!"

"Yu, stop!" Chie pleaded, only for Yosuke to step in her way.

"Chie, you don't have to be a part of this if you don't want to," he whispered, and his voice quivered with a trace of compassion and guilt. She looked at his eyes, and she could see the turmoil his heart was caught in. His hazel eyes steeled and hardened, and he spoke louder, his tone now harsh. "But this is happening. He needs to die."

"Have you guys lost it?! W-we can't-!"

"You can't tell me you're fine with things ending like this!" Yosuke growled, motioning to the cowering murderer.

"Who said I was fine with it?! I think it sucks, but we can't do this!" argued the girl.

"Narukami." Naoto's voice cracked through the air like a whip. Almost everyone looked to the girl. Her very presence demanded attention, but Yu did not bother to turn his head.

His hands relaxed around Namatame's throat as he spoke through grinding teeth. "You can't be serious, Naoto. Even now? After everything he's done?! You're going to defend him!?"

"No. I'm not." He hadn't realized how cold her voice was. How the passion and wisdom he had come to expect seemed lost, leaving a hollowness in her throat. "I'm saying this is impractical." He finally turned to her and something in her made him freeze. It was her eyes. Her eyes were normally a brilliant, navy shimmer, but now they were paler, almost like ice. She stared right through Yu, glaring at Namatame with something writhing in her eyes.

"If you choke him to death, what happens next? His body is found, along with your fingerprints"
around his neck? No, what we need is something more efficient. Something that can't be traced back to us, but will ensure Namatame's demise." Her voice carried an almost mocking portrayal of her usual serenity. She was usually so calm, but what was once comforting now turned chilling.

"It's not our fault if he happens to escape into the other world," she mused, glancing at the large TV in the room. "If he did, he might find there is no other way out. He'd walk, aimlessly, through a hellscape made by his own twisted god complex and obsessions. Eventually, the Shadows will kill him and his body would be propped up atop a building just like his victims. There would be no way to trace it back to us."

"N-Naoto, you can't be serious," Chie shivered. "We wouldn't... We'd never..."

"She's got a point," Yosuke muttered. He looked at Namatame with the same cold, twisted indifference that afflicted Naoto's eyes. "Chie, if you want to leave, then leave, but this is happening. Namatame dies tonight."

"We're the only ones who can pass judgement on him," Kanji decreed, fingers twisting as he slowly walked towards Namatame.

Yu stood over the cowering man, but he hadn't moved since Naoto had spoken. His eyes had never left the Detective Prince as something in his mind snapped. Snapped back into place, or out, he wasn't sure.

He just couldn't get Naoto's eyes out of his mind. They were burned into his vision, almost growing larger before him. He tried to close his eyes and shake the hallucination away, but it just... there was something in him that couldn't look away. His mind wandered and fought with itself as he became an unintended wall between Kanji and Yosuke.

"Senpai, move!"

Naoto...?

This is good, right?! She just gave me the all clear! I can finally kill this bastard!

"What are you doing, man? Get out of the way!"

What was it she said...? "We will find a way. I do not know how, but we will."

We couldn't. There is no other way.

"Yu, move!" Yosuke's hand grabbed his shoulder, but Yu was like a statue where he stood.

But Naoto believed there was.

The memories of her warm, compassionate eyes, and the reality of her unfeeling, chilling gaze became a battle within his mind. They conflicted against one another as he tried to move his shaking body. This is what I wanted, but it isn't what Naoto wanted... It's what she wants now! But is it what she really wants...? His nails dug into Namatame's neck, before suddenly releasing him.

Namatame fell to the ground, laying there as he gasped for what, coughing violently. Namatame deserves to die, but what if we're wrong? Is there a chance we could be wrong...?

His mind picked at the case, his train of thought miles away from the hospital. Kanji's arm tried to push him, but Yu smacked the boy's hand away from him. We saw his Shadow, but what he said didn't make sense. It wasn't the same Namatame we saw in the other world. Yu knew all about the
lying game. He knew how to lie, he had lied for most of his life, but there was just something off about Namatame now.

Like he was telling the truth...

"Move!" Yosuke ordered.

"Hold on a second!" Yu commanded, pushing Kanji and Yosuke back. He stood between the others and Namatame as his brow wrinkled and his eyes stared past them.

"Narukami, what are you doing?!" Naoto growled. "We don't have time for this!"

Could I live with killing an innocent man? Could Yu live with the knowledge that he had killed an innocent man in cold blood? Yu closed his eyes and he searched the inner depths of his soul. He asked him the question again and again, and the truth sickened him. He could deal with the guilt. What was another innocent life ruined by Yu Narukami?

It disgusted himself to admit it, but Yu knew he could live with himself for killing an innocent man. He'd happily accept that burden if it meant Yu would get his revenge, but another question made him his blood turn cold. What about Naoto?

Her entire family had devoted themselves to law enforcement. Her family of detectives and sleuths that she was so proud of... The legacy she was a part of. Would this moment change everything for her? Would it destroy the faith her parents had instilled in her? If Namatame was innocent, she would never forgive herself...

What's wrong with me?! he screamed at himself. This is all I've wanted since this case began! Just kill him! But something plagued his mind, writhing within his skull as he ground his teeth. Yosuke finally shoved him aside and Yu's back hit the wall as Kanji and Yosuke approached Namatame.

"Wait a second...!" Yu's voice surprised even him. His eyes widened as he tried to see through the fog of his own mind. Rage, lost, his own parasitic ego, they all clouded his thought, but he tried to peer through the veil.

"Wait?! For what?! The cops will be here any minute! We need to do this now," growled Yosuke. He reached for Namatame, but Yu's hand caught his wrist. "What the hell are you doing...?"

Yosuke's voice barely held back his fury and outrage.

"We're... I-" Yu strained to find the words, his own impulses fighting against him as something in him urged him to speak up. Calm down, he ordered himself. What are you trying to say? What's the point in saving this piece of shit?! Yu's eyes squeezed shut as his teeth ground tighter against each other. He was shaking as he released Yosuke's hand and stood between the two boys and the murderer.

"What are you trying to say?!"

What am I trying to say...?

"Narukami." Naoto stepped forward, her eyes stabbing through him and glaring at his conflicted soul. "This isn't the time for jokes. You were right. Namatame has to die."

"Please! I'm sorry! They were going to kill her!" Namatame sobbed, tears falling down his face as he tried to bury himself deeper into the corner of the room. "I just wanted to save her! L-let me go! Please!"
Naoto's eyes fell upon the deranged man. There was no kindness in her eyes, just utter revulsion, as though Namatame was an insect. "Don't beg. It's pathetic," she hissed.

Naoto...? Yu stared at his best friend with unblinking eyes, trying to comprehend their situations. The role reversal they had gone through was almost funny, were it not so frustrating. "We can't kill him," he declared, his voice commanding respect and obedience.

"What do you mean we can't?! Why not?!" growled Yosuke.

Yu stared at Yosuke, putting up a mask of bravery as his mind tried to conjure an answer. He looked at Namatame, before turning his head back to Yosuke. "Because we don't know the whole story yet."

"The whole story?! Don't give me that crap! You were willing to kill Chie just to catch the guy, but you won't even think about killing him?! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

A lot, but that's beside the point, groaned Yu. "Look, I know I haven't been the most moral person in the world, but even I see bullshit when it's right in front of me! Can't all of you?! There's something wrong here. Things aren't adding up! There's more to this case, and if we just kill Namatame all we're doing is bullshitting ourselves!" Yu looked to the other members of the team, urging them to listen. "A wise person once told me, 'We can't lose sight of what's right.'"

He saw Naoto's eyes widen, and he prayed he was getting through to her. He looked at the others, from Rise to Yukiko, before stopping at Chie's stunned face. She was as silent as the others, but she nodded her head, silently supporting the silver-haired boy.

"At first, I didn't really get just what that statement meant. Not giving up? Not being killers? No, it means remembering why we did this in the first place. Not for revenge, not even for justice, it was to find out the truth. To solve this mystery! If we just kill Namatame, we're just lying to ourselves and accepting utter crap!"

"He's right," Naoto agreed. Her voice was slow, as if she was still recovering from waking out of a dream. "He's right. We can't do this. Not without finding the truth." Her navy eyes, once lost to flame and rage, were like glass as she stared at Namatame. She struggled to calm her mind as she spoke again. "It occurs to me that we haven't heard Namatame's side of the story."

Yu could see hesitation and doubt forming in the eyes of his friends. Their anger was being tempered by Naoto's words, and he sighed in relief. One by one, his friends began to calm down. Rise and Kanji shared a glance at one another, Yukiko closed her eyes and struggled to breathe, and Naoto just stared at the ground in quiet contemplation. Yosuke was the only one to hold onto his hate, glaring at the others.

"How the hell are we supposed to believe anything this bastard has to say?! He thinks killing and saving people are the same damn thing!" Yosuke argued.

"Yosuke." Chie walked forward and touched the boy's arm. "I get it. I don't know if Namatame's innocent, but I think there's definitely more going on. We should at least try to figure out what's really happening, and fighting each other isn't going to help."

"I..." Yu could practically hear Yosuke's teeth cracking from the way he was clenching his jaw. "Fine. But if the cops come, and we're no closer to figuring this out... Just know that I'll do whatever I have to to protect this town..."

"I understand." Yu nodded his head.
"Let's keep racking our brains until we figure this out," Rise agreed, nodding her head. Her hand fell into Kanji's, and both naturally squeezed the other's hand. She took a deep breath and sighed, her mind and body freed from the shackles of vengeance.

"I guess if we do anything else, we'd just be lying to ourselves," sighed Kanji. "Ain't no point in doing something if we don't do it right."

"Yeah," uttered Yukiko. Her eyes widened and she shivered in fright as the full weight of their actions came crashing down on her. "I can't believe we almost... I actually wanted..."

"Hey." Everyone's eyes turned to Yu, and the silverette found himself in the awkward position of comforting his friends. He scratched at the back of his neck as he contemplated what to say, before sighing. "Look, I spent years of my life being a dumb, asshole. If I can overcome being stupid my whole life, you guys can overcome being stupid for ten minutes." He walked forward to Yukiko in particular and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. He smiled at her, and she stepped forward to rest her head on his chest for a moment.

"That's reassuring," sighed Yosuke.

"He's scared." Yukiko's voice caught the others' attention as she stepped out of her respite and away from Yu. The others followed her ebony eyes to the man on the ground. Namatame was shaking with fear as he hid under his arms, quietly sobbing. "We terrified him... I-I don't know how we'll get him to open up to us about his side of the story..."

"Let me try," Yu offered.

"Senpai, are you sure?" Rise asked, looking at the young man.

"Rise, I'm me. I can do anything." Yu's eyes glanced at Naoto, and he flashed that arrogant smirk of his. She did more than see it, though. She saw right through it.

Yu was scared. The confident braggart was terrified. She could see the guilt in his eyes. She felt a connection to him, a link that whispered his fears into her mind. It was almost fantastical, but part of her realized it was simply the bond the two shared. Their closeness let her see all the little emotions in Yu's eyes. He was tried to hide the tremble in his voice, but she could feel the dread carried on his every breath.

Narukami...?

Yu was ignorant of Naoto's own worries for him, and he turned to Namatame. He approached the older man and sat down in front of him. His arrogance vanished as soon as no one could see his face and silver eyes peered at the terrified man with utter frustration.

He murdered Nanako, he told himself. You could have just destroyed your only chance for revenge. Hate was like a toxin coursing through his body, making his arms shake as he stared at the worthless man in front of him. Yu reminded himself of Naoto, and it tempered the sickness within him. He had to figure this out, or his actions would have been all for nothing.

Yu Narukami was an insightful, intelligent young man who could read people with ease. It's what made them so easy to control. He always knew just what to say to make a girl take her clothes off, always knew what threat to make to collar an enraged boy, he knew how to lie to adults so they'd turn a blind eye to his cruelty, and he knew how to pry at people's insecurities to take advantage of them.

But now, he had to use that gift to help someone, rather than control them.
Yu stared at Namatame for about half a minute, but his mind made it feel like an eternity. His eyes picked apart the disgraced politician, recalling the things he had said and the crimes he had committed. He tried to understand Namatame, tried to see what had led the once promising man into being a criminal.

"Mayumi Yamano." Namatame trembled at the very name. "Did you love her?" Silence. "I know what all the reports say. You used her as a side bitch." Namatame's fingers twitched, digging nails into his elbows. "A mistress for the stuff your wife couldn't do." Namatame lifted his head up, and Yu could see hazel eyes glaring at him. "A one night stand blown out of proportions?"

"Don't talk about her like that!" Namatame screamed, slamming a fist on the ground as he glared at Yu through the pooling tears on his face. "I loved her!"

"Why? How does a politician fall for some reporter? Especially a married politician," wondered Yu. "Can you tell me that, Namatame? Can you tell me why you fell for her?"

"I..." Namatame wrapped his arms around his legs, squeezing them against his chest as he stared at the tiled floor. "P-people expect certain things out of politicians. Out of leaders. Smile and wave, become a leader, word endlessly, but have a human side. A fun side. Be a good husband, marry a beautiful or talented woman," he muttered. "Misuzu was all of that and more, but... but she never cared about who I was beyond my career." He scoffed, and his lips twisted into a crooked, parody of a smile.

Yu knew there was something wrong about the man when he first saw him. He hadn't realized how utterly broken he was until now, as he wiped falling tears from his face.

"She fell for what she saw, not who I was... It was so stupid, but-but Mayumi saw the real me."

"She saw through your mask..." Yu whispered the worlds, unable to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't realized it at first, but the comparison was impossible not to make. Namatame was like him.

A liar who had fallen in love...

"Mayumi was a TV announcer, but she was so much more than that," Namatame reminisced. He hardly seemed to even see Yu. The older man was lost in a fog of memories and better times, walking aimlessly as his face was paralyzed in a heartbroken smile. "She was smart. Strong. Brave. She didn't care what people thought of her, she knew who she wanted to be... She was so hot-headed. So damn proud of herself," he gasped.

Strong. Brave. Smart... Stubborn. Yu closed his eyes and nodded his head. "She wasn't like anyone you'd ever seen before."

"She saw right through my smile. Behind the scenes, she'd ask me real questions, try to know the real me... It had been so long since anyone wanted to know the real me," he confessed. "God... The way her eyes lit up when she figured something out. She wanted to be a reporter, you know..." He wiped his eyes once more, and Yu opened his own. Hazel eyes met silver pools as the two men stared at one another. "Expose the truth. Shock the world. Make sure the truth got out there... She was one of a kind."

Namatame stared at Yu's hand, flinching as he expected to be smacked or shoved. Instead Yu just placed a hand on Namatame's shoulder, silently urging him to go on. "What happened next, Taro? It's important you tell me."
"We started seeing each other out of work. One thing led to another, and I... We fell in love," he croaked. "Those were some of the best days of my life. My career rose, but Mayumi... She was everything I wanted out of life. I thought about divorcing Misuzu, and marrying Mayumi. I thought about all the wonderful things we could experience together, but... it wasn't meant to be." His fingers twitched as Yu's hand squeezed his shoulder in silent understanding. "We were found out, I lost my job, and Mayumi lost... everything she had worked for."

"The scandal destroyed you both," Yu summarized. "But did your feelings for her ever wane?"

"No! I-I loved her! I thought she would hate me, but... but she told me she loved me still." Yu stood up, and he stretched a hand down to Namatame. The older man stared at it with wide, quivering eyes, before he took it. Yu lifted the man up and the two shared a look.

"I'm sorry. Losing her must have hurt."

"It felt like I was dying. Like I've been dying ever since," he whispered. Namatame looked at the others in the room, his broken mind slowly working to match the words to his feelings. His eyes widened as he stuttered. "T-the girl... S-she's...?" Taro nearly fell onto the ground, stopped only by Yu's hands. "No! I-I was supposed to save her! I didn't want her to die!"

Yu wanted to speak up, but a sound cut through the air and caught everyone's attention. Footsteps, slowly approaching the room. Kanji quickly moved to the door and glanced through the open space.

"Shit. Guys, cops...!"

"Taro." Yu began to walk forward, pulling the older man along. When Namatame stumbled, Yu caught him, helping him stagger towards his bed. "I need you to listen to me. What happened in the other world, why you kidnapped my friends, you need to explain it to us next time we see you."

"N-next time? Y-you're not gonna kill me?" Yu and Taro pushed through the group, and the silverette helped the terrified man sit onto his bed.

"No. I... I'm sorry for what I said to you. And nearly killing you. Look, we don't have time to explain, but you need to tell us everything you know next time we meet. You entered the other world through a TV, right? So did we. Remember? That's where we first saw each other." Yu's words had an affect on the broken man, making him pause to consider the words. "You entered another world, just like us..."

"Y-yes... I remember. I-I used that world to save people, but it wasn't... it wasn't the paradise I thought. It wasn't safe. It was torture. H-Hell," muttered Namatame, before looking at Yu. "Y-you're like me?"

"More than you know," sighed Yu. He looked down as Taro's hand caught his wrist, pulling the younger man closer.

"You have to find them." Taro's fingers tightened around Yu's wrist, but the young man just stared. "The one who killed Mayumi, a-and the other girl. You have to stop them, before they kill again. P-please."

Yu's hand caught Taro's wrist, but rather than pry his hand off, the silverette nodded his head. "I promise. We'll find them."

The door opened and Namatame's hand fell from Yu's wrist. The older man fell onto his bed with closed eyes as Dojima's assistant and another officer, Namatame's guard, burst inside.
"H-hey! What are you guys doing in here?! You can't be here!"

"Oh, crap," Chie swore.

"W-we were keeping an eye on the prisoner," Naoto lied, thinking quickly. "If he had escaped, the police's reputation would been tarnished, as well as their trust in you, Adachi-san."

"O-oh. I see, well in that case, can you please step out? I won't tell anyone you were in here, if you won't tell anyone I wasn't around, okay...?" The raven-haired man motioned the group to leave, and one by one, they obeyed.

Yu was the last to leave. He stared at Namatame, and what he saw chilled him to his bone. It wasn't the man himself, but rather the sense of familiarity. Yu felt like he knew Namatame better with a single conversation, than months of time with Yukiko, Yosuke, or Chie. He saw a mirror in Namatame, a reflection of what could have been.

When Yu lost Nanako, he was ready to execute a possibly innocent man. Justice was second to the thirst of vengeance burning inside his gut. When he thought he had lost Naoto, he was ready to kill himself in a vain attempt to make things right. If he had lost her, what would he have become? A broken man, desperate for purpose? Had the days been reversed, the order changed, would Yu be the one sobbing on a hospital bed, broken and driven mad by lost?

"I'm sorry," Yu whispered, and he hoped Namatame heard it.

"Hey! Yu! Come on, you got to get out of here," Dojima's assistant ordered.

"Right."

The group walked out of the hospital room and away from any prying eyes. They stood outside the building with heavy hearts and racing minds. Yu scratched his neck, his worry and anxiety rising with every passing step. He looked at the others and sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh? The hell are you sorry for, man?" Kanji asked.

"I know I have no right lecturing any of you about justice or morals. You all know who I am, and-" Yu paused and glanced at the others, his brow furrowing as he came to a realization. "Where the hell's Teddie?"

"Huh? Hey, he's right!" Chie realized, looking around. "Where is he? He wasn't in Namatame's room with us!"

"Maybe he ran off back home? I mean, he and Nanako were close and..." Yosuke couldn't seem to finish the sentence, and the others were thankful for it. The memories still burned in their minds. No one wanted to think about what had just transpired.

"Yeah, maybe," muttered Yu. "A-anyways, let's come back here tomorrow," he suggested. "We can find a way to talk to Namatame and get his side of the story then, but I think it's clear there's a lot more going on than we thought."

"Narukami is right," agreed Naoto. "We should all get some rest. This case is far from over, it seems."
"Yeah," Yosuke sighed. He blinked as he felt something cold and wet fall on his head, before looking up to find bits of snow falling down on the group. "Seriously? Are you kidding me?"

"Gah!" Rise shivered as the cold nipped at her naked neck. "Man, it's freezing..."

"Here," Kanji offered, taking off his jacket from his shoulders. He carefully placed it onto the girl's back, before glancing away. "S-so we're meeting up here tomorrow?" He quivered in place, both from embarrassment and the harsh, cool breeze.

"Yeah," nodded the silverette. He glanced at Rise's blushing face, before looking at the similar rosy glow on Kanji's. He smiled at the two, thankful for them adding a bit of levity to the night. "Yosuke, keep us posted if you find Teddie, okay?"

"Yeah." Yosuke nodded his head, but Yu could tell he wasn't really looking at him. "Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow..." He waved goodbye, and began to walk away from the others with heavy steps. Yu watched him leave, before looking at Chie.

"Chie?"

"Huh? Yeah?"

"Thanks. You were the one who wanted us to stop. Even when all of us were against you, you stood up for what you believed in. Thank you for that." Yu meant every word he said, and the brunette smiled weakly at the kind words.

"Yeah, well... It just didn't sit right with me."

"I'm glad it didn't." Yu glanced at Yosuke's shrinking figure, before looking at Chie again. "If you could, maybe try talking to Yosuke? I don't think he'll listen to me, and I know he's still angry with me. I don't blame him, but..."

"I get it," she nodded. "I'll try... See you guys later. You coming, Yukiko?" The hazel-eyed girl looked to her friend, who was staring at the stone sidewalk below her feet.

"Y-yeah. I'm coming, Chie."

"Yukiko?" Yu's voice stopped the raven-haired girl. She looked to the young man and she saw the smile he had on his face. Weak, but earnest. "You're not a bad person. You were angry. It happens to the best of us."

Her smile was a reflection of his own. Weak, exhausted, but it was real. She seemed to have appreciated his words as she followed Chie back to their homes. Yu and the others waved goodbye to the two, before looking at one another.

"You two okay?" Yu inquired Rise and Kanji. "Rosy cheeks and raging hormones aside."

"We're fine, Senpai," Rise muttered. She couldn't bring herself to glare at him for his teasing. She was too tired from the day's adventure, too exhausted to even muster a clever retort. She looked at Yu with sympathetic eyes as she asked, "How about you? I-I mean..."

"I'll be fine, Rise," Yu replied, and no one believed him. "You two should get going."

"Right. See you later, Senpai." Kanji bowed his head slightly, before turning. "Come on, Rise."

"We're here for you, Senpai. If you need anything," swore Rise. She followed her blond friend
down the path, leaving Naoto and Yu alone.

"Well," Yu sighed, brushing some melted snow from his hair. "I-I guess I'll see you later, Naoto."

"Narukami, wait." A familiar hand caught his, stopping the young man in his tracks. He stared at their linked hands, before looking at the detective. She was staring at the ground, her hat hiding her features. "I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure. Shoot." Their hands fell to their sides as Yu watched Naoto with curious, tired eyes.

"What... What was going through your head in there? I saw you choking Namatame to death, yet you were the one who realized what we were missing. I-I'm not upset at that fact, I just wish to understand what was going through your head."

"Oh." Yu took a deep breath into his nose as he looked up at the cloudy, dark sky. "It's not going to be a very good answer. You might not like it."

"I'm sorry? Why would I not like it...?"

Yu released the breath he took as a hot sigh, watching his breath enter the cool, night breeze. "The thought that Namatame could have been innocent, or something, did pass through my head. I didn't care, though." Yu moved his hand under Naoto's chin and he lifted her up so they could look into one another's eyes. It wasn't meant to be a romantic gesture. He just wanted her to see the truth in her eyes. He stared into her wide, navy eyes as he confessed his sin. "I didn't care if I was going to kill an innocent man. It was worth it to me."

"Then why did you stop...?"

"Because it wouldn't have been worth it to you, Naoto." He could hear her gasp, and the sound made him smile, even if his words stabbed his own heart. "It would have hurt you to kill a man who might have been innocent. You would have seen yourself as a disgrace, you would have hated yourself. I couldn't let that happen. So my actions tonight weren't out of kindness or compassion. They were a little selfish, honestly. If Namatame was the killer, I could have just ruined everything because I didn't want you to be sad."

"Yu." The sound of the woman he loved whispering his name made him fall silent. "I... T-thank you."

"Huh? For what?"

"You believed your actions were selfish, but in truth, I believe they were compassionate. You were a hero tonight, Narukami, and I'm proud of you." Her words shocked the young man, and he experienced a rare moment in his life. He had stunned silent as he stared at the girl, a slight hint of scarlet on his cheeks.

"O-oh. Thanks, Naoto." Yu smiled at her words, and the two found themselves gazing into one another's eyes. Naoto watched his silver eyes gleam like treasure, while he saw her sapphire pools glistened like a cave of gemstones.

Only the voice of an approaching nurse broke the two and drove them apart. "Excuse me? Are you Nanako-chan's family member?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I am," Yu nodded. He silently cursed the woman that stepped out of the hospital, both for ruining his moment with Naoto and bringing up the recent memory. Still, he forced a smile on his face and tried to appear strong as the older woman spoke.
"Thank goodness, I was so worried I wouldn't find you. I just wanted to inform you that Nanako has, well... It's difficult to explain, but."

"She's what?" Yu asked, his voice barely concealing his sharp tone. "What happened?!"

"She's awake. We're not sure how, but she's come back to life, and everything seems normal." The nurse seemed to hardly believe the words she was relaying to them, but her tone was clear. Neither could believe the news as their jaws fell open and their eyes widened.

"S-she's awake?" gasped Naoto.

"What?!" Yu stepped forward, and the Detective Prince followed him. "Is she okay? Can we see her?!

"I-I'm sorry, but no. The doctor's need to keep a close eye on her. I just wanted to inform you of the good news. She wanted me to make sure her 'big bro' knew. It's a miracle honestly. I-I've never seen such a thing happen," the woman confessed. Her wrinkled and aged features did nothing to hide the warm smile on her face. "You're very lucky, young man."

"Nanako... She's okay," he laughed in shocked disbelief. "T-thank you for telling me." The older woman nodded her head, before bidding the two farewell. Naoto was about to speak regarding their good fortune, only to be plucked off of the ground by Narukami. He clung to her, arms wrapped around her back and pressing her against his, just below his head. She was lifted off of the ground in a tight embrace and spun around several times as the silver-haired boy cheered. "She's okay! She's alive! I can't believe it, she's alive!"

"Um... Y-Yu?" Naoto's voice caused the man to pause. He realized just what he was doing as he felt Naoto's suppressed breasts against his chest. Despite the sarashi wrapped around them, he could still feel the mounds of flesh through her shirt. "I understand you're happy, but please put me down."

"R-right! Sorry." Yu gently placed Naoto onto the ground with a sheepish grin and crimson cheeks. "Sorry."

"It's quite alright," she replied, avoiding his eyes. "You have every right to celebrate. This is wonderful news," she smiled, fixing her hat. She tried desperately to cool her heated cheeks and neck. "I'm happy for you, Narukami."

"Narukami? What happened to Yu?" he teased, chuckling at the younger girl. She merely muttered something as she looked away, glaring at a nearby tree as he embarrassed her. There was a moment of silence as the snow gently fell upon them, broken by a simple question. "Naoto? Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Well, with Teddie missing, and Nanako and Dojima in the hospital, um... I'm home alone."

Naoto's face turned a vibrant red as she began to piece together where this conversation was going. "I really don't want to be alone right now, so I was just wondering if you'd be willing to stay at my place again. Without looking at my sketchbooks this time, I mean," he chuckled nervously. There was a subtle rosy hue to his own cheeks as he rubbed at the nape of his neck.

_Come on, man! You're Yu Narukami! You've seduced girls out of their clothing before! Try to come off a little cooler than this_, he scolded himself. *"If you want, I mean. I just... I don't want to be alone right now."*
The night had been one of the most exhausting, tiring, and terrible nights in Naoto's life. Yet it would be engraved in her mind as one of the most amazing nights of her life. Not only had Yu Narukami saved her from making a terrible mistake and disgracing the Shirogane name, Nanako had somehow been revived!

And now... Now Narukami was inviting her back to his home. He was desperate for company, but rather than ask any of their friends, he asked her. Was it merely fortune that she was the last to leave?

No. It couldn't have been. He wanted her, and her alone.

Naoto stared at Narukami for what felt like eternity. She saw how weak the man was. Behind his arrogance and bravado, he was exhausted and cracked. His spirit waned in the cool, winter breeze. His silver eyes looked dull at times, before hiding behind a mask of strength. His smile was real, but it looked so easily shattered. He was tired. Yet he wanted Naoto.

The words were on his lips, read as clearly as a title to a book. "I need you, Naoto."

It was impossible for her to say no for so many reasons. She was needed by one of her closest friends, but more than that, she needed this too. She needed to do what she should have done when Nanako was taken in the first place. She needed to be by Yu's side, to comfort him when he was scared, to let him be real around her, to let him express the torment in his soul...

"I-I suppose I can. If it won't be too much trouble housing me again," she mumbled.

"Not at all," he promised. "Shall we get going, my dear detective? I'll text the others the good news on the way home."

Her lips curved upwards as she nodded her head. She really was his dear detective... Not his, like a possession, but his like they were simply meant to be each others' other half. She chuckled at the ridiculous notion as they walked down the sidewalk together, under the cover of the moon and the dark, grey clouds...

Naoto sighed in relief when they reached the Dojima residence. The winter's night was only getting colder, it seemed, and the two brushed snow off of them as they kicked their shoes off.

"You want anything to eat?" asked the older boy, walking to the fridge.

"No. I'm quite alright, thank you."

"Suit yourself." Yu fell onto the living sofa and let out a loud sigh. "I'm so exhausted."

"It has been a draining day," she agreed, sitting on the couch with her usual posture. She strained to keep herself upright as Yu glanced at her.

"Naoto, relax. It's just me. You don't have to look cool in front of me. I already know you're cool," he grinned, winking at her.

"Ahem... Noted." Naoto turned her head away from him, but her form did relax. She laid her back against the soft cushion as she released a fatigued groan. "Today has been rather harrowing."

"You can say that again," Yu muttered, opening his mouth to yawn.

"Sleepy?"
"Look who's talking," he retorted with a smirk on his face.

"I have no..." Naoto cursed her body as a yawn fought its' way out of her mouth. She could feel Yu's grinning face staring at her as she fixed her hat atop of her head. "Nevermind..."

The day's hindrances had left them both exhausted, and with no adrenaline to keep them awake or active, exhaustion began to truly take its toll on them. "Hopefully we will be well rested for tomorrow," Naoto said, closing her eyes.

"Mm."

Naoto found a relieving comfort from the cushion behind her head. She rested her neck on it, before muttering, "Thank you, Narukami..."

"Hmm?"

She chuckled at his half-muttered words. It was cute, even if the very thought of the word and Narukami made her blush. She opened her eyes to stare at him, and he was already falling into a deep slumber. She smiled at him regardless. "For thinking about me. Thank you for upholding the Shirogane name."

"Hm."

Naoto's eyes fluttered up and down, before she finally let them close. Just for a moment... I'll rest my eyes, she told herself. Her head slide down from the sofa and landed against something cold. Her head found its place on Yu's shoulder. The young man was already fast asleep, but his lips curved slightly at the warm presence beside him. Naoto pushed against the cold 'pillow,' and it slowly began to warm up as she nuzzled into his side.

Were the two more awake, they would have realized what was happening, but slept kept them blissfully ignorant. They fell asleep beside one another, smiles on their face as their hearts warmth one another.

END
"Welcome to the Velvet Room."

"Ah, fuck." Yu opened his eyes to find himself once more within the strange limousine. Igor sat across from him, and beside the strange man was his ever present aide, Margaret. "I was really hoping for a dream about Naoto," he groaned.

"Hm. It is nice to see you living with truer colors," commented Margaret with a wryly smile. "Better the devil you know, than a devil wearing an angel's face."

"I..." Yu didn't say anything, shaking his head before looking at the owner of the room. "So, what's the point of summoning me here, Igor? Come to remind me about my 'tainted' bonds or something?"

The long-nosed man laughed, and Yu couldn't deny how unnerving the sound was. "I have summoned you within your dreams for a different reason. Now then, your journey has taken you quite a distance thus far. Do you believe you'll be able to successfully solve this mystery...?"

The question was a simple one, and once upon a time, Yu would have felt he could answer the question confidently. Now, he was not so sure. "Do I believe I'll be able to solve it...?" he muttered to himself. "I don't know," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "You know, I keep wondering why the hell I'm here. Why I was picked to solve this mystery." Yu glared at Igor, who merely smiled back in response. "Why me? Why not Naoto, or Dojima, or Yosuke? Why did you pick me?"

"I do not pick my guests. Fate merely brings you here."

"Fate's a load of shit," argued Yu, scowling. "I've never believed in it. I make my own fate..."

"You dig your own grave," Margaret remarked, leaning back into her seat.

"Damn right," he agreed, nodding his head as bitterness burned in his eyes. "I'm at fault for my own crap..." Yu's eyes fell to the ground as his foot bounced. He rested his arms on his knees as he leaned forward. "Do I think I can solve this case? I'm not sure anymore, but I'm not the only one trying to solve it, now am I?" A small smile pulled at his lips as he stared at Igor. "Naoto, Rise, Kanji, Yosuke... My friends... They're a crazy bunch, but I think this case can be solved if I have their help."

The irony was almost palpable. He had once seen the group as stepping stones, but now he saw them his pillars. His bonds with them were once rotting and putrid, made of lies and deceit, and decaying with every passing day. Now he could feel the difference. He felt a new warmth, a strange, foreign feeling in his chest when he thought of his friends.

As embarrassing as it was to admit, he was happy to know the others. His friends had changed him as much as he had changed them, maybe even more so.

"People are like water flowing in a river. There is only one stream, but all who pass through it are affected differently. Some travel fast, some change their course. Experiencing countless events as they travel down the river of time," Margaret mused.

Yu nodded his head in acknowledgement. If they were all being carried down the same stream,
they all faced their own obstacles and challenges, but the destination was the same. He and his friends were the same. Yu felt the limo come to a slow halt and his iron-colored eyes looked at Igor.

"I have a friend missing. Do you know where he is? His name is Teddie, short fellow, blond hair... Sometimes he's a bear?" Yu wasn't sure why he was bothering asking, but he doubted it would hurt.

"The Star Arcana," Igor nodded. "Yes, I know of him." The tall, lanky man glanced towards a window. Yu's eyes followed his gaze, and they stared out into the fog that surrounded the car. "Lost, but searching, seeking his own truth..."

"Is there any way I can help him?"

"In time. For now, he must walk his own path." Igor seemed to find Yu's concern amusing, but the silverette could hardly tell. Igor's rictus-like smile never seemed to leave his face. "You are worried about him?"

"He's the only one on the team who doesn't know the real me. Not to mention he just vanished," sighed the young man. "Look, why did you even call me here?"

"Have you noticed we stopped?" inquired Igor. Yu nodded his head. "The state of this room reflects the scenery of your heart... Perhaps this may be a time for contemplation rather than action..."

"Contemplation?" Yu repeated, only to feel a dizzy spell overtake him. His eyes widened as he felt his head hang heavy on his neck. "Whoa..."

"It's time to wake up. Heed our words, remember the bonds that you have forged, and find your way out of the fog." Margaret's voice was the last thing he heard as everything went black...

When Yu opened his eyes, he found himself inside his home, sitting on the living room couch with something warm and small pressed against him. He blinked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his free hand, before glancing to his side. What he saw made his heart skip a beat and his face turned a bright scarlet.

Naoto Shirogane was cuddling against his arm, a content smile gracefully painted on her lips as she clung to him. He felt his mouth turn dry as he struggled not to wake her. His jaw hung from his skull for a moment, before he sealed his mouth shut. He tried to lift his body up, only to feel Naoto's weight hold him down. Her arms had slipped around him somehow, and her grip felt like a bear trap.

Only softer. And warmer.

"N-Naoto?"

The girl moaned in response, pulling Yu's arm against her body. The silver-haired young man blushed a darker shade of red, feeling the slight curve of Naoto's hidden breasts gently rubbing against him. He took slow, methodical breaths as his mind raced.

Don't think about Naoto's tits, don't think about Naoto's tits, don't... Ah, damn it, he sighed. He glared at the girl, trying to look annoyed despite his discolored cheeks. "Naoto, wake up."

"Hm." The young woman groaned again, her fingers gently clinging to his arm.
Damn it, I wish I had my phone to take a picture of this. Yu lifted his hand to gently touch Naoto's cheek. Her skin felt warm, yet unbelievably soft. She smelled of vanilla, with a hint of mint. Don't be creepy, asshole, he scolded himself. But damn...

Yu had been with many people in his life. Young men and women, even a few older lovers, yet Naoto trumped them all. She was everything he wanted in a partner, and everything he needed. Beautiful, yet intelligent. Clever, yet socially inexperienced. Kind, yet firm. He was enamored with the young woman, and he could barely resist whispering his feelings to her sleeping form.

One day, he told himself. "Naoto, wake up." His free hand prodded her face, his lips grinning as he found her cheeks to be like putty against his hand. Nao's eyes strained as she felt her face being toyed with. They finally fluttered open and cobalt, sapphire eyes stared into deep, silver pools. "Good morning, sleeping beauty. Did my kiss wake you up?"

Oh, how Yu savored the look of utter embarrassment on her face. She was redder than he had ever seen her. Anger, embarrassment, and fear all danced in her eyes as his teeth gleamed like that of a shark. "I'm joking. I haven't kissed you yet," he remarked with a giddiness in his voice.

"Narukami?! W-what are you doing so close?! P-please, step back!" she demanded. She lifted her hand up and pushed at his face, trying to force him away as he groaned in annoyance. Her hand was pressed against his cheek as he glared at her.

"I would, but you've got my arm in a vice! Let go before you rip my damn arm off!"

Naoto paused, before her eyes slowly traveled the length of her arms. One was pressing against Naruki's face, while the other was currently clinging to his arm, as if she was desperate for him not to go. Her eyes widened and her scarlet cheeks turned an even more vibrant shade of red as she released him. "I-I-I..."

"We fell asleep next to each other last night. I woke up just a moment ago to find something very small, and very cute holding onto me. Imagine my luck," he chuckled, grinning at her with a raised, grey brow.

"Small?" Naoto repeated, with a hint of indignation. She blinked in realization, before turning her scarlet cheeks away. "C-cute...? You're impossible," she sighed.

"And you're beautiful," he retorted with a wink of his eye. "I'm going to get breakfast started. You want anything in particular?"

"A-anything is fine," she muttered, lifting her hand to hide her blushing face with her hat. Her fingers found only hair, though. "Huh?"

"Your hat's on the couch. Behind you." Yu pointed behind the girl, just where the hat was. "It looks cute on you, but I actually kind of like you without it. You look... Wow." His eyes were on her, and he savored the sight of her face practically being painted red by his words. She quickly pressed her hat back onto her head as he turned to the kitchen. "You want any morning coffee? I can make it for you."

"I-I can make the coffee myself. I don't want to be any trouble..."

"No trouble at all."

"Even so, I-I insist. I'll handle it myself."

Yu nodded in understanding. There was a content smile on his lips as he began to assemble his
needed ingredients and cooking tools. He could hear Naoto moving behind him, quietly creating her own cup of coffee when a thought occurred to him. The two had woken up side by side, and now they were making breakfast together. It was like they were living together. Like they were married.

The dark red blush traveled from his cheeks to his ears and neck as he rubbed a cool hand against his face. He was trying in vain to quell his beating heart as the thought left a strange tremble in his chest. The sensation was warm, and tingly. The thought of Naoto and himself married, living together, maybe even with a kid on the way...

What would Yu look like? What would Naoto...? He could see himself growing out his facial hair a bit. Nothing too bushy, just a hint of ruggedness. His hair would maybe grow out a little, but nothing too disorderly. He could easily see his body remaining as perfectly balanced as it was now, just enough muscle to impress, but never enough to appear bulky or slow. He'd be just right, making him the perfect stud for any lucky man or woman.

But Naoto... Naoto would probably look like some kind of goddess in a few years. Her hair could still be as short as it was now, or maybe it would grow out. His heart fluttered at the thought of a long-haired beauty searching for the truth, before coming home to a hot meal prepared by her dashing husband. She might even be more open about her feminine side. She wouldn't bandage her chest anymore and... and...

Yu shook his head as he began to wash his hands. Gah. Get your mind out of the gutter. Focus on something else! Anything else!

His mind traveled along Naoto's body, moving away from her chest and down her slender arm. There was a simple, silver ring on her finger, with a sapphire gemstone gleaming in the sun's rays.

His heart stopped and he felt his face continue to burn. He'd never thought of marriage before Naoto came into his life. Now he found himself thinking about the act far more often than he'd like to admit... Oh, man. I really hope she didn't see that drawing in the sketchbook, he groaned.

"Narukami?"

"Huh...? Y-yeah?"

"You've been washing your hands for several minutes. Is something wrong?"

Yu glanced at his hands, before turning his head to the sleuth. Her face had long since returned to normal, but he couldn't help but feel like his own face was now flushed instead. The things you do to me, my dear detective...

After a quiet, but enjoyable breakfast, the two left to meet with their friends. Despite the time of day, they found the city of Inaba was blanketed under a large fog. It wasn't difficult to walk through, but the two remained close to each other's side just in case. They met the others at their usual table, but Yu and Naoto were both concerned to hear that Teddie had yet to be found. They sat down as Kanji and Rise reported their findings, or lack thereof.

"Kanji and I have been running all over town looking for him, and we haven't found a thing. We even entered the other world, but I didn't even get a trace of him," sighed Rise. "I'm sorry, guys. I wish I could be of more help..."

"Hey, come on, it ain't your fault." Kanji's hand rose from under the table and gently landed on Rise's, gently stroking her pinkie with his thumb as the girl nodded her head. Yu wanted to make a
joke about the two, but decided against it.

"He's right. We'll find Teddie. Don't worry. He's not going to leave us, I'm sure of that. Unfortunately, that's not the only problem we have on our hands. We need to know what to do about Taro," Yu explained.

"You on a first name basis with him now?" growled Yosuke, glaring at the silverette. The other young man didn't reply, merely glancing away as the bluette defended him.

"Narukami is right," Naoto agreed. "Namatame will be transferred soon, so we must talk to him before that happens, or we'll lose any chance to understand his perspective."

"Right. We know there's a lot more to this case than we thought," Yu added. He flashed a brief smile to Naoto, before looking to the others. "So let's think on this. We know he believes in saving others, but his definition of 'saving' them is different than ours, or at least, it's off."

"We also know that Mayumi Yamano and Saki Konishi are the only actual victims to be... killed." Naoto saw the flinch in Yosuke's face, and she looked down at the table. "I'm sorry, Yosuke-senpai."

"It's okay... We know that Mitsuo guy only killed Mr. Morooka. No one else, right?"

"Correct."

"I saw the way he talked about Mayumi." Yu's voice was firm, kindly asking for the others' attention as he glanced from face to face. "I don't think he killed Mayumi. I don't think he had it in him."

"You know that just be looking at the guy?" Yosuke argued. He sounded unconvinced, but Yu just shrugged as he stared at the brunette.

"I saw it in his eyes. He loved this girl. He was head over heels for her, thinking about marrying her. It just doesn't make sense to me. It couldn't have been an act of passion, she died over a week after the scandal was found out." His silver eyes glanced at Naoto, before turning to Rise's. There was an understanding in her eyes that helped him along. "He loved her. He would never want to hurt her."

"Well, he did talk a lot about saving people," Chie commented, trying to get Yosuke's sharp eyes off of Yu. She scratched the back of her head in thought, staring at the foggy sky. "But, I mean... People still died. So I don't really get why he thought putting them in the other world would save anyone. It sounds like he didn't mean to actually kill anyone." Her eyes slowly drifted back down and she shivered as she found her friends staring at her. "W-what? Come on, don't get all quiet on me! You know I just say the first stupid thing that comes to mind."

"No, Chie, I think you have a point... You're on to something." Yu snapped his fingers and looked at Naoto. "What about the letter? The ones that were sent to me? The first one talked about not rescuing anyone anymore, and the second said, 'If you don't stop this time, someone close will be put in and killed.'"

"But that doesn't make any sense," Yukiko argued. "If all he cared about was saving people, why threaten to kill someone close to you?" Yu's lips curled into a smile as he watched the dawning realization flicker in his friend's ebony eyes.

"Wait, I don't get it," Kanji admitted. "Was he trying to warn you?" He scratched at his head as the silverette looked at him, motioning for him to keep talking. "I mean, the letters are kind of weird
already. They don't sound right, like someone else wrote them for him."

"But only the killer would send a letter like that," Rise thought aloud. "But, doesn't that mean-"

"There's a second culprit..." Naoto's eyes widened as Yu banged his hand on the table.

"Son of a bitch, we're actually doing it!" he laughed. The others watched the silver-haired man with bewildered and confused stares, but he brushed them off. "Sorry. Just really proud of us. We're actually cracking this case." There was an elation in his voice, as if he was actually having fun with his friends. "I think we all know what we need to do. I think we need to talk to Taro."

He stood up, pushing his seat back as he looked at his friends. "If I can make a suggestion? I think we should split up and reconvene at Aiya's. Me, Yosuke, and Naoto will go talk to Taro, everyone else can ask around town for info on the murders and keep an eye out for Teddie."

"Sounds like a plan to me," agreed Rise. "We'll keep looking then."

"Hey, you sure this is a good idea?" wondered Yosuke.

"If you have a better idea, I'd be happy to hear it, but there's no real need for all of us to go," explained Yu. He tried not to sound too overbearing or arrogant as he smiled at Yosuke. "We should keep it small and simple. Go in, talk to Taro, and get out. A smaller group could do that easier than a large one."

"He has a point," agreed Naoto. "If there are no objections, then I am in agreement." No one raised their voice. Even Yosuke seemed hesitant to argue with the plan, even if he was still angry at Yu.

"Great. Naoto, Yosuke, go on without me for a bit. I need to pick something up from Junes," Yu smirked.

"What? What the hell do you need?" asked the brunette with an exasperated sigh.

"Just trust me. I'll meet you there." He bid the others a fond farewell, before quickly running off from the group. They stared at the departing silverette, clearly confused by his enigmatic goals.

Narukami was true to his word. He met Naoto and Yosuke outside the hospital, and the three made their way to Namatame's room. The detective's eyes were on her silver-haired friend, picking apart his smile with scrutinizing eyes. He's clearly at peace, relatively speaking. Whatever he's done, he isn't worried. He doesn't seem scared, or anxious. Hm... Perhaps some sort of gift? But what could he plan on giving to Namatame?

"Hey," Yosuke whispered, motioning around the corner as he looked back at the two. "You were right, Naoto. There's a guard outside the room. You sure your plan's gonna work, Naoto?"

The detective nodded her head, before glancing at Narukami. "Please, follow me. Yosuke-senpai, stay back until I give the all clear." The brunette nodded his head, though Naoto caught the way his hazel eyes seemed to glare at Narukami. If the other man noticed, he didn't show it. He simply followed behind Naoto as she stepped out from around the corner and approached the guard on duty. Yosuke quietly waited behind them with shifting, anxious eyes.

Naoto greeted the older officer, before asking for a chance to see Namatame. She caught Narukami's face shifting beside her, turning into an unnatural mask of meekness. She could see through it easily, but the officer seemed to find it unassuming enough to ignore the young man. Naoto made small talk with the officer, when his radio buzzed to life.
"Has something happened?" inquired the detective, after the man listened to the message. Her own deception skills were put to good use, allowing her to maintain a faux expression of curiosity as he the officer explained about a strange package found in the lobby downstairs.

"Ah. Well then, this works out nicely. You should back up your colleagues downstairs. We'll keep watch over Namatame-san," suggested Naoto. She could see the glimmer in Narukami's eyes, as if he had found something peculiar. She ignored him for the moment and kept up her facade, gently pushing the man to leave with her words. "A disturbance in a hospital lobby, after all... It sounds serious."

Naoto could see the older man's hesitation, before he sighed and nodded his head. "If anything happens, hit the nurse call button. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Understood. Please be careful." Naoto and Narukami nodded their heads, before watching the man dash down the hall. The two waited for a moment, before Narukami looked at the young woman with a toothy grin.

"Wow. So, you actually planted a suspicious package for this?" Naoto didn't have a chance to answer the rhetorical question before he spoke again. "Where did you even get that thing?"

"A detective should be ready for any kind of circumstance. A tool for every occasion," mumbled the girl. She glanced away, crossing her arms as she felt his silver pools examining her.

"Man, that's hot," he remarked. "The way you manipulated and tricked that guy? Whoo." Narukami shook his smiling head side to side as Naoto felt her cheeks burn. "Hamina, hamina, hamina."

"Louse," she grumbled, tipping her hat down to avoid his mocking smirk. "He's always saying things just to embarrass me! Damn him... He can be so... so perverse at times," groaned the sleuth in the privacy of her mind. Despite that, she stood up a little straighter, wondering if she really had impressed him with her plan.

"Aw, you know you love me," teased Narukami, only to pause. His own words seemed to weigh on his mind as he quickly became silent, staring at the wall. Naoto glanced at his face to find his own cheeks were turning a dark shade of red.

"Hey, are you two done flirting? Can we get moving?" Yosuke grumbled, stepping out from behind the corner.

"We weren't...!" Naoto sighed, before nodding her head. "Y-yes. Please, follow me," she ordered, pushing the door open.

The three found Namatame where they had last seen him, sitting on his bed, eyes on the window of his room. The sun's rays faintly illuminated his body. He did not seem to notice their entrance, and before Naoto could speak, Narukami walked forward.

"Hey, Taro. Remember me?" He spoke so casually. His words carried no fear or distrust. It was as though he and Namatame were old friends, and Naoto watched with surprised eyes as Narukami pulled a sandwich, wrapped in plastic, out from his pocket. "Got you something. Hospital food's crap, so I thought you'd appreciate some half-decent stuff from Junes." He handed the sandwich to Namatame, who took it after a moment of hesitation.

"I... T-thank you," mumbled the disgraced politician.

"No problem. I hope you like it." Narukami sat on Namatame's bed, smiling at the older man as Yosuke and Naoto watched from the side. "Taro, I need to ask you some questions. We just want to
try and understand you after all that's happened. Don't spare a single detail. We know about that other world... We're people you can trust, I promise."

Namatame did not respond immediately. He unwrapped his food and took a tentative bite of the soft meal, tearing a portion of bread and meat out of the sandwich and chewing it. Naoto watched his eyes drift, noticing how he stared at Naoto and Yosuke like they were snakes waiting for their chance to strike. He was nervous, skittish as he shuffled slightly on his bed. He glanced at Narukami, and his eyes relaxed. His twitching began to slow as he nodded his head.

"O-okay."

"Can you tell me who the first person you put into the other world was? It's okay, whoever it is, I won't be mad..."

"I-it was the girl," whispered the man.

"We're going to need more than that," Yosuke sighed.

"S-she was here. D-dark black hair. Red shirt... Her family runs the inn. Her name was-"

"Yukiko Amagi. I understand." Narukami glanced at his fellow investigators, and Naoto nodded her head. She was cheering for him, and she felt a degree of pride for the young man. He was using his social skills to get what they needed from Namatame. It was an impressive sight to behold. "What about the letters?"

"T-the what? I never sent any letters..."

"Wait, what?" Yosuke's brow furrowed, while Naoto tilted her head in confused. "You don't remember?"

"N-no, I-I never wrote any letters," groaned the man, massaging the temples of his head. "I-I don't remember writing them..."

"That's okay. It's alright," Narukami promised. "Can you tell me how and why you started kidnapping people? Saving them, I mean?"

"Y-you'll listen to me?" Namatame questioned, lifting his head to look at the younger man. He was trembling, but the silverette firmly squeezed his shoulder, calming him. "All right..."

"After the scandal became public knowledge, I returned to my parents home to try and hide from it all... I-I started drinking heavily to help me deal with everything that had gone wrong," confessed the man.

Narukami nodded his head as Naoto's cobalt eyes glanced at her friend's face. He wasn't smiling. He looked guilty, if nothing else. Naoto could only imagine why, but she wondered if the young man saw Namatame as something like a cracked reflection of himself. Narukami... Did you see things like Namatame did? You both have a history of being foolish, but I don't think either of you are bad... At least, you aren't anymore. She released a mental sigh, rolling her neck slightly as Namatame continued.

"Mayumi's name was thrown down the gutter. She was slandered, and it was all my fault!" Namatame cried, gasping for air as tears began to pool in his eyes. "I loved her, but now she was suffering because of me! I-I thought I was stronger than that, but I just failed her, and... and... I remember seeing her face on the TV screen. I-it wasn't like before. It was at midnight, and-"
"The Midnight Channel," Yosuke realized. "You saw the Midnight Channel?"

"Y-yes! I remembered hearing stories about it, but I thought it was just a myth!" He nodded his head vigorously, further pushed to recall his story. "S-she looked like she was crying out for help, and I remember reaching for her and my hand went through the TV screen!"

"It's okay. We can do the same thing," confessed Narukami. Namatame's eyes widened, and he looked at the younger man with shocked eyes. "I don't know how or why, but we have the same gift as you."

"R-really? I thought I was going crazy... I-I remember blacking out and thinking it was just a nightmare." Narukami just nodded his head, before gently pushing the man to continue. "But Mayumi was dead the next morning. She was dead, and I realized that she had been calling for help." He wiped his arm against his eyes, brushing away the tears. "I failed her. She was dead because of me, and..."

"It's okay, Taro. It's okay... Please, keep going. We need to know what you know, so we can catch the real killer and avenge the people they've killed."

There was a compassion in Narukami's voice that almost pushed Naoto to smile. She caught her lips curving and she quickly controlled herself, but still... She was proud of her friend. She listened to him speak, and she heard no lie in his voice. Not an ounce of deceit. He was speaking honestly, straight from his heart. She couldn't deny the pride burning in her chest as she watched Narukami urge Namatame on.

"Avenge... Yes, I understand," agreed the disgraced politician. "The next rainy night, I remember seeing another girl at midnight. I-I recognized her from my new job... She worked at the liquor store in town."

"Saki-senpai," muttered Yosuke. Naoto glanced at the brunette, silently asking if he was okay. He caught her stare and simply nodded his head as he crossed his arms.

"I recognized her as the girl who found Mayumi's body too. She was so scared, and I thought the Midnight Channel was telling me she was next! I couldn't let her die like Mayumi, so I became obsessed with trying to rescue her, to protect her!" His fingers curled into a fist and he slammed it into his own leg, snarling in rage. "I tried to warn her! I tried to tell her, but it meant nothing! I saw her die, just like Mayumi!"

"I knew she was in danger, but I couldn't do anything to save her! I failed her, and I failed Mayumi again!" sobbed Namatame, lifting up his fist again. "I kept failing everyone!" Yosuke flinched away at the man's screaming, watching with pitiable eyes as he wept. Naoto was little better, her brow wrinkling as she watched the older man shatter like glass.

"I know what that feels like," admitted Narukami. "I know what it's like to feel like nothing you do is right, but hating yourself isn't going to change anything, Taro." He caught Namatame's arm this time, stopping the man from hurting himself. "Catching the killer will. I know it hurts to remember, but you need to. Please..."

His words had the proper effect, calming the hysterical man. He nodded his head, shivering slightly as he continued. "R-right. I-I remember seeing another girl appear on the Midnight Channel." His voice was trembling. "She was going to be next. T-the girl from the Amagi Inn. I knew I had to do something, but warning the victim failed, and I tried going to the police about it, but they just thought I was crazy! That's when it occurred to me..."
"If I could enter that other world, what if I could hide someone in it too? Give them shelter, where their killer couldn't get them? I knew I had to do something, I had to protect these people... That's why I made it my mission."

"And so you kidnapped Yukiko," Narukami finished. "And she never died, so you thought you really did save her."

"I screwed up again, didn't I? The people I put into the TVs weren't really safe, were they?" Namatame's voice sounded broken, but he wasn't crying any longer.

"I'm afraid so. In truth, those put inside were in mortal danger. It was only thanks to my friends that no one you kidnapped was killed," Naoto explained.

"I knew it... I failed again." Namatame's head hung from his neck, sighing as he stared at his bed with dejected eyes. "When I went into that world with that poor girl, I saw how grotesque it was. It was horrible... Like a nightmare made real. I-I knew the sanctuary I believed in was nothing more than a lie. I wasn't some hero, I wasn't a savior, I was just a stupid, damn fool! I'm just as bad as the one who killed Mayumi!"

"Hey!" Narukami's voice startled everyone in the larger room. He glared at Namatame as the man lifted his head to look at him. "Enough with the pity party! What's done is done. You can't change the past, but we can change the future. I know what it's like to think you're nothing more than a piece of shit. I've fucked up too, but I'm trying to make things right. Mayumi wouldn't want you to just give up, and she damn well wouldn't appreciate the man she loved comparing himself to her killer!"

Narukami took a deep breath, and released it slowly. "You had good intentions. From your perspective, people stopped dying. I get it. I don't think I can hate you for what you did, so try not to hate yourself. You fucked up, yeah, but you can still make things right."

"Maybe you're right," the older man mumbled. "But my crimes are too severe to just brush aside like that. I have every intention of being punished for my crimes. I kidnapped people, I put their lives in danger... I was so stupid. I'm sorry." He looked at Naoto, and he bowed his head. He then turned to face Yosuke and did the same thing. "I'm so, so sorry."

"The Midnight Channel and the other world... You can hardly be blamed for failing to understand them properly," Naoto assured. She tried her best to comfort the man, even if she was not as skilled in speaking as her close friend. "We must apologize to you as well. Had we let our emotions blind us to the truth, we would have piled all the responsibility on you. I'm deeply sorry." That night still played over in her mind. How close she had come to not only killing an innocent man, but disgracing her family's legacy.

Thank goodness Narukami stopped me. Her eyes glanced at the silver-eyed man. I don't know what I would do without him...

"Yeah," Yosuke agreed. "You were trying to save Saki-senpai... I guess we do owe you an apology, so..." Yosuke's fingers combed through his hair, glancing away from Namatame as shame burned in his eyes. "I'm sorry too..."

"You shouldn't have to apologize to me. I understand." Namatame groaned and he rested his body back, falling onto his bed and letting his head rest on his pillow. "I'm sorry, I just feel so tired..."

"I understand. Get some rest, Namatame." Narukami stood up from the bed and turned his body to properly face the man. Naoto watched with mild surprise as her friend offered his hand to
Namatame. "Thank you for all your help... I'm Yu, by the way. Yu Narukami. If you ever need any help, try and find me. I'll do what I can." Namatame stared at the younger man's hand, before taking it firmly. The two shook hands, before Narukami gently pulled the man up. He wrapped his free arm around the politician, and patted his back in a one armed hug. "You've helped us a lot. Thank you. We'll make sure the guy who did this pays."

"T-thank you, Narukami-san."

The two parted away from one another and Narukami looked to his friends. "Let's get going." Naoto and Yosuke nodded their heads, before quickly making their exit. Naoto gave a passing glance to Namatame, her previous indignation and disgust replaced with pity. Still, the man looked at ease. Perhaps not happy, but at least more content with himself.

It wasn't much, but Naoto hoped that gave him some comfort.

The three were outside when one of them finally spoke again. They walked into the fog infested town and began to make their way to Aiya's when Yosuke looked at Narukami.

"Dude, what was that? You hugging him and stuff..."

"The dude needed a pick me up. He needed to be told he wasn't useless or a failure. I gave him that," shrugged Narukami. "He needed to be told he was important and played a role in stopping the killer." He looked at at Yosuke with sharp eyes for a moment. "You can call it lying if you want, but I know what it's like to be a failure, and to be desperate..." His eyes softened and he sighed in exasperating, breathing warm air into the mist. "Sorry, I guess, if I pissed you off again."

"I... Don't be." Yosuke released his own sigh, shrugging his shoulders as he pocketed his hands. "I get it. You probably said the right thing to the guy, especially after how we treated him last night. I guess you were right. He didn't do it," confessed the brunette. "I'm sorry for the shit I said to you last night, Yu. I guess I was out of line, and-"

"Stop. We're cool," Narukami remarked. "Thank you for understanding. You don't need to say anything else man. I'm just sorry for all the shit you've had to go through."

"It's okay. I just want to close this case for good," Yosuke admitted.

"That's something you and I can agree with." The two boys nodded at one another, and Naoto couldn't help but feel she was witnessing a hatchet being buried. She shrugged the feeling off, and the three continued to walk in silence until Narukami spoke up again. "The guy isn't running from his sins. I respect that," he muttered, a hint of admiration in his voice.

"It reminds me of someone I know," Naoto interjected. The corners of her mouth lifted into a small smile as Narukami glanced at her. "Someone who made mistakes, but is determined to redeem himself."

"Hm. Someone tall, handsome, and with an amazing sense of humor?" Narukami's infamous smirk formed on his face, and even in the dense fog, Naoto could see his eyes twinkle with his characteristic charm and confidence.

"Hm. More like a spectacular sense of arrogance," corrected Naoto with a sly smile. Narukami's smirk faltered for a moment, before he grinned even wider.

"So, you think I'm handsome?"
"I..N-no! I wasn't talking about you in the first place!"

"Right. Cause Namatame's so much like Rise."

"Ugh," groaned Yosuke, rolling his eyes at the two. "Can we hurry up? I can't take you two flirting much longer." There was a toothy grin on his face, smiling as the two blushed.

They returned to Aiya's and reconvened with the others, exchanging Namatame with what little information the others had gathered. To Yu's frustration, the others' search had proved fruitless. They had found little information on anyone who could be the killer, and even less on the whereabouts of Teddie. Yu sighed in annoyance, before glancing at Chie as she lifted her hand, waving a waitress to their table.

"One steak bowl, please!"

"Seriously?!" groaned Yosuke.

"What? I can't think on an empty stomach!"

"I'll cover for us," Yu offered, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. "Go ahead, everyone, order up." The others looked at their friend, before they began to make their orders. True to his word, Yu covered for everyone's meal as they all sat at the large table. Naoto was by his side as he ate away at his own bowl, listening to the others' repeat what little info they found.

"There's no new information. The end?" Chie offered.

"Half the people I tried talking to just ignored me and started talking about this stupid fog," added Kanji.

"And no signs of Teddie, either," sighed Rise.

"The police had a large number of officers in the area during the initial investigation, yet there wasn't a single report of any suspicious characters. Whoever did this must have been able to move without drawing any attention," noted Naoto.

"Maybe they're not even in town anymore?" Yukiko suggested.

"But they're probably the ones who also sent me the letters. I'd imagine they'd have to be close to watch over us," Yu commented.

"There was no way the letter was delivered by a mailman. It had to have been placed there," Naoto muttered. Yu stared at the girl, and at her untouched food. He could see the strain in her eyes as the gears in her mind turned. He could see the conflict in her, and he noticed the others were staring at her as well.

She's putting the weight of this case on her shoulders...

"I need some fresh air before I give it more thought. I'll be outside." Naoto stood up and exited the restaurant, and Yu followed behind her without hesitation. He found her staring at the sky, her body bathed in the fog as snow fell from the clouds.

"Hey. How you holding up?"

She looked at him, and for a moment he could see a lie hanging from her lips. It never came out. "I feel like a failure. I'm supposed to be a detective, yet I'm no use to any of you."
"Don't you start. You're the smartest person I know. You just need help, and thankfully, your beautiful assistant is here to do just that," he chuckled.

"Beautiful, now?" Her lips were turned into a bittersweet smile. He always could win a smile out of her.

"Right. Handsome. Sorry." The two smiled at one another, before looking at the snowing sky. "Okay. So this is someone who would have connections to both girls, while being practically invisible to the people and cops. Sounds simple enough." Naoto just nodded her head as Narukami took off his jacket and placed it on the girls' shoulders.

"What are you-?"

"Namatame wasn't seen as suspicious because of his job. Who else could move around like he could?"

"Oh, um..." Naoto began to recite various professions from her mind as Yu listened intently. "Repairmen, plumbers, police officers, parame-" She stopped as Yu looked at her with a smile. "A police officer..."

"Okay. A cop. Could our culprit be a cop?"

"It's an interesting approach," confessed the Detective Prince. "They could move about without suspicion, they'd be able to follow the case closely, and they could even destroy evidence that could implicate them, but there are dozens of cops in this town..."

"Well, what about my house? You'd think a cop dropping letters in my mailbox would be something our neighbors would catch or something." Yu, in all honesty, was talking out of his ass at this point, but it was clearly helping Naoto along some kind of path. He just hoped he was being useful to her. "Maybe it wasn't a co-"

"They'd have to be close to your family," her voice uttered.

"Huh?"

"They would have to be someone your uncle trusted. Someone who wouldn't raise suspicions being around your house specifically," Naoto realized. Her eyes widened as Yu stared at her. "Someone like Adachi..."

"Wait, Adachi? My uncle's assistant? He's the shittiest cop in this to-" He stopped. Namatame was a liar. Yu was a liar. Would it really be so shocking to find their killer hid behind a mask? "The guy would always blather some shit to us, before going 'Oops, I've said too much.' He always acted like he was stupid and inept, but do you think...?"

"It's a lead. It's something. In truth, there has been something off about the man, but... Damn it! I should have realized this sooner," she growled.

"If he's our guy. Don't go beating yourself up on what ifs, gorgeous. Look, you call and find the guy, I'll go get the others and tell them about your theory."

"Our theory," Naoto corrected, taking out her phone. He just smiled at her, before he quickly ran back into the restaurant.

Yu and the others ran into the hospital, and it did not take long to find their subject of interest. The
rookie detective blinked in confusion when he saw the group, greeting them with a half-hearted wave.

"Hey guys. Any of you know where Dojima ran off to? Namatame's being relocated, but I can't really go home until Dojima's back in bed..."

"You seem awfully eager to leave," Yu commented, his silver eyes narrowing as he inspected the detective.

"Huh? What do you mean by that? I'm tired. I want to go home, and-

Adachi...!" A voice called out to the group, before turning into a low groan. The teenagers turned their heads to find Dojima limping towards them, still dressed in his hospital gown. "There you are... I need your help. I need to find Namatame, but he's not in his room. Where is he?"

"Huh? H-he's been relocated, sir! W-what are you doing out of your room?! You should be resting, sir!" Adachi stepped forward to help his senior walk, only to be stopped by Yu's hand on his shoulder. "Huh? What are you doing?"

"What do you mean he's been relocated?! Who authorized that?!" snarled Dojima.

"G-give me a break, Dojima-san! Why are you getting mad at me for?!"

"The first two murders... Something hasn't been sitting right with me. That's why I need to talk to Namatame!"

"W-well, it isn't my fault he got moved! And you kids," Adachi growled, showing an uncharacteristic fire in his eyes as he pushed Yu's hand off his shoulder. "You guys are getting in the way of police business! You should all go home!" Yu noticed his eyes were different. There was something off about them, something sharp. He had never noticed before, but Adachi's eyes were a dull grey...

"Hey, what's gotten into you? You don't usually take work this seriously," Dojima commented, stepping forward. Kanji quickly moved to help the older man, helping him stand up straight and move.

"H-hey! What's that supposed to mean? I'm always giving it 110% percent!" Adachi's mouth spoke with a shocked tone, he spoke like a buffoon, and he sounded stung by the remark, yet there was something off about him.

"Adachi-san, were you the last person to talk to Mayumi Yamato?" questioned Yukiko. "I remember seeing you at my family's inn, talking to my mother. You were one of the officers at my house, right?"

"Huh? Well, yeah, I saw her, but-

"What about Saki? Did you ever talk to her? Did you ask her about what she saw?" Yosuke asked, stepping a little closer to Yu's side.

"Why wouldn't I talk to her? She saw the victim's body and-

"What happened to the letters?" Yu inquired. His voice was cheerful, and he plastered a fake smile onto his lips. It was so easy to fool people. Yu was an expert on that. It was so easy to trick others. "Remember? The letters that were sent to me?" His voice dripped with artificial mirth, making him come off as off-putting. The stark difference between his voice and the subject matter made
Adachi flinch away from the young man.

"W-well, with everything that's been happening, I-I think I just misplaced them, but I Mean, they were a joke, right? Why would-?"

"You lost them!?" Dojima roared. "I gave it to you for processing, damn it!"

"I-" Adachi was off balance. Too many questions, too many voices, too many people. Yu grabbed his shoulder again, pulling the officer close to him.

"Namatame didn't kill anyone. Do you know what I think, Adachi?" His smile slowly melted. He bared his teeth as he hissed in the cop's ear. "I think you did it."

"What the hell are you all talking about?!" The officer smacked Yu's hand away again and stepped back. "We all know Namatame the one who put them in!"

Silence. There was a deep, endless wave of silence that filled the halls as everyone stared at him. Adachi was just as quiet; his grey eyes slowly began to widen.

And then Yu pulled back his fist and slammed it into Adachi's face, throwing the older man to the ground. "You son of a bitch!" he screamed, releasing his anger like an inferno upon Adachi. He approached the fallen detective's body, savoring the sight of Adachi's bloody nose as Yu lifted his foot to kick Adachi in the ribs. His anger at Nanako's death, his fear for Naoto's life, his realization of his own inhumanity, he felt a twisting in his stomach when he saw into Adachi's eyes...

"Yu, stop!" Naoto grabbed his arm and quickly moved herself in between him and the groaning murderer. "It's over. We have him."

"Yeah." He was panting, trying to catch his breath as he looked at Naoto. *This bastard killed two innocent women. Mayumi and Saki... Both dead because of him. But there was something else. Something more that made Yu's stomach twist and writhe. He couldn't understand it. There was just something wrong burning in him. Like guilt, but different..."

"Are you okay?" Naoto whispered, the hand on his arm travelling up his body, resting at his shoulder. Yu nodded his head as his silver eyes stared into her own sapphire pools. They eased his anger, but something was wrong.

He could see Adachi reaching for something under his coat. His face contorted, blood staining his face as his teeth gleamed. Yu's silver eyes inspected him closer as time seemed to slow down. Adachi was taking hold of something. Yu's eyes caught something black in Adachi's hand, and his blood turned cold as realization set in.

Adachi had a gun in his hand. He was aiming it at Naoto's back. She was completely ignorant of the danger she was in as their friends stood behind them, too far back to see what Yu saw, too far away to react in time.

It fell on Yu's shoulders.

He saw Adachi's face right before he fired the gun. It was turning into something uncanny, something unsettling. There was pride in his dull, grey eyes. There was something that lit them on fire, made them almost glow as his mouth turned into a wide rictus. He was smiling, like how Yu would used to smirk at his prey.

Yu didn't hesitate. His hands pushed against Naoto's body as his legs thrust him forward. She fell to the side, eyes wide as she watched in confusion. He buried the thoughts of her as Adachi pulled...
down on the trigger. The bang was deafening. Yu, for just a moment, swore he saw the bullet travelling towards him. He didn't show fear, even as part of him trembled in terror.

He wasn't just waiting for the pain, he was running into it, and painful it was. It was like a hot, metal poker being skewered into his chest. It burned as it scathed against his ribs. He felt it hard to breathe. Yu wanted to stop, but his body kept moving on autopilot. The force of the bullet made it feel like something was tugging on his back, but still he ran forward.

Adachi clearly didn't think that Yu would still be moving after being shot. The adrenaline was probably the only thing keeping Yu moving. That and his friends. Adachi was ready to fire again, but Yu grabbed the barrel of the gun and forced it towards the ceiling. It went off. The bang stabbed at his ears, but he buried that pain. He tightened his free hand into a fist and swung it as hard as he could.

The punch collided with Adachi's cheek again, and he released the gun as he fell back to the ground. Yu held the gun in his hand, as Adachi moved back and kicked at him. The sole of his shoe hit Yu's chest, knocking the young man back and onto the ground. The others were screaming, but their voices sounded muffled. Maybe his hearing was giving out.

Footsteps. Adachi was running. Dojima was screaming. His friends... He had been hoping they'd chase after the bastard, but true to their form, they were stupid. They went to Yu's side instead, staring at him as his shirt stained with a deep crimson. His eyes widened as he stared at the lights on the ceiling. They stung at his eyes as he tried to take in a breath.

It hurt to breathe. His chest and face felt hot. It hurt.

He saw a shadow loom over him, blocking the lights. The shadow was Naoto looking down at him, crouched beside his head; he wanted to smile and tell her she looked like an angel.

It hurt to breathe.

He couldn't say anything as a voice finally reached him.

"Yu...?"

_Damn._ He thought to himself as the world began to melt. _She looks beautiful._

END
Yu remembered the day he met Teddie. He remembered how the small bear saved his, Yosuke, and Chie's life. He remembered how the supposed 'bear' gave him glasses to wear that would allow him to see and fight in the TV World. He even remembered how the bear nearly sacrificed his life to save him and his friends from Rise's Shadow, unknowingly saving the idol from Yu's sword.

But the thing he remembered most about Teddie was how pathetic he was.

Out of all of his so-called friends, Teddie was the most eager to bow before Yu. He adored his 'Sensei,' groveling in the mud towards his superior. Yu could barely hold back his laughter as he realized how worthless the bear saw himself.

Yu remembered pushing the bear to the ground, amused with the clownish creatures attempt to stand. Yu didn't even have to apologize to the creature. It just assumed it was an accident and moved on.

Teddie was so desperate for a place in life. It was like Yu was waving a bottle of liquor in the face of an addict. The bear revered Yu, and that gave the silver-haired man power.

The bear was no better than any of the other parasites hungry for Yu's attention. Teddie was an unremarkable stepping stone, but he was the easiest of the group to step on.

Yu had to resist the urge to smile when he and the others found Teddie alone and depressed. They needed his help to find Rise, but it was clear that the bear was suffering, drowning in his own loneliness. The silver-haired teen knew it would be easy to manipulate the bear, shackling it like the dumb animal it was.

Teddie tried to hide the fact that he was crying, and Chie and Yukiko apologized on the group's behalf. Yu opened his mouth to make silver-tongued promises, but something was off with the bear.

"Sensei...? Do you really not care about us?" wondered the grief-stricken Teddie.

"What?" Yu's eyes widen, and his kind smile was wiped from his face. The colorful bear was staring with reflective, trembling eyes. His sniffles brought Yu back to reality, and the liar tried to save face. Teddie's question had thrown him off balance, but Yu could lie his way out of any problem. "Teddie, you know that's not true. Of course I care about you."

Teddie's tearful gaze contorted, his fabric-like skin ripping as his coal-colored eyes glittered like gold. Yu took a step back, only to feel a hand pushing him back into place. "Liar." The bear's voice deepened, becoming low, enough to send a tremble down Yu's spine as his bones began to ache from the vibrations in the air. "You don't care about anyone, but yourself."

A sharp pain cut through Yu's body, and he cried out as his shoulder burned like it had been set on fire by a match. He stumbled forward, glancing at the familiar kunai lodged in his shoulder. "W-what?"

"Stop pretending to care about me!"

That voice sounded so familiar. It only took Yu a moment to realize it was Teddie's, echoing in the
air like thunder. He turned his head and he saw the eyes of the others rolling into their skulls. Their mouths were plastered into wide, toothy grins that dripped black, inky blood. Their eyes turned gold, glowing with a familiar, eerie sheen as familiar voices snarled at him.

"And what were those words you used to call us in your head?"

"I think he called us... Leeches."

"Weaklings."

"Parasites."

"Stop it," Yu pleaded, but his voice was barely above a whimper as the memories bubbled in his head. "Please, stop..."

"Stop? Why the hell would we do that?" a voice cackled.

Yu watched as Teddie's mouth grew into the same wide, inhuman grin. The fabric that made up Teddie's face ripped, oozing, black shadows pouring from the torn material. It fell onto the ground in murky waterfalls as something moved under Teddie's skin. Yu could see something press against the fabric from within the bear suit, pushing and kicking harder and harder against the creature's skin. Teddie's eye popped out, falling to the ground like a large coin as a hand slowly began to rip the fabric apart.

Teddie's body, no, his corpse vomited more ink-like blood as a familiar face slowly peeled the suit from his body. Black hair, lanky frame, but with an all too familiar smirk.

Adachi was drenched in the shadow-colored blood, smiling at Yu with a rictus-like grin. "You've finally found yourself."

Yu gasped for air, opening his eyes to find himself in the familiar setting of the Velvet Room. He was panting, trying to calm down his racing heart as he slowly separated reality from dream. A nightmare... Just a nightmare... He was shaking, rubbing his hot and sweaty forehead as he gasped for air, swallowing spit down his throat with great effort.

The only sound in the Velvet Room was the low hum of the engine, and his own breathing, and that brought a disturbing realization to light. He was alone, inside the Velvet Room.

Okay. Okay, calm down. He took a deep breath, relaxing his heart rate as he slowly began to recount what led him back to the Velvet Room. It was a simple task, and one that allowed him to try and forget about the nightmare he had just gone through. We were at the hospital. We were talking to... to Adachi. Memories flashed through his mind.

Adachi. A gun. A loud bang. Naoto calling out his name as he lay on the ground.

Yu brought a shaking hand to his chest, feeling his body for any kind of wound. He was relieved to find there was no bullet wound on him, but he quickly reminded himself that the Velvet Room was somewhere between dream and reality, and the reality was that he had been shot.

"Shit," he cursed. "So where the hell is Igor?" he growled, glaring at the empty seats in front of him. "How the hell am I supposed to get back without...? Huh?" It was brief, but something had caught Yu's attentive eyes. It was a brief, very subtle shift in color on the couch Margaret would sit on. A flicker of crimson formed, before it vanished again. "What the hell...?"

It was like something was trying to exist, but couldn't. Like a TV with bad reception, it flicker into
and out of exist every few moments, too quick for Yu to get a better look at it. "H-hello?" He called out to it, and the ruby figure twitched, staying where it was for a moment longer as blue formed over it.

Yu knew exactly who he was looking at with just a glance at the creature's dome shaped head. "Teddie?"

"Huh? Sensei? What are you doing here?"

"I... I could be asking you the same thing," replied Yu. He looked around the room, expecting Igor to appear, but there was no one but himself and the colorful bear. "Teddie, where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you," the young man explained, turning his silver eyes to the small bear.

"I'm sorry for troubling everyone," he whimpered.

"That's not..." Yu groaned, rubbing his forehead as he forced his body up. His muscles ached, but he ignored the fatigue to approach the bear. Teddie looked away as the silverette sat in front of him. "Teddie, what happened to you?"

"I..." The bear struggled to look his sensei in the eyes, but no matter how hard he tried, he failed. He just looked at the ground and sighed. "I've been thinking lately. About who I really am." Yu nodded his head, the young man's face was stern, but attentive. He motioned for the other boy to go on, and Teddie did so. "I'm no one. Since the start, no matter how hard I tried to look, I've been no one. I'm just a Shadow from the other world..."

"What? A Shadow?" Yu repeated the idea in his mind, his eyes widening as they examined Teddie closer. How could he be a Shadow? He's never acted like them...

"That doesn't make sense, Teddie. How could you be a Shadow?"

"My world is shaped by human thought," explained the bear with a broken voice. "One day, a Shadow awoke to human emotions and desires, but humans and Shadows are two completely different entities. So I made myself forget I was ever a Shadow." Teddie turned his body away and stared out one of the windows into the endless fog outside. "I wanted people to like me," he whimpered, trembling in place as his voice continued to crack.

"I really am stupid," Teddie confessed. "What that other Teddie said was true! No matter how hard I try to find my true self, I'll never find it! Because there is no real me. There never was to begin with."

"It would have been better if I had just never remembered," sniffled the bear. "But I guess I couldn't even do that right. I'm probably going to turn back into a normal Shadow soon..." He looked away from the fog and stared at the taller man. "Sensei? C-can I ask you to do something for me?" Yu was silent, but he forced his head to nod. "When you see Nana-chan in heaven, can you apologize for me? Tell her, I'm sorry I couldn't do anything right." Teddie trembled in front of the silverette. "I'm really sorry..."

Yu had heard enough. "Teddie." He tried to sound firm without scaring the so-called Shadow. "I won't have to tell her that. She's safe. She's alive." The news clearly surprised the bear, but shock soon gave way to sheer joy as Teddie sighed in relief.

"That's wonderful! N-Nana-chan's okay? Thank goodness. I'm so glad I could hear that before I... Huh? Sensei?" Yu's hands were stretched outward, reaching around Teddie's head. The bear's eyes widened as Yu took the metal zipper in hand and pulled, undoing Teddie's head and pushing it off,
revealing the boy inside. "Huh?!"

"Out. Now." Yu grabbed the boy's collar and pulled, forcing the blond to come tumbling out of his bear suit and onto the ground beside Yu.

"Ouchie..." The boy groaned as he rubbed his head, brushing hair from his eyes. Yu grabbed hold of his arm.

"Get up and sit down on the couch."

"Huh?"

Teddie once again felt himself being pulled, this time onto his feet as Yu pointed at a nearby cushion. "Sit down. I'm going to get us some drinks." The bear blinked dumbly, before opening his mouth. "There will be plenty of time for questions. Right now, you and I need to talk, Teddie. Man to man." The younger boy blinked again, before quietly obeying his teacher's orders. He moved to sit down on the leather cushion as Yu walked towards the cabinet of drinks.

Yu glanced from bottle to bottle. He found some alcohol, and while tempted to pour a glass for himself and Teddie, he decided against it. The young man needed Yu at his best, and that meant being sober. Instead, Yu picked up a pair of wine glasses and a large bottle of apple cider. He placed the cups on top of the cabinet of drinks, and filled them.

He placed the bottle down and picked up the cups, handing one to Teddie as he downed the other. Yu returned the empty cup where he found it and looked at Teddie. The young boy was sitting down, looking up at the silverette. It was a grim reminder to him that Teddie thought the world of his 'Sensei.'

"We need to talk. I need to tell you the truth of who I am, and I need you to listen, okay?"

"Um... O-okay."

Kanji Tatsumi buried his face in his hands as he struggled to think. He had just exited Yu-senpai's room. He could hear Yukiko, the last of the members to see Yu's hospitalized state, enter the room. The others were strewn about the long hallway, each quietly looking at each other for answers as Yu slept. Rise was by Kanji's side, sitting up straight, body leaning forward. She rubbed at her eyes, brushing the fresh tears off of her face.

Yosuke and Chie-san were walking back to the group. They had left to make sure Dojima was okay. Really, it was more about making sure Dojima didn't rip off his stiching again or hurt the hospital staff. Kanji couldn't blame the old man. Yu was probably like a son to him, and Adachi nearly killed him. *He almost lost Nanako... Can't imagine what would have happened if he lost Yu too.*

Kanji scratched as his head, taking a deep breath and sighing as his cerulean eyes fell on the detective sitting across from him. Naoto Shirogane. The woman he had loved and the one who had broken his heart. Honestly, the pain of rejection could still be felt by the young man, but he brushed it aside. It hurt, but this was worse. This was so much worse.

Naoto looked dead. She barely looked better than Yu. Her eyes seemed glassy and dull, and her characteristic hat just laid on her lap. Naoto's fingers played with the rim, gently stroking it with her fingertips as she sat there.

Kanji wanted to talk to her. He wanted to say something, anything to make her feel better. Despite
all the heartache and turmoil she had, unintentionally, put him through, he still gave a crap about her. Some part of him still loved her.

"Naoto?"

She didn't move her head.

"It's gonna be okay. Senpai's gonna wake up. He's too tough to go down."

She didn't even glance at him.

It was infuriating, and Kanji wanted to scream at her to look at him. He stopped himself, though. Anger was always something he had fallen back on. It was the simplest reaction to what life threw at him, but he knew better now. Anger wasn't gonna help anyone. Not Naoto. Not Yu. Not Rise.

Rise shifted beside him, lifting her head up to look at Kanji as Yosuke and Chie approached the others. The blond forced himself up, standing on his own two feet. He could still see Yu-senpai in front of him. He laid on the hospital bed, dressed up in one of the patient gowns the doctors force people in. There were bandages under his clothes, all over his chest. Kanji could still see the blood on the ground, staining the sterile, tiled floor as Yu's eyes widened, staring into the ceiling.

He could have died.

He still could.

Kanji could still remember his father, laying in a hospital bed just like Yu's. He remembered how weak his father was, how the man he looked up to just laid on the bed, wired up to machines. The memories made Kanji feel sick, they made his blood boil, but he wouldn't let his anger control him. He took a deep breath as Yukiko exited their friend's room.

Good. Hopefully I don't have to repeat myself, thought the blond. "Guys? I-I think we should go after Adachi." The others stared at him like he had gone crazy, and why wouldn't they think that? Kanji, the team's idiot, coming up with a plan?

"What? Y-you want us to just abandon Yu?!" Yukiko gasped, clearly offended by the very notion.

"We ain't abandoning him!" Kanji tried to sound to sound brave, but trying to actually voice his thoughts turned out to be as scary as facing his Shadow. He sighed again and turned his head to Yosuke and Chie, slowly facing each of his friends. "We don't need to be by his side to be with him. Adachi's out there, doing who knows what! Yu wouldn't want us to just stand around watching him sleep!"

"He's right." The voice cut through the air like an explosion. The others turned their heads, and Kanji found himself smiling wryly as Naoto finally lifted her head up. Her eyes lacked their usual color, almost appearing grey as she looked at the others. "Yu would want us to look for Adachi."

"He'd probably call us all idiots," Rise commented. She brushed her sleeve against her eyes again, standing up on shaking legs. Kanji offered an arm to her and she caught it, helping her stand straight. "Typical Yu..."

"They're right, Yukiko." Chie looked at her best friend, who stared back with crimson, puffy eyes. "We should at least try to find Adachi in the TV World... Give Yu some good news when he wakes up." The brunette forced her lips to smile, and despite the strain, Yukiko slowly nodded her head.

"Alright, fine... I understand, but... someone should still stay here to keep an eye on Yu."
"I'll do it." Yosuke lifted up his hand, dragging his feet forward. "The rest of you can go to the other world. Try and find Adachi, but don't go after him."

"Agreed. Reconnaissance only. We should leave immediately."

"Do... you want to see Yu again before we go?" Yosuke asked the group the question, but Kanji knew he was really asking the detective. She didn't even pause as she shook her head.

"It's fine. We should hurry." Naoto marched her body down the hall, motioning for the others to follow. Yukiko and Chie glanced at one another, before sighing and following suit. The brunette girl placed a gentle hand on Yosuke's shoulder, and the two's eyes met for a moment, before separating.

Yosuke watched the girls leave, before looking at Kanji. "Nice work, man." He forced himself to smile, and Kanji returned the gesture. Yosuke entered Yu's room, leaving the the two younger teens in the hall.

"Good work, Kanji," Rise complimented. The young man was silent as he felt the idol's eyes peer into his head. Her hands gently touched his arm as her voice called out to him. "Kanji?"

"S-sorry. Just scared." Kanji let his shoulders fall and his arms hang at his sides. His heart was racing. Trying to act like some kind of leader to the group was exhausting, and he was thankful that Yosuke, Naoto, and Yu shouldered that responsibility most of the time. He turned his head to Rise, seeing the concern in her hazel eyes. "I did alright, right?"

"You did great, Kanji." She hugged his arm tightly and he took in another slow breath, unintentionally smelling her rose-scented perfume. "Yu couldn't have done better himself."

"Heh. Yeah. Right." The blond's cheeks turned warm at the feeling of Rise's warm embrace, but his blood turned cold once more as he stared at the door to Yu's room. Somehow his fingers and Rise's found each other, and the two locked hands as their eyes both fell on the door. "He's gonna wake up, right?" Kanji remembered asking his mother the same question once upon a time.

"He will," his mother and Rise answered. "He has to...

Wake up soon, Yu. We need you, man.

Teddie wasn't sure what Sensei wanted to talk to him about. He sipped some of the strange drink, before putting it down on the floor. His blue eyes watched his Sensei stand there, awaiting to hear whatever it was he had to say. Sensei sounds upset... It must be serious, but what is it? Could it have something to do with me being a Shadow? The boy flinched as he reminded himself of the truth, only to be distracted when Sensei finally spoke.

"When I was younger, there were these two girls I knew who were best friends with one another. Kaiyo and Katsumi, I think their names were."

"Um... Okay?" He nodded his head, slowly.

"I dated both of them, and others, all at the same time. I cheated on them. I used them, and then I threw them aside when I was done with them."

"What?!” Teddie almost jumped out of his seat, but Sensei's hand motioned him to sit back down. What? That can't be right!
"Listen to me. I've been with dozens of people in my life. Boys and girls. Old and young. It was easy for me. People were like thread, and I could wrap them around my fingers with ease. I didn't care if they got hurt. I didn't care how badly they cried, or how much they hated me. I just enjoyed having them love me, almost as much as I enjoyed hurting them."

Teddie struggled to understand what he was hearing. It was like hearing that the sky was green, or that topsicles were hot. It just didn't make sense!

"That... That doesn't sound right. Why would you do that? You're the nicest guy I know!"

"I'm not. I never was," sighed the older boy. "Before I came to this town, I was a bad guy. I hurt people, and I took advantage of them. That was who I was. That was the real me."

"The real you...?" Teddie shook his head, his lips turning into a brief scowl. "That's impossible! The real you couldn't be a bad guy! You're... you're supposed to be my Sensei..."

"I was never worthy of you calling me that," sighed Teddie's teacher. "I'm not your better. Honestly, you might be my better..."

"Your better...?" Teddie scoffed at the idea. "I don't want to be your better though..." The silver-haired teacher didn't say anything, scratching at his head as he struggled what to say next. "Are... are you still a bad guy?"

"Well, I got shot, so... Maybe?"

"Wait, what?! You got shot!?!" screamed Teddie. The older boy moved across from the bear, sitting down on the other side of the car as the blond boy rose up. "How?! Why?! Who?!"

"Adachi."

"Adachi?! That goofball?!" Teddie blinked once, before scratching at his head. "What happened while I was gone?!"

"A lot. After Nanako turned out okay, Naoto found out Adachi was the murderer, and he tried shooting her. I pushed her out of the way, and... Well, you can guess what happened after that," the silver-haired man sighed.

"You... you saved Naoto-chan?" Sensei nodded his head, and Teddie stared at the ground in thought. "You took a bullet for her?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"But that doesn't sound like something a bad guy would do!" Teddie racked his brain, his eyes briefly turning into a glare as he looked at Sensei. "Why would a bad guy get hurt to save someone?!"

"I was getting there. I was a bad guy, no argument there, but after I met Naoto things began to change. She and Rise helped me out a lot. They helped me be a better person, and open up to the others. I'm sorry to say you're the last person in the group to find out about the 'real me.' I wanted to tell you, but then you vanished..."

The other boy sighed as Teddie stared at him. "I'm sorry, Teddie. I really, really am. I know this must be a disappointment to you, but I am trying to change. Rise and Naoto, and all the others, they're helping me change. They're helping me be a better person, and I think they can do the same for you."
"Huh? For me?"

The young man nodded his head. "I used to think people were just stepping stones for me. That I was better than them, and that I could just do what I wanted with them. But I guess Naoto changed me. Then Rise changed me. Then I started to realize, people were more than that." The smile on his face didn't look like a normal smile. It wasn't like the charming, winning grin that Teddie was used to his Sensei wearing. It almost looked sad.

"Kanji's more of a man than I gave him credit for. Yukiko's an amazing woman with a strong spirit and a forgiving soul. Yosuke stopped me from killing myself. Chie's more like me than I ever realized. All of these people in my life who I took for granted, who I stepped on, they've changed me. Made me more than I ever was alone."

His silver gaze fell on Teddie and he placed his hands together. "Teddie, if you want to leave, then you leave. If you don't want to go back to my world, then don't. But don't do it because you're a Shadow, or a bear, or whatever it is you are. Make a choice based on what you want. To hell with everything else. Be selfish. That's my last lesson for you. Be happy."

"And if you do go back? Talk to the others. I think you'll find that they care about you just as much as they care about me. I know it sounds crazy, but they helped me find my true self. I think they can do the same for you."

"Huh..." Teddie met his teacher's compassionate gaze, before blinking. "Wait, last lesson?"

"Yeah. Like I said, I don't deserve to be called your Sensei. So consider this your graduation." Teddie's eyes nearly popped out of his head as his jaw hung open.

"W-what?!!"

"I want you to think of you and me as equals from now on. That, or maybe I should call you Sensei," he chuckled.

"I... I don't understand," Teddie lamented. "You don't seem like a bad guy. You don't seem like my Sensei either. You're... you're someone else entirely." But maybe that's the point... Maybe his true self isn't my Sensei or as a bad guy... Maybe he really is my equal. "Equals? You and me?"

"Is that so crazy?"

Is it? Teddie tried to answer that question, only to notice something as he glanced at his feet. "Whoa!"

"Huh? What is-?" Yu's eyes followed Teddie's before he recoiled in shock. "Your legs...!"

They were fading away. Yet the blond bear stood without issue. Rather than freak out as most people would, Teddie just snapped his fingers in revelation. "Oh! My time must be all spent up here. I'm not allowed to stay here any longer." His legs continued to fade away as he looked at his Sensei... no, his friend. "Yu?" The word felt foreign on his tongue. "I think you and I are more alike than you thought too."

Yu glanced at Teddie's vanishing body, before looking at his smiling face. He sighed briefly, before he formed a small grin. "Yeah, maybe. Hey, Teddie? No matter what you pick, I hope you find what you're looking for. I really do."

"Thank you, Yu-san." And just like that, Teddie felt his body become weightless as he was taken away.
"Teddie...?" Yu approached the empty seat and waved his hand in the air, as if the strange boy was just hiding, but he found himself along once more. "Great..."

"It seems the water's strength has moved a single stone that had stopped, returning it once again into the flow... Very interesting."

Yu turned his head to find Igor and Margaret staring at him. The woman had a soft smile on her lips, while the older man was grinning with the same toothy smirk he always had. Yu sighed, shaking his head as he walked over to the two. "Hey. Sorry for stealing the cider."

"Not a problem. You are our guest, after all," chuckled Igor. "Now, it is time once more for us to depart. There is no need for us to tarry here any longer. Margaret?"

"We are ready to go. Let us depart," the older woman agreed.

"Wait, you're going already?" Yu asked, before glancing at the nearby window. The car was moving, and he could feel the ground shaking below him. The sudden movement of the car nearly made him fall over, but he caught himself.

"You are every inch the guest I had anticipated," Igor laughed. "Now, it's time for you to return. I must admit, I am even more intrigued now as to where this is all headed... Goodbye, Yu Narukami."

"We'll be waiting for your next visit."

"Huh? I-ahh!" Yu felt a splitting pain in his chest, his eyes widening as his head was hit with a fierce dizzy spell. "What...?" Crimson stained the underside of his white shirt as he felt the ground below him crumble. His eyesight was turning black as he fell into darkness...

Yosuke sat beside Yu's bed, glaring at his phone. The hardest part of all of this for him was that he was completely powerless. There was nothing he could do to help Yu. Nothing he could do to help his friend wake up. *Come on, you bastard. Wake up. We need you,* cursed the brunette.

All he could do was sit by Yu's side, waiting for something to happen while their friends risked their lives hunting down a killer. He squeezed his phone in his hand, sighing angrily.

Yu looked the same as he had when the others had been here. He laid on the bed, the only moment he gave was the slight rise and fall of his chest. There were wires connecting him to machines, the sight of which unnerved the young man, and the soft beeps of the heart monitor was still grating Yosuke's nerves.

"What the hell are we supposed to do?" he asked himself.

"Y-Yosuke...?"

"Huh?" Yosuke's head darted left and right as he nearly dropped his phone. He looked down from his seat and found Yu's face twitching, eyes squeezed shut. "D-dude! You're awake! Hold on, I'll get a nurse and-"

"Yosuke." Yu's voice stopped him. He had a tone of urgency, one that was only made more apparent due to the strain it took for him to speak. "I need you... to do me a favor, okay? I need you... to try and find Teddie. Got it?"
"Huh? Teddie? But he's-"

"He's going to come back. He wants to, I know he does." Yu's eyes forced themselves open, but Yosuke could tell his friend couldn't see straight. His vision was probably blurry, yet he knew Yosuke was there.

"Dude, are you sure? I mean-"

"Go. Go get a doctor. Probably need to make sure I'm not dead." His silver eyes fell closed once more as the electronic beeping of the nearby monitor filled the room once more. Yosuke stared at Yu's still body, before walking out of the room.

It did not take him long to find a nurse. He quickly pointed to Yu's room and explained that the patient inside had woken up and spoke to him. It took even less time for the nurse to call a doctor to come inspect the silver-haired patient. Yosuke was asked to stay out of the room while the staff worked, which worked out well for the amateur investigator.

He was texting the others the news, hoping they would get it as soon as they stepped back into their world. Meanwhile, his brain was working overtime. *Find Teddie? How the heck am I supposed to find that bear? We've been looking all over the place for him!*

"Excuse me, miss? Can you help me find my friend, Yu-san?" There was a voice around the corner. It was the voice of a young boy, and just hearing painted a face within Yosuke's mind.

What? No way...!

"Yu-san? Do you know his last name?" the nurse inquired.

"Um... Narukami, I think? He's Nana-chan big bro. He told me he got shot and-"

"Teddie!" Yosuke ran around the corner, and he found the familiar blond-haired boy/bear talking to a young nurse. Teddie turned his head to find Yosuke's shocked face. He smiled in response, waving at the taller boy.

"Yosuke! Hi!"

"How...? When...? What happened?! Where have you been?!" Yosuke shouted, running up to the boy.

"Do you know this man, sir?" the nurse asked, her almond eyes drifting between the two boys.

"Y-yeah! Um... He's my little brother," explained the brunette. "Ain't that right, Teddie?" His own hazel eyes glared at the younger boy, hoping he'd catch on.

"B-brother...?" Teddie repeated, with wide eyes. "Y-Yep! That's right! He and I are bear-thers!" The boy gave a thumbs up to the nurse, nodding his head vigorously with a beaming grin on his face.

"Hm." The woman was said nothing, but her eyes spoke volumes. The almond orbs threw daggers right through Yosuke, and he had to fight the urge to flinch away as a creeping feeling crawled along the back of his neck. It was gone in an instant, and the woman seemed to smile at his nervousness. "Alright, well, just make sure to stick together now, okay? You two have a nice day now, okay?"

"R-right."
"Yep! Thanks for the help, Miss Nurse!" Teddie happily waved the woman goodbye as Yosuke glared at him.

As soon as the nurse was far enough away, Yosuke spoke. "Dude, where have you been?!" he questioned, motioning Teddie to follow the brunette. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been?!

"I-I'm sorry... Was everyone really worried about me?" the bear asked.

"Of course we were, fuzz-for-brains!" huffed Yosuke, only to pause. He took a deep breath, and exhaled, before speaking with a gentler tone. "Come on. We better meet up with the others. I need to tell them about Yu, and they need to see you're back." He paused for a moment, glancing at Teddie. "Wait, how did you know what happened to Yu?"

"He told me."

"He told you? How the heck did he do that?" The question brought Yosuke to a stop, and Teddie did the same by his side.

"Um... I guess that's kind of a long story." Teddie scratched at his head as chuckled awkwardly. His eyes widened slightly as he remembered something, and Yosuke could hear an oddly serious tone in the blond boy's voice. "Yosuke. I need to ask you something important. Is Yu a bad guy?"

In an instant, Yosuke understood the other boy's tone. "So, he told you?" Teddie nodded his head, his lips a tight, thin line. "You okay?" He hesitated, but Teddie still nodded his head. "Alright. Well, I think Yu's a lot of things. He's arrogant. Kind of an ass. Weird, but... No. I don't think he's a bad guy."

Yosuke watched as Teddie's sealed lips slowly curved. "Yeah. I don't think he is either," he confessed, the corners of his lips rose higher up, before he began to walk again. "Come on! Let's go find the others!"

The fog in the other world felt differently on Rise's skin. It just seemed to crawl on her skin, dragging against it like it was something's long, damp tongue. It felt rough against her skin, not to mention hot. She ignored it as best she could, focusing her mind to look through her Persona's eye. She combed through the strange, fog-infested world, but try as she might, she found nothing, and contrary to what others might have thought about what she did for her friends, using her Persona's power was exhausting her.

She couldn't let her other friends see though, no matter how much her legs shook. Rise knew she couldn't join them in a fight, she knew couldn't do what they did in a battle, so she put her all in what she could do...

Despite that, her fatigue became obvious to Kanji.

"Hey. Take a break, Rise," he gently requested of her.

"I'm okay... I'm just a little diz-Hey!" Rise felt her body being pulled, and Himiko vanished as the young idol fell against Kanji's chest.

"You looked ready to pass out, ya dunce," grumbled Kanji. His hands were under her arms, helping support her as she the two looked at one another, both upside down from the others perspective. "It's okay, Rise. You can take a break."
Any attempt to argue died in Rise's throat when she glanced at Kanji's azure eyes. She merely sighed and allowed him to help her back onto her feet. "I must look like a mess," she muttered. It sounded like an attempt at humor, but her voice lacked any kind of upbeat energy. Her fingers combed through her hair, only to get caught in several knots.

"Nah. I think you look good. A bit of sweat looks good on a girl!" Kanji complimented. It only took him a moment and a barely contain snicker from Rise to make him regret his words. "W-what I mean is, sweat looks good on a girl cause it means she worked hard! I didn't mean anything weird by it... Quit laughing!" The blond tried to make his voice sound fiery, but the glimmer in his eye revealed he meant nothing by it.

If anything Rise seemed to appreciate the awkward statement. "Thanks, Kanji-kun." Her eyes glanced away from the boy, the faintest shade of red on her cheeks.

"You two make a cute couple," commented Yukiko, a mix of amusement and jealousy forming her tone. She snorted and giggled as the two first-years denied the statement as best they could, but the lighthearted moment did not last long.

"What do we do now?" wondered Chie. "If Rise can't find the guy, what are we supposed to do?" She looked to Naoto for answers, but the Detective Prince offered none. She just paced around the outskirts of the small stage, lost in thought.

"I'm sorry, everyone," apologized Rise. "I know Adachi's around here somewhere, but I just can't pinpoint where..."

"Hey. It ain't your fault," Kanji comforted. "Don't sweat it, Rise."

"I know, I just... I wish Teddie was here," confessed the copper-haired idol.

"Huh? Why? Didn't he said his nose was useless or something?"

"Yeah, I know he probably wouldn't be any help, but... Well, he just always supported me." Rise shrugged her shoulders, offering a weak smile to Kanji and the others. "It was nice having two cute, cuddly bears cheering for me."

"Yeah, I get that... Wait, two?!"

Chie smiled at Rise's laughter and Kanji's flushed cheeks. "That bear's a loudmouth, but he's but he sure is nice to have around. He's always so full of energy."

"Yeah... I miss him too," admitted Yukiko. "I'd do almost anything just to have our team back together again..."

"Well, I can help for at least part of that!" Yosuke Hanamura traveled through the portal, a toothy grin on his face.

"Hanamura-san!" Naoto stepped closer to the brunette, her brow wrinkled into an angered glare for a moment. "What are you doing here?! You're supposed to be watching Yu!" In an instant, her demeanor changed and softened into one of dread. "Wait, did something happen? Is he okay?"

"Yu's alright," Yosuke answered, holding his hands up to stop the siege of questions his friends were about to ask. "He woke up, said some stuff, and then I left while the doctors and nurses were looking him over. He's okay, I think. Might even be awake when we come back down to see him."

"H-he's awake...? Yu is...?"
"That's great!" cheered Rise, embracing Kanji without warning. Rather than push her away, Kanji's own grin rivaled Rise's. The sight of his beaming face so close to hers made her cheeks turn a rosy shade of red. "Alright! That's awesome!"

"What a relief," Chie said, her shoulders falling close as she released a breath she didn't even know she had been holding.

"That's great!" Yukiko added, nodding her head in approval.

"It gets better, you guys. I found-" Yosuke was promptly shoved to the ground by a small, if familiar sight. "Ow... Dude! You were supposed to wait for the signal!"

"Oh. Oopsie?" Teddie helped Yosuke onto his feet as the others stared with shock at the small, human boy. "Hi everyone! Um... I'm really, really sorry for-"

"Where have you been?!" Rise cried, dashing forward to embrace the blond human boy. She threw her arms around his head and buried her tearing eyes into his neck. "Bad bear! Bad! Do you have any idea how worried we were about you?!

"Man, we were running ourselves ragged looking for you! Where the hell have you been, ya dumb bear?!” growled Kanji, holding back tears as he stomped over.

"Teddie's back? How...? Where did you find him?" Chie wondered, looking at Yosuke as Yukiko ran over to hug the blue-eyed boy. "How did you find him?"

It took only a few moments for Yosuke and Teddie to regale the group with how they found one another, and only slightly longer for Teddie to explain his own revelations. Rise could see the confession was something Teddie was dreading, and even as the words slipped from his mouth, Teddie looked as though the group was ready to attack him.

Once he was done, Chie was the first to speak up. "A Shadow? Like the ones we've been fighting?"

"Yeah. That's right," Teddie admitted, a hint of anxiety in his voice. "I-I'm not like them, but I am at the same time, I-"

"It's kind of a letdown, honestly."

"What?!" The well-dressed boy turned his cerulean eyes to Yosuke, glaring at the older teen. "What do you mean a 'letdown'?!"

"Well, I kind of always thought you'd be something crazy like that"

"W-w-what?! Here I am, pouring out my bear naked heart, and you're saying you're not even surprised?! How could anyone think a beautiful bear like myself would be a Shadow?!

"I mean, you had to be something, right?" Yosuke commented, shrugging his shoulder lazily. "Besides, not like it matters."

"Huh?"

"He's right. Who the hell cares what you are or were? Only thing that matters is what you is!" Kanji declared, pointing at finger at Teddie.

"Poor grammar aside, they're right." Naoto's voice was like a spotlight in the dark. Everyone's eyes turned to her and they each paid attention as she spoke. "It's true that you may have been born a
Shadow, but you now possess the power of a Persona. A Shadow is suppressed power, once controlled by the ego, it becomes a Persona. Doesn't it follow, then, that you must have developed an ego? Whether the ego masters its Shadow, or the Shadow awakens to its ego, the only difference I see is the order in which the process occurred."

"So... That means Teddie's practically human, right?" Chie wondered aloud, scratching at her head.

"He looks human. He sounds human. I'd say he's as human as any of us, bear costume or no bear costume," Yukiko announced with a firm nod of her head.

"Totally! Teddie, you're one of us, simple as that." Rise gently hugged one of Teddie's arms, pulling him into another embrace, before pulling away so he could see her smiling face. "We don't care what you are. You're our Teddie, first and foremost."

Teddie was struck silent by the group's acceptance. There was no struggle, no questioning, barely any confusion. They accepted him with open arms. His bond with them, and their bonds with him, were too strong to break. Yu had been right the whole time. Teddie could feel the warmth and mirth that surrounded him, drowned him, until all he could do was roar out of sheer joy.

"Raaawr! T-thank you, everyone! I missed you all so much!"

Teddie was clinging to Rise like a child to their older sibling, before he dashed away from her to embrace Kanji, who turned scarlet once more and fought to get the bear off of him. Teddie then went to Chie and Yukiko, hugging both girls, who returned the gesture hesitantly. They kept an eye on his hands, before Teddie made his way to embrace the Detective Prince, who accepted the hug with her own blushing cheeks. After that, the blond looked at Yosuke.

"Dude, don't even think about it! Hugging's totally a girl's thing and if you hug me, I'm gonna-!"

His threat fell on deaf ears, and soon, Teddie was squeezing the life out of Yosuke. "Alright, alright! I get it! Let go!"

"I'm so happy! All of you still like me and... and..." In a moment, Teddie's good mood disappointed. His expression became crestfallen as he looked at the ground. "Yu... I remember seeing him while I was away from this world. He told me I should come back and talk to all of you. He told me what happened."

"So you know about Adachi then?" Rise asked.

"Yeah... Have you found him yet, Rise-chan?"

"No, I haven't," she mourned. "But it's good you're here. I wanted to know if you could help me find him."

"Huh? Me? B-but my nose is useless!"

"I know, but I'm not getting anything," the idol sighed. "I just really need some help, Teddie. Please, can you try?" She placed her hands together and gave the small boy a pleading pout. In an instant, a fire seemed lit in the bear-turned-human's eyes.

"O-okay! When you look at me like that, how can I say no?!" Teddie happily declared. He marched forward, to the center of the stage, his face brimming with determination and resolve. The boy took a deep whiff of the fog, a sight that was even stranger than normal considering he was without his bear costume. "I can bear-ly see two feet in front of me, but my nose is as good as ever!" He took another deep whiff, pacing forward, before turning sharply, and then going right back to where he came. "Hm..."
"You got anything or not?" Yosuke asked.

"It's hard to say... It's like I got something, and nothing at the same time." Teddie's eyes were shut as he took in one more deep whiff of the fog-infested air. His eyes shot open and he grinned proudly. "I got him! It's coming from the room Chie, Yosuke, and Yu came from when I found them!"

"Huh? You mean that room where Yosuke peed himself...?" Chie shuddered at the memory, as Yosuke glared at her.

"Hey! I did not pee myself!"

"Ew! That's so gross," Yukiko gagged.

"I didn't!"

"Enough." The childish bickering fell silent as Naoto's cold eyes fell on the two. "Teddie, are you sure you have Adachi's position?"

"Yep! I'm fur sure!" Teddie didn't seem affected by the sleuth's stoic voice. He simply smiled in response.

"Then we should return to the hospital, and inform Narukami of our progress. Challenging Adachi with anything less than our full strength would be foolish. We have no idea what is waiting for us up ahead." There were no arguments from the others, and so Naoto turned her body to the TV that led back to their world. The others followed her.

The group returned to the hospital, with little fanfare and heavy hearts. They walked to Yu's room, expecting to find the silver-haired young man asleep once more, but that was not the case. Instead they found a very awake Yu Narukami laying on his bed, his body propped up slightly as he ate from a tray by his bedside. He placed a piece of fruit onto his tongue, only to stop mid-bite as he noticed his friends gawking at him from the doorway.

"Hey." He gave a halfhearted wave to them. "At least Adachi had the decency to shoot me inside of a hospital, am I right?" His joke fell on deaf ears as his friends rushed to his sides, creating a miniature tornado of greetings, shouts, and relief.

"Senpai!"

"You're awake!"

"Sense-Sorry. Yu! You're alive!"

"Of course, I'm alive!" Yu shouted, swallowing his food. He tried to motion for the group to give him space, a facetious glare in his eyes. "It was just a gunshot. Who do you guys take me for? Kanji?"

Rather than be insulted, Kanji found himself laughing at the remark. He wiped tears from his eyes as he tried to grumble back. "Oh, right. You're a real tough guy."

"You know it," scoffed the silver-haired patient. His eyes glided along the room, his mock annoyance giving way to a genuine smile. "I see you're all fine. You even found Teddie! Shit, maybe I should get shot more often. Maybe Adachi will just turn himself in next time."
"That's not funny!" Rise scolded, despite the smile pulling on the corners of her lips. She wiped her own tears from her eyes as she whimpered, "We were all so worried! We thought... We thought..."

"Rise, come here." Yu motioned the girl closer, and with only momentary hesitation, Rise approached him. The two shared an embrace, Rise leaning down to wrap her arms around him as he did the same for her. Yu gently patted the girl's back, before releasing her. "See? I'm okay." She wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded her head.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Yukiko inquired, placing her hand on Yu's when he faced her.

"There's something you can not do that'll help. If any of you-" Yu very poignantly pointed at Rise, Chie, and Yukiko, one by one. "-try to cook for me, I will fling myself out that window, I swear to God."

There was laughter in the group, a sound that Yu had sorely missed. The group chuckled at his joke even as Chie and Yukiko tried to defend their culinary skills. He savored the sound of their chuckling and giggling as his silver eyes spied the only friend of his that wasn't by his bedside. Naoto stood against the wall, staring at him and the others, but clearly keeping her distance both emotionally and physically.

Yu allowed the happy moment to last for as long as it could, before he smile fell and he asked the question he had been dreading to utter. "So what have I missed?"

"Teddie says he's found where Adachi's at," answered Yosuke.

"Excellent work, my old student. Knew you were ready for that graduation. We'll have a party after, have some real drinks," Yu chuckled, winking at Teddie. The younger boy winked back, a wryly smile on his face.

"Wait, graduation? Real drinks? What are you two talking about?"

"Don't worry about it, Yosuke." Yu brushed the question away. "Alright, let's go get him." The silverette tried to push his body up, only to feel Kanji's hand press against his chest. "Kanji. Why are you groping me?"

"Dude..." Kanji shook his head, pressing down firmly. "You're not going anywhere right now."

"What? The hell are you-"

"He's right, Yu!" Rise was quick to step to Kanji's side. She placed her hand on Kanji's, pressing down gently with him onto Yu's chest. "You need rest. You need to recover."

"I'm fine! It was just a gunshot. Besides, Yukiko can heal me when we're inside the other world."

"That's even if you make it to Junes," Yukiko argued. "You need to stay here and heal." She reached across the bed and met Kanji and Rise's hand in the middle, placing her on top of Rise's. "We voted on it, and we all agree you need time to heal before you can even try to walk out of here."

Yu glanced at the raven-haired girl, before glaring at the three hands on his chest. "Okay, sweet gesture, but get off. It's actually starting to hurt a little." The three retracted their hands as Yu sighed. "How long am I supposed to wait?! Adachi could be planning another murder for all we know!"
"A week." Naoto walked away from the wall and approached Yu's side. "At least one week. You need to stay here and rest for the duration of at least one week before we even consider bringing you back to the field."

If there was any argument in Yu's mind, it never made it past his lips. He just nodded his head as he stared into Naoto's cobalt eyes. He gazed into them, unsure of what he was even looking for. All he found was a strange emptiness, a familiar hollowness that he was all too familiar with. He glanced at Rise, and she seemed to read his mind.

"Why don't we give Yu some breathing space. I don't even remember the last time I ate." She tried to pepper her voice with childish whining, but one glance at Kanji meant he understood the truth.

"Yeah. Some food sounds really good right now."

"Huh? How can you guys think about food at-" Yosuke placed his hand on Teddie's shoulder, silencing him.

"Come on, Teddie. Let's get some food. I'm buying."

The others all quietly agreed. Yu waved the others goodbye with a weak smile, before looking to the only person still standing in the room. It seemed even the socially awkward Detective Prince was able to read the mood, and understand the real reason why the others walked out. She stood by his side, staring not at his face, but at his chest. Knowing her, she was visualizing the bandages that were wrapped around his stomach.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself for what came next.
It's Enough

Naoto saw it every time she closed her eyes. Yu Narukami laying on the ground, his eyes wide as he struggled to breathe, his blood washing over the white floor like a crimson wave. His eyes were locked with hers as he trembled on the ground. Her mind felt like it was moving through mud, slowly moving from disbelief to absolute horror. She wished it was a nightmare, but the simple truth was that Yu had been shot...

He had taken a bullet meant for her, saving her life, but possibly damning his own.

The thought made her stomach churn, and her mouth taste like bile. It burned her mind and it churned her stomach.

Her eyes opened, and what she saw sparked a wide range of emotions. Joy to see her friend alive and well. Relief to see him smile, even if he was on a hospital bed. Guilt as his brow flinched from the pain of moving.

And anger.

Ugly, repulsive, illogical anger.

She couldn't find the words to convey what she wanted to say. She couldn't find words strong enough to carry the emotional weight. All Naoto Shirogane, the 'great' Detective Prince, could do was tremble as she stood by his bedside.

Naoto mentally damned the others, cursing them for leaving her with Yu. She wasn't an idiot, she knew they wanted her to speak to him, but where was she supposed to begin? A simple lapse in judgement, a rookie mistake, had caused her closest friend to nearly die, and it was all her fault.

"You know..." Yu Narukami began, almost singing the words. "If you were in a nurse outfit, this would all be worth it." His lips curled into the impish smirk he was known for, arrogance and desire sparkling in his eyes as he resembled the snake she had met all those months ago.

She saw right through it. Some calmer, logical side of her mind told her it was his way of helping her, goading her to say something, to help her try and voice her feelings. It was stupid, and reckless, and it was so like him. Maybe she should have been thankful, because his words, and those accursed eyes, brought the truth out from her.

Logic and rationality were like pebbles. They couldn't hold back the flood as Naoto finally found the words she wanted to say.

Yu Narukami stared into Naoto's eyes. It was almost like she was looking right through him. Like he wasn't even there. All she could see was his injury. The blood and bandages, and nothing more.

He wanted her to stop. He wanted to go back to Halloween, or even the night of Namatame's trial, just so he could hold her in his arms and see her smile. He wanted nothing more than to comfort her, to help her, but even shifting in his bed caused his body to scream in pain.

So Yu did what he did best. He talked out of his ass, hoping it would get her to look away from his wounds and talk to him. He made a comment about a nurse outfit, and he saw her eyes twitch. He
struck again, while the iron was hot.

"You know, they say anger and lust are two sides of the same spectrum." Yu tried to maintain his plastered grin, even as her eyes caught his. Her voice was like a sledgehammer against clay, shattering his mask.

"Don't. Do not do that." His smile crumbled as her cold, cobalt eyes glared at him. He remembered the last night, and how Namatame was being put to death by the group. Naoto's eyes gleamed like they did that night. They were like ice, and like ice, he felt chills going down his spine.

"Naoto-" He opened his mouth, but her voice silenced him.

"Stop treating this like it's some kind of joke!" Naoto's sapphire eyes glared into his. Her voice was hoarse, raw with rage and frustration "Don't you realize what happened to you?!" Her hands rested on the metal railing around his bed, trembling as they squeezed the bar until her fingers turned pale.

"I got shot, but I'm o-" Yu tried to calm her down, but his demeanor only served to further enrage the young woman.

"You were shot?!" She scoffed at his words, spitting them out like venom. "What an eloquent way of putting it. Then allow me to give you me version of what happened!"

She tore her hat from her head and slammed it against the railings. Yu could tell her more logical side was barely in control. She was infuriated, and he didn't know what to do. In truth, he wasn't sure if he had ever seen her so enraged. Even the night of their first kiss seemed to be a lit match in comparison to the inferno she was spitting out now. The night of Namatame's trial was close to this, but it was still very different. Her anger wasn't directed at any supposed murderer. It was aimed at him.

"Three inches! Did you know that?! The bullet was three inches away from hitting your spine! Three inches and you would have been paralyzed!" Naoto screamed. "If the bullet had hit your spine, you would have never walked again!"

"Naoto-"

"How could you ever be so stupid?!!" Naoto paced along the outskirts of his bed, and Yu could see the shimmer in her navy eyes. Tears were pooling, and she was desperate to hide them. "I don't know what's worse. The fact that you were shot, or the fact that you practically ran towards the bullet! If you had just moved to the side, you would be the one standing here and-"

"And you would have been shot." Yu's voice growled, the very thought sending a shiver down his spine. "Like hell I would have let that happen." His voice hardened like steel as his eyes glared at her.

"Why?! You were always selfish, why couldn't you be selfish again tonight?!" The words stung to hear, and he could see the regret in Naoto's eyes as soon as her lips uttered the words. Yet she wiped the regret and tears from her eyes, and glared at him. "Why couldn't you just let him shoot me?"

"Because I care about you, Naoto," Yu growled.

Naoto scoffed once more, shaking her head. "Enough jokes! Enough! Do you think this is some kind of game?! Don't you realize how stupid you were?!" The detective tossed her hat aside, letting it hit the wall and quietly fall to the ground with a low 'thud.' "You almost died! If Adachi's bullet
had moved just a few inches to the side, you wouldn't have been able to even walk out of here! You should have just let it hit me, damn it!"

"Stop. Saying that," Yu demanded, his teeth grinding and fingers digging into the palms of his hands.

Yet his warning couldn't reach her. She ranted and raved, sweeping her hands through the air as she bellowed. "You're always doing this! Always trying to prove how stupid you are to me! Flirting with me, calling me ridiculous pet names, acting like...like...!!" She failed to finish the sentence, her frustration leaving her to just groan in exasperation. "You always act like an idiot around me, but this?! This is easily the dumbest thing you have ever done!"

"Naoto, calm-"

"I'm a detective. An excellent detective, yes, but the mystery is solved. Out of everyone in the group, I am the least important team member now! I'm useless to you, and the others now, so why did you do it!!?"

That question. That single question. He had the answer to it. He had many answers. She was still a member of his team, she was still a person, he owed it to her, it was the right thing to do, et cetera. There were so many reasons for why he couldn't let her get shot, yet one reason laid on the tip of his tongue. He closed his eyes, strained his mind to keep silent, but the venom she spat at the two of them still burned at his ears and heart.

Useless? Naoto, you're not useless. The very thought of the woman he loved, the person he needed most, being called useless made his heart writhed. His vision blurred as he took in a slow, haggard breath. Naoto. He saw the way her sapphire eyes gleamed when she noticed something seemingly insignificant, the way her cheeks blushed when he complimented her genius intellect, the way she actually chuckled or laughed at his jokes, the way her lips curved and stole his breath away.

All the little details that made him fall deeper and deeper in love with her.

"Narukami. Answer me! What drove you to nearly kill yourself?! Why do you always have to be so reckless?! Why couldn't you have just let him shoot me?!"

"Because I love you!"

His voice was, ironically enough, like a gun shot. It made the room go quiet and neither could muster the strength to speak at first. There was only the harsh, timely beeps of the heart monitor beside him. Yu chewed the inside of his cheek, staring at Naoto as her eyes widened and her body shook. He opened his mouth and the words fell out.

"I love you, Naoto Shirogane. You... You are the single most important thing in my life. I can't imagine a life without you. I can't stand the idea of letting you get hurt. I can't... I can't be selfish when I look into your eyes, because I... I love you with every ounce of my heart. I love you."

It felt good to say it. He chuckled, despite the tears that were now falling from his eyes. Revelation set in as he stared through the haze of pooling tears. He almost died this night. If he had, Naoto never would have known how he felt. How much he needed her. How much he loved her.

"I love you." The words tickled his tongue like drops of sugar. "I love you, Naoto." The words felt natural. "Every time I hear your voice, every time I think of you, I just... I want to be with you." He couldn't believe he was finally saying it. His own eyes widened as the words naturally slid off his tongue.
It was like the dam that controlled his true feelings had shattered. The floodgates were open. The truth had fallen out of his own mouth, and now it hung in the air like the fog outside. Yu stared at Naoto, and his heart suddenly ached. Naoto...? There were tears cascading down her cheeks. Her hat laid on the ground behind her, letting him stare into her eyes without hindrance. She was crying.

"N-Narukami, t-that isn't..." Her voice wouldn't stop trembling. She took a deep breath, before forcing the words out, slowly. "That isn't funny."

"I'm not trying to make a joke." Yu was shocked she could even consider him going that far. He wondered if she was just that desperate to deny that he had feelings for her. "Naoto, I really do love you."

"How can you say that?!" She shook her head, trying to scoff at the words. "How could you possibly believe that...?"

"How could I not...? I love you, Naoto." He said it again. It was nice to say. It was addicting, honestly. He wanted to go on saying it for the rest of his life. "I love you. I love the way your eyes light up when you figure something out, I love how clever you are, I love the sound of your laughter, the way you look when you smile, your desire for justice, your-"

"T-there are a million reasons for why you shouldn't feel that way about me! You aren't that type of man, I'm not that type of girl, I-I shouldn't even be thinking about such things at my age, I have to focus on my career, my family's legacy, the case, I can't-we can't, I..."

"Naoto, I'm not trying to make you into anything you aren't. I'm not trying to take anything from you. I just... I love you. I don't care if you're a boy, or a girl. I've felt this way for months. Hell, before I even knew you were a girl, I loved you." And he meant it. He remembered seeing her at Junes, knowing he found her cute, but not realizing the Pandora's Box he was opening.

He remembered the night of the King's Game, and how addicting her lips felt. How soft she felt. How it hurt when she walked away. How he realized Yu Narukami, famed lover and thief of hearts, had fallen for the detective.

Yet she couldn't understand it. She couldn't meet his silver eyes as she paced back and forth by his bedside. "Rise, and Yukiko would both be more fitting matches for you. They're feminine, a-and both are very beautiful. They're not me, and-"

"And I don't love them. The only person I love is you. They're not as smart as you, or as fun to be with as you, or as beautiful as you. They're not you, so I don't love them." He wiped his tears away, and he took a deep breath. His nose felt clogged. His cheeks felt hot. He quietly laughed at himself. He used to be so cool. Such a heart breaker. Now look at him.

"Beautiful? Narukami, you can't honestly think..." She bit her lip, silencing herself. "You're delirious. You... I should go." She pulled away. She made a break for the door, and he felt desperation clawing at his heart.

"Naoto!" He called out to her, and he was disgusted with himself. He sounded utterly pathetic. Completely, and utterly pathetic. Needy. Whiny. Weak. He couldn't help it, though. She always brought out the real him. "Don't go..." The words fell from his mouth, and regret and bile stung his tongue.

She stopped mid-step. She was facing the door, staring at it like it was her only hope.
Does she really want to leave that badly? he thought. "I'm sorry." He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for. It just felt like the right thing to say.

"T-there's nothing you need to apologize for. I just... I-I have to go, Narukami."

Why? He didn't know what to say. He wanted to stop her, but was that the wrong thing to do? Was it selfish to make her stay? But he wanted her. Yu needed her. He had almost died, and he could barely move. Was it wrong to want some company?

Yu's fingers dug into the sheets of the bed, and he tried to smile. He wiped away his tears and he nodded his head. He tightened the mask against his face, and when he spoke, his voice had no hint of sadness in it. "Alright. Goodbye, Naoto."

Naoto stood in front of the door, staring at the wooden frame for what felt like eternity. She lifted her hand to push it open, but her fingers fell, dragging against the smooth, cold surface.

Just push the door open, she told herself. Just go. She lifted her hand again, but her knuckles just gently tapped the door. What's wrong with me...? Why can't I leave!?

Her mind raced as her heart pounded like a drum. None of this was how it was supposed to be. Yu wasn't supposed to feel this way for her. He couldn't. He was lying. He was just lying to her for the sake of his own entertainment! That was it! He couldn't love her, she told herself.

She wasn't beautiful. She wasn't strong. She wasn't even smart! She was a failure, and no matter what she felt, they couldn't be together. No matter what I feel... Naoto told herself to just walk away. To leave the room and forget this ever happened. Forget the words Yu had said.

Him? In love with me? Impossible. I... He's just lying. Maybe some part of her wished they were true, but they just couldn't be true. Even if they were true, what was she supposed to do? Tell him she loved him back? Did she love him back? Yu Narukami is the greatest friend I have ever made. H-he's helped me, and I have helped him, but...

"Naoto? You can go. I promise."

He was trying to disguise his voice. She easily heard through his attempts. Yu didn't want Naoto to hear his heart shatter.

She couldn't walk away. To leave Yu's side now would be selfish. She couldn't bring herself to do such a thing to her best friend. Whatever feelings either of them may have had, she couldn't just abandon him.

Narukami. Yu Narukami... The name sounded odd, echoing in her head. She had heard his name so many times, yet it sounded peculiar now. Even after taking a bullet, you're trying to make this as painless as possible for me. She stared at the door, trembling where she stood on legs that felt too weak to hold her. He said, I can go. I should just go. She knew what she should do, but something told her different. How long am I supposed to make him suffer for me? I can't... I won't. Naoto felt her legs stepping away from the door, slowly dragging themselves away from it.

"Naoto? I said-

She turned her body to face him. Neither of them looked presentable, she imagined. Narukami's eyes were turning red, her face felt hot, dried snot and tears laid on his arms from wiping his face, and she felt as though she was ready to collapse from fatigue. Despite all of that, she walked forward and embraced him, and his eyes widening as he felt her tears shatter against his neck. Yu
was clearly stunned at her touch, and his silence only made the sound of her wracking sobs all the
more pronounced.

Naoto couldn't stop the tears from falling. She couldn't stop her voice from wailing. She must have
looked so childish... But Yu would never call her that. No, he'd tease her, but she knew he would
never actually insult her. After all, he loved her. The damn fool...

"I-it's my fault you were hurt..." she confessed. "It's my fault you're here. I should have seen the
gun. I should have kept my eyes on him. Because of me, not only did Adachi escape, but you..."
She was crying. The tears flowed from eyes to his neck as she gasped for air, hiccuping and
sobbing. "I'm sorry...

"Naoto..." Yu embraced her, pulling her closer against him as he laid his head on her shoulder. He
didn't seem to care how badly it hurt him, and as long as he could keep embracing her, she didn't
want to let go. "Listen to me. You are so much more than a detective. You're a fighter, a genius, a
person, and my friend. You belong with the Investigation Team. Mystery or not, we are so much
less without you. Hell, I'm less without you..."

His arms felt nice, Naoto realized. She felt a warm sensation crawl up her arms, warming her skin.
His words only poured gasoline on the fire. Her cheeks turned hot as she pressed her body tighter
against his, taking in his scent and savoring his embrace. Part of her wanted to stay there for the
rest of the night. She knew she would have to make due with a few more moments.

She pressed her face against his neck, wiping the last remaining tears against against his skin as her
haggard breaths began to slow. He had almost died. Her closest friend, and he had almost died.
Anger gave way to guilt and sadness, and tears doused the enraged fire in her soul.

"I was terrified I'd lose you," she admitted. "I... The thought of never hearing his voice again.
Never hearing another stupid, flirty comment, followed by that trademark smile. The thought
brought more tears falling down her face. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault I got shot, Naoto," he chuckled, laughing through his own tears. They fell down
his face, gently landing on her head, into her blue locks. "This is all on Adachi. He did this, and
we're going to put an end to it."

"I should have been better. I should have-"

"Shh..." His voice was soothing. His touch comforting. He gently stroked her back, carrying her to
a better place. "Naoto, it's okay."

"No, it isn't. You almost died." She spoke again before he could. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, clearly you
know what happened, I just... I was so close to losing you." She tried to pull back, but she could
feel his hold on her keep her there. "Narukami." It felt odd to call him that now, she realized. "I'm
sorry for so many things. I'm sorry for what happened to you, but I'm also sorry about... about
trying to leave. I just don't know how to react to this! I-"

"I know, Naoto."

The two embraced one another for what felt like forever. Both were terrified of the empty space the
other would leave behind. The very idea that this could be the last time they see each other would
be the last time. Eventually, Yu's hands began to slowly fall off her back and he pulled away from
her. One hand was on her hip, lingering there, before falling off. "Naoto." His eyes met hers, and
she saw a reflection of herself.
His eyes were red, lacking his characteristic energy and spirit. They were also puffy, with his cheeks a sizzling crimson. His hair was a mess, and he struggled to breathe through his nose. She imagined she looked very similar. "I love..." Yu stopped himself, and Naoto felt a pang of guilt for his hesitation. "I forgive you. None of this is your fault, but if you need to hear it, I forgive you."

"Thank you." His words, both the ones he told her, and the ones he kept buried in his heart, hung over her head. "About what you said earlier, I... I want you to know you mean the world to me. You are my greatest friend."

"You sweet-talker, you," he joked, earning a small smile from the sleuth.

"I just... I need time. I don't know how to comprehend this, and-and there's still the matter of Adachi, and... I just need time," she sighed, head hanging low.

"I understand. Take as much time as you need. I'm not going anywhere," he joked, the corner of his lip rising slightly.

"That isn't funny," she huffed, yet her own lips twitched at the comment. It almost felt like nothing had changed.

"Yeah. I know." Despite that, he continued to chuckle. "Hey, Naoto?"

"Yes?"

"You should get some food, babe."

Food felt like the last thing on Naoto's mind, yet her stomached nearly growled at the thought of sustenance. Yet Naoto felt her feet rooted by Narukami's side. "Narukami, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You need food, and I should probably get some sleep." His lips smiled at her, before he let out a sigh of exhaustion. "I promise. I'm okay. Just tired. You need food, and rest. Go home. I'm going to be here for a week, so you don't need to worry."

"R-right." She nodded her head. "I'll come by tomorrow after school." He nodded in return, and she stood straight. "Well, goodbye."

"This is enough, you know."

"What?"

Three simple words that confused the infamous detective. Her brow furrowed as he held his hand out to her, motioning for her to touch him. She placed her hand in his, trusting him wholeheartedly. He held her hand, which had never looked smaller or plainer than it did today, and kissed her knuckle. A familiar spark of electricity coursed through her, and part of her screamed to pull her hand back. Naoto felt her body stiffen as Yu placed another kiss against her skin, before he pushed her hand back towards her. Yu gently pushed her hand against her chest as he spoke.

"I won't lie to you. Not again. I love you, Naoto, but if you don't feel the same way about me? Fine. This is enough. Your friendship is enough." His thumb caressed her palm, before he released her. "This will always be enough for me."

"Yu?" He was such a strange person. Obnoxious, flirtatious, yet kind and compassionate. Didn't he once say that this change in personality came from her? That she inspired him to be different? Perhaps that was love in its purest form. The desire to improve in honor of another. Naoto sighed, exhaustion weighing her mind down. *A mystery for another day...* Despite her fatigue, she smiled...
at Yu, and bowed her head. "Thank you..."

"Always." She walked towards the door, and this time, she found the straight to leave her best friend alone. She needed rest, and she needed time. She hesitated, noticing something. Her hat laid on the ground, resting against the wall. She picked it up and dusted it off with careful, steady fingers. "Narukami?"

"Hm?"

"Will you hold onto this for me?" She held her hand out to him, and he stared at it as though it was a glittering diamond. "Until we see one another again?" She didn't know what possessed her to come up with the idea. This was her father's hat, passed down to her. It was a symbol of the Shirogane legacy that hung over her, yet she was giving it to a man she once hated?

Yu took it, and she watched as he held it with bated breath. His eyes were wide, and he took deep, steady breaths as he stared at it. He placed it upon his head and he smiled at her. It was perhaps the brightest he had smiled since waking up. "With pleasure."

Kanji watched as Naoto finally return to the group, and he immediately saw something was wrong with the young woman. She looked like she had gone through hell, with something heavy on her mind. She gave a halfhearted wave to the six as they sat at a table together, before walking away to get her own food. Rise watched the girl, before glancing at Kanji.

The two stared in silence, speaking without words with one another. Both knew something was wrong with Naoto, and both wanted to help their dear friend. Kanji nodded his head and Rise nodded right back.

The group made an agreement to have someone come after school to visit Nanako, Dojima, and Yu each day. Naoto volunteered to be the first, and she was met with no arguments. Chie suggested the group say goodbye to Yu, but Naoto commented that they should let him asleep. Once more, no one argued. Teddie was uncharacteristically quiet for the most part, only speaking when Yosuke placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Come on, Teddie. You can crash back at my place while Yu gets better, okay?" Yosuke spoke warmly, like an older brother to the blond bear, a fact that broke Teddie's grimace.

"Thanks, big bear-ther."

"Ugh." Yosuke rolled his eyes as he waved goodbye to the others. "See ya, guys."

"Bye, everyone!"

The others all bid their own farewells, leaving the hospital's entrance. Kanji and Rise were the only ones who didn't move, watching the others go their separate ways. Kanji glanced at Naoto, before noticing Rise's eyes on him. Her concern mirrored his own.

"You gonna talk to her?" she asked.

"I was planning on it, yeah..."

"You want me to come along?"

"Nah. I want to talk to her on my own..." Kanji could see the hesitation in Rise's eyes, but he knew she trusted him. Her hand brushed against his, both cold from the foggy, winter night. Rise's lips
curled into a small smile, and she nodded her head.

"Okay. Just be careful. I'll wait here for you."

"The hell you will. Rise, it's late, you should just head on home without me."

"I know, it's late. That's why I want you to walk me home." Rise's smile never left her face. It illuminated the foggy night, and Kanji sighed with a hint of amusement.

_She sure is stubborn..._ But he always kind of liked that about her. She had a fire behind those hazel eyes, and that fire could either be warm and comforting, or hot and invigorating. "Alright. I'll walk you home. Just give me like five minutes." She nodded her head, before watching the taller boy walk away from her. His eyes were on the detective slowly walking away, not on the idol who stood behind him, staring at her phone.

Kanji reached Naoto quickly, and he greeted her with a wave of his hand. She seemed to stare at him as though he were a Shadow, clearly surprised to see him following her.

"Tatsumi? Is there something I can help you with?"

"Nah, I mean... No, I'm alright. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Ah. I see. I'm sorry, Tatsumi, but tonight has been a rather draining. I don't think I have the energy to talk much..."

"Alright, then just listen." Naoto was clearly taken back by the firmness Kanji spoke with. The young man, in return, tried not to grin at her surprise.

"Look, I don't know what Yu-senpai and you talked about, and you ain't gotta tell me. I just wanted you to know that I'm here for you." Naoto's brow rose slightly, and Kanji went over the words in his head before speaking them. He didn't want to mess this up. "You and I haven't really talked since the night of the Culture Festival."

Naoto's eyes darted away from Kanji, glaring into the fog-infested streets of Inaba. She inhaled the thick mist, before sighing through her nose. "Kanji-

"Just listen, alright?" he asked. "I just want you to know I'm sorry for the way I acted. I know I could have done things better than I did. Not have said some of the stuff I said, y'know?" Naoto blinked, as the blond scratched at the back of his neck. "I messed up. I said things I shouldn't have, and I lashed out at you like some kind of idiot or something. I mean, I ain't the brightest bulb, but I still should have known better, right?"

She didn't answer back. He chuckled at her silence, slipping his hands into her pockets. _Man, this is weird. It's... Man, what's that word? Ironic._ "I just wanted to say sorry, and I hope you and I can be cool with each other again."

"I... Yes, of course." The sleuth nodded her head. "Your friendship is appreciated, Tatsumi, but what brought this on?" she wondered.

"Just felt like it was something I had to do. I haven't had the chance to say sorry since it happened, and with the whole team on break for a week, I guess, I just wanted to." He shrugged his shoulders as his hands slipped into his jacket's pockets. He felt something strange churn in his stomach.

It used to hurt to look at Naoto, because all Kanji could think about was that night at the festival. Now he was looking right at her, and she was avoiding his eyes. It still hurt remembering that
night. It still hurt to think about what could have been. Regret was heavy in his mind, yet despite it all, he felt like he could finally drop the weights on his back. He stood tall as he continued.

"You're my friend. I hope you know that, and whatever happens, I'll still be your friend."

"T-thank you, Kanji." Naoto looked stunned. Kanji couldn't blame her. He didn't think he'd sound this 'okay.' But being confident was just something he had to be since he found about the real Yu.

It was funny. If Yu had never confronted Kanji about his feelings, the young man would have never started to break out on his own. Rise would have never helped him be confident enough to talk to Naoto, so he would never have the confidence to talk to the navy-haired detective here and now. It was like a bunch of dominoes, all falling on each other. One thing led to another.

"Kanji?" Her voice brought him back to reality. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"That night at the Culture Festival, you implied... That is to say, you-" Naoto sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose. "Do you think Yu has feelings for me?"

"Oh." Kanji's cheeks began to slowly turn red as he stuttered out a response. "I-I mean, that's not really for me to say, right? It's between you two, right?"

"Kanji-kun." Her voice was firm, and clearly demanding a straight answer. "Please. I need to know what you think," she sighed, her shoulders falling slightly.

"I..." He sighed, hanging his head low for a moment, before lifting it up to look at her. "I think Yu-senpai cares about you. I think you mean everything to him. I think you're the closest person to him, even after we've all seen his real self. I've seen the way he looks at you, and... And I know he has feelings for you."

It was strange for Kanji to confess this to Naoto. He couldn't deny that a part of him considered denying everything, lying about the silver-haired young man, but Kanji crushed the thought with a firm stomp. Despite everything, he could honestly say that Yu was one of his closest friends, and that the two were way more alike than Kanji could have ever imagined.

They both fell for the same girl, and that girl caused both of them to change. Naoto pulled Kanji out from his shell, and the same detective shattered the mask Yu had been wearing. They had both fallen for Naoto, but in the end the only thing that mattered was how Naoto felt.

"Do you have feelings for him?" He couldn't believe he uttered the question, but it just slipped out. The two blushed as Naoto glared a hole into the sidewalk below her. "Sorry... Guess that was too far."

"I-I have feelings for him, I just... don't know what they are," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. Kanji had to strain to even hear her speaking, and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do after he heard those words.

Should I offer to help her? How the hell would I even do that?! No. No, this has got to be something she does for herself. Should I ask what she and Yu talked about? No, that's none of my business... Shit! What the hell am I supposed to say?! He glanced at the shorter girl as he chewed on his bottom lip. Think, stupid...

"Honesty's... the best policy?"
"What?"

Kanji wanted to smack himself in the head, but he held back that urge to try and explain himself. "Look, I'm not really good at this whole 'advise' thing, but I've had to do a lot of stuff I'm not used to lately. Fight monsters, talk to people, accept myself, and... well, other junk," he muttered. "The best advise I can got for you is that whatever you feel, make sure it's the truth. I know Yu-senpai. He's a lot of things, but whatever you two talked about, I bet he meant it."

"A simple belief," muttered the detective.

"Nothing wrong with simple," Kanji replied. "It's worked out pretty well with me, I think." He smiled at her, and that smile grew as she slowly returned the gesture. It was a small one, but it looked amazing on her. "I should probably get going. You gonna be okay?" He scratched at the back of his neck, still afflicted by his own nervousness.

"I will be fine, yes. Have a good night, Kanji-kun." She nodded her head at him, subtly bidding him farewell and showing a new level of respect to him. Least, that's how Kanji saw it.

"You too, Naoto." He waved goodbye to her, watching her leave him behind as the night's fog swallowed her up. Once he was sure she was gone, he sighed to himself. He began to make his way back to Rise, his thoughts a bittersweet mess.

Naoto sure is something, he thought to himself. Smart, cool-headed, and... pretty. His cheeks felt hot, but he tried to just ignore that feeling. He knew the chances of him and Naoto ever becoming more than friends was slim to none, but he accepted that with as much grace as he could. Naoto was amazing, and he was proud to call her his friend.

He took a deep breath of the cold, night air, before sighing one last time. He saw Rise on her phone, and called out to her. "Hey."

"Were you able to talk to her?" Rise asked, finishing her text message, before slipping her phone back into her pocket.

"Yeah. You ready to go?" She nodded her head, and the two began their trek back home.

"I doubt it means much, but I'm proud of you." The blond hadn't been expecting that. He lifted a single brow as he looked at her. She smiled back at him, her hazel eyes glancing at him. "You've come a long way since needing lessons on talking to Naoto," the idol joked. "And you even stood up against Yu-senpai when he was mad at me. You really have grown since I met you."

"Yeah, well..." Kanji didn't know what to say. He didn't know why he was coming up with nothing. Was it because of what Rise was saying? Or because of who was saying it? He hoped the fog blocked her from seeing his rosy cheeks as he shrugged. "I guess I did alright..."

"Are you blushing?" she teased, causing the taller boy to mentally curse his luck. "That's so cute! You're such a teddy bear, Kanji," she laughed, trying to playfully poke at his cheek.

"And you're freakin' hilarious," he shot back. Yet despite the glare in his eyes, he grinned at her. Naoto was amazing, and while Kanji Tatsumi would wonder 'what if,' he found himself content
with life. He and Naoto were friends, Senpai and he were closer than ever, and he had the greatest friend he could ever ask for. Loyal, supportive, stubborn, tough as nails, and cute to boot.

*Wait... Cute?*

"Kanji? You okay? Your cheeks are really red now..."

"F-fine! C-come on! Hurry up! It's freaking cold out here!" Kanji's pace quickened, and Rise was left pouting as she chased after him.

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Yu laid on his bed, staring at his phone as sleep slowly pulled at his mind. Naoto's hat laid beside him on his bed. Rise had sent him a simple message a minute ago, and he wondered about his answer.

'Senpai, are you okay?' he read, his eyes glancing over the text.

The funny part was, despite everything that had happened, Yu really did feel okay. He didn't feel hollow. He didn't feel empty. In fact, he felt content.

He loved Naoto Shirogane with all of his heart. Whether that stone was made of stone or gold, he loved her, and that love had begun something. He had forged bonds with people he once saw as nothing more than insects, and he felt stronger because of it.

Yu Narukami told Naoto he loved her, and despite everything, he didn't regret his feelings. He didn't think he ever would.

He texted back to his second closest friend, promising her that he was okay and that she should focus on taking care of herself for now. He hit send as his eyes began to fall shut. In one week, he and the others would finish this mystery with a battle against the murderer. Yu did not fear the coming battle. He was happy. He didn't fear Naoto's answer to his feelings. He was calm.

_This is enough_, he repeated to himself, with a subtle smile on his lips. He relaxed his body and let his eyes fall shut as he slowly began to fall asleep.

When Yu opened his eyes again, he was surprised to notice a figure in the room, sitting by his bed. His vision was blurry, but he could definitely see a small, blue blob beside him. He strained his vision, only for his eyes to widen as he found Naoto Shirogane in his room, a book in her hands as she sat beside him. She hadn't noticed he had woken up yet, and Yu was left wondering what he should do. Did he greet her like nothing was different? Ask her if she had an answer for last night? Flirt? Yu nibbled on the inside of his mouth for a moment, contemplating his next move.

He glanced at the blue hat by his head, and he slowly tried to sit up. His body still ached, but Naoto seemed too engross by her book to notice his quiet grunting. He picked up the hat and held it out to her. "I didn't expect to see you so soon," he admitted, catching her off guard. The look of surprise on her face brought a smile to his.

"N-Narukami," she greeted, closing her book, leaving only a single finger inside to keep her page. "Good afternoon."

_Back to Narukami, huh?_ he thought, with a hint of annoyance. "Wait, did you say afternoon? How long was I asleep...?"

"Quite a while, I imagine. I only got here recently. We decided to have one of us visit you every day while you recover. I volunteered for the first day, and came straight here after school."
"Oh." Does that mean you do like me? Or don't? Do you even have an answer yet? Yu growled at the thought, trying to shoo it away. "Well, I appreciate the company."

Naoto nodded in response, her cheeks clearly rosier than normal. "I had some questions for you, if you don't mind me asking." Yu was silent, merely raising a brow and motioning for her to continue. "H-how do you feel about heights?"

"Huh?"

"Please, Narukami, answer the question." Her voice was firm, but he could still hear the tiniest tremble in it.

"I like them. I always enjoyed the view from the Tokyo Skytree."

"In truth, I have always had a preference for them as well. In fact, I... I used to climb trees when I was younger," she muttered, her blush intensifying. "I would pretend I was a secret agent, and that my secret base was at the top of the tree.

Yu's eyes widened. Not at the mere imagery of a young Naoto climbing a tree, though he did find the image to be adorable, but that Naoto was telling him she did. Whether it was because of their similarities, or because they were simply close friends, Yu realized what she was doing. She wants to know about me, and to tell me about her. It's like this is a... a date, he realized.

His own cheeks were now aglow, and he found his throat turning dry. Is this a date? What should I do? Yu had been on many dates, and he had been in control for all of them. He manipulated men and women like they were sheep, but now, he found himself staring at someone smarter than him. He didn't have control over Naoto, and that sent a rush of fear and excitement through his body.

"Would you like to ask me a question now?" inquired the navy-haired woman. She was blushing still, and Yu found the sight to be comforting.

Leave it to Naoto to make a first date seem more like an interrogation, chuckled the silverette. "Sure," he replied, a grin forming on his face. Alright. I'll play along. "What's your favorite book?" A good question that Naoto would be eager to answer, he thought.

"While I enjoy several of her stories, I believe 'A Murder is Announced,' by Agatha Christie is my favorite," she answered, with little hesitation.

"Really? I was expecting something starring Sherlock Holmes," he commented, with mild surprise.

"While I am a fan of of Sherlock Holmes, his novels suffer due to their narrator." Yu stared at her in confusion as her brow wrinkled slightly. "Watson isn't as acute as Holmes is, thus Holmes has details the reader is not privy too. It's unfair."

"Wow, are you actually mad at Holmes from keeping clues from you?" Yu chuckled. "That's adorable." Her blush became a radiant pink on her face, traveling down her neck as she looked away. It was clear that she was embarrassed by her childhood antics, so Yu decided to confess one of his own secrets. "When I was young, I actually used to steal DVDs from movie stores."

"What?" It was her eyes that widened this time, staring at his smiling face as he explained.

"Yep. Just so I could watch Phoenix Rangers," he confessed. His smile turned into a mischievous smirk as she gawked at him. "What? My parents wouldn't let me watch it at home, and I was an addict for that stuff as a kid. Before you judge, I still remember how your Shadow was based on Kikaider."
"Y-you recognized that?! H-how?!" Naoto shouted, her cheeks as crimson as a tomato now.

"I loved tokusatsu when I was a kid," he explained.

"So that wasn't a lie...?"

It took him a moment to realize what she meant, but he remembered it. When they had first met, when he was blackmailing her to hang out with him, he made a joke about enjoying Phoenix Rangers. Originally, he had done it simply to get a reaction out of Naoto, but now... "Huh. I guess I did. That feels so long ago..."

"A lifetime ago," she agreed, with a quiet sigh. "We were both very different people then..."

"Yeah." Yu could feel regret burn the back of his throat, and a single glance at Naoto showed him that the past was plaguing her own mind as well. "So, you're a fan of Agatha Christie, huh? You know, I can't help but feel we resemble a couple of her characters." His voice took that arrogant, mocking tone it did when he wanted to mess with Naoto. "You just might be the Tuppence to my Tommy."

That lit a fire on Naoto's cheeks that burned her regrets away, and left her the perfect mix of impressed, embarrassed, and annoyed. "Louse."

Yu chuckled in response, before smiling much more naturally. "Next question?"

END
Yu walked out of the hospital on sore legs. He was told by his doctors that he should stay at home for the next few weeks, only leaving to work on his physical therapy. His body was still in the process of healing, and he needed to avoid strenuous activity. He promised them he would with a smile on his face, and obedience in his eyes.

No matter how much he changed, lying was still second nature for him.

That afternoon, he and his team, stood in the other world, their final battle awaiting them. They prepared themselves both mentally and physically on the stage, knowing their toughest battle was about to begin. Yu inspected his sword, the hilt feeling foreign against the palms of his hands, when Yukiko approached him.

"Yu-kun, are you sure you're okay with this?"

"The worst of my wounds have healed, and you and Teddie are keeping my body together. It hurts, but I can move, and I can fight." Yu fastened the sword to his hip, before giving Yukiko a small grin. "I'm good."

"Promise me you'll be careful?"

"I can try, but I also promised Rise I wouldn't do anything stupid for a week. Adachi shot me, like..." Yu took a moment to think, his brow furrowing slightly. "Two days later?" He let out a fake chuckle as Yukiko stared at him with clear concern. "Guess I can't help breaking promises, huh?" The joke was bitter, laced with self-loathing. He tried not to let her see his frustration or anger, and he failed.

For better or for worse, he just couldn't lie to his friends like he used to. Yukiko saw through his pain, and she placed her hand on his shoulder, before embracing him in a tight hug. The silver-haired boy was surprised, but he accepted the gesture and returned it. "I'm glad to have you back. I was really worried about you," she muttered.

"Hey, come on. I'm invincible. Like a bullet's going to kill me." Yukiko was a slender young woman. Curved, though still petite in a way. Taller than most girls her age, but that just enhanced her fragile image. Like she could snap if someone held her too tightly.

In another time, another place, Yu would have caught and collared her, treated her like she was his trophy, before letting her shatter on the ground without a second thought. She would have made a fun toy.

"Just be careful, okay? I won't always be there to patch you up, you know." She was trying to keep her voice firm, straining to keep herself strong. She didn't want him to hear the dread in her voice. For her sake, he pretended not to notice.

"Duly noted, Yukiko," he replied. The hug lasted for a moment longer, before the two parted.

"Narukami, I believe everyone is ready." Naoto approached the two, and if she was jealous or annoyed at the two's embrace, she didn't show it. There was focus in her eyes. Determination to see Adachi in police custody.
Yu couldn't help, but see Naoto as especially beautiful when she was focused like this. He chuckled as he glanced at her, nodding his head. "Alright. If we're all ready then, let's go."

The eight walked into the room Mayumi Yamano was killed in. The very air reeked of the fog, even with the glasses on, and Yu could feel dread and a crawling sensation of disgust just leaking from the walls now. This room, in a way, was born from Adachi. Yes, it was created by Mayumi, but now it just stood as a monument to Adachi's work.

And the mad artist stood in the room, muttering himself, not even caring about the eight teenagers glaring at him.

"That damn bitch... I noticed her first, and she just had to run off and have an affair..." The murderer glanced in the eight's direction, and he scoffed as a crooked smile formed on his face. "Has anyone told you kids, you're really annoying?"

"Mayumi Yamano and Saki Konishi are dead because of you! We're bringing you in, Tohru Adachi, and you will be punished for your crimes," Naoto declared, glaring at the murderer.

"Wow, Detective Prince, been cooking up that speech for a while now, have ya?" He chuckled at her, Yosuke walked forward.

"You son of a bitch! You killed Saki, didn't you?!"

"Saki? Huh... That name doesn't really ring a bell to me," Adachi sighed, tapping his chin in thought. "I mean, even if I did so happen to push her into a TV, well, how would I know what would happen to her? Just sounds like bad luck to me."

"Cut the crap, you damn freak!" roared Kanji. He walked forward, fist raised, but Rise's voice stopped him.

"Kanji, wait. I...I don't think that's really him. I think he's just an illusion."

"What?"

"Wow, bravo. Glad someone on this team has an IQ that's in the double digits," Adachi mocked, clapping his hands. "Very good, Risette, and here I thought you were just some slut who just knew how to shake it for older men."

Rise growled, cheeks flaring red as she tried not to dignify Adachi with a response. Kanji could not maintain any sense of calmness, roaring again.

"Don't you say shit about her!" Kanji ran forward, trying to shoulder charge the older man. He ran right through Adachi, slamming himself into the wall behind the killer. The police officer laughed, placing his hand on his head as he mocked the blond boy.

"Wow, seriously? You knew I'm not real, and you still tried to him me?! How dense can you get?!"

"So why are you here? You just wanted to mock us?" Yu asked. His voice was calmer than the others, but there was still an edge to it. A fire.

"Just here to extend an olive branch." Adachi walked forward, and despite knowing about his intangibility, Yu stepped aside, his and the others eyes on the murderer. "It doesn't really matter who killed who, now does it? What's a couple of sluts compared to the whole town?"
"What? What are you talking about?" Chie questioned.

"I'm saying, this world is going to become our world. All those stupid, dumbasses on the other side are going to become Shadows. None of this shit matters, cause come the end of the year, we're all going to be either dead, or one those things," he chuckled. "Tough break, kids."

"You expect us to believe you? You're just trying to cover up for the shit you pulled!" Yosuke snarled.

"Don't believe me? Fine, doesn't matter to me." Adachi retreated, slowly walking back towards the wall, and the Investigation Team watched with wide, shocked eyes as the wall practically melted away, revealing a black and red portal. It pulsed, like it had a heartbeat, and Adachi laughed as he was swallowed up by it.

"You're not getting away!" Chie ran forward, followed closely by Yosuke and Kanji.

"Wait!" Naoto's voice fell on deaf ears as the three ran through the portal. "Damn it!"

"Come on," Yu ordered, motioning the others to follow him. They quickly ran through the portal, and in an instant, found themselves in the ruins of Inaba.

"W-what the hell...? This is the shopping district," Chie whispered.

The town of Inaba was destroyed. Broken buildings, shattered walls, bent street signs, it was like a flood had gone through the small town. It was just rubble. Yu looked to the sky, and it resembled the portal they had stepped through. Red and black, and pulsing with a strange, almost living, energy to it.

"Guys? I'm getting some really weird readings," Rise warned. "I think Adachi has complete control over this place. It doesn't feel anything like the other places."

"Then we need to stay together. We'll find him, and we'll make him pay for everything he's done," Yu declared. The others nodded, their resolved matched with his, before a loud voice cackled at them.

"Come on, guys! Let's meet up at the secret headquarters to go over the case! We'll catch the killer!" Adachi mocked, laughing from what sounded like every direction. "God, do you idiots have any idea how stupid you sounded?!!"

Rise backed away from the killer's howling laughter, only to feel a painful chill touch her shoulder. She turned her head, and Adachi's grinning face was mere inches from her. She cried out in surprise, as Kanji grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him. He acted as a wall, holding his shield up in defense for the idol. Adachi just laughed at the two.

"This isn't even my fault! It's that slut's. Mayumi... I just wanted to scare her straight, you know?" The ground under the officer melted, and a TV rose to the surface. The screen flickered as Adachi lightly knocked on the top of it, presenting the video to the group. "For your viewing pleasure..."

"Why did you call me here?" a female voice asked. The screen was a haze of static, yet Yu had a guess as to who was speaking. It made his stomach churn as he saw Mayumi's hazel eyes staring back at him. Adachi's voice came from the TV, and it almost sounded heartbroken. Almost. It was more goading, challenging, as if he wanted to see her angry, as if he wanted her to say it was true.
Mayumi stepped back, and Adachi stepped forward. The two were in a lobby, slightly generic in design. It could have been anywhere, but it wasn't anywhere. It was the Amagi Inn, somewhere Yu had been at, a place Yukiko called home. Mayumi ground her teeth as she barked at Adachi.

"That is none of your business!"

"I knew it," sighed the frowning man. "You're just like those other sluts, and after I went to the trouble of falling for you. You're just another whore looking for a meal ticket, aren't you?" Static clouded the video again, like a fog over the screen, and Yu could see Adachi's grey eyes gleaming through the mist. "I think you need to be taught not to spread your legs so often..."

A loud clap. The sound of his hand hitting her cheek. Yu could feel his jaw clench as his nails dug into his palms. The sound of Adachi attacking the poor woman were familiar to him. Eerily similar to Yu's own memories. He looked around the wasteland, hunting for the real Adachi as Mayumi's cries filled the air.

"P-please, stop!"

Yu caught the sight of her shirt being pulled on from the corner of his eye. Adachi shouted at her, hitting her again, before pushing her. She screamed as her body hit the TV... and slipped right through the screen.

"T-that happened at our lobby...?" Yukiko shuddered as realization set in, and Chie caught her friend as she trembled.

"It was amazing! It had to be some kind of miracle! Some kind of reward for all the shit I've had to deal with!" Adachi shouted.

"Why?! Why would you do this?! Because she loved someone else?!!" Chie screamed, glaring at the officer.

"Don't buy any of his crap, Chie," hissed Yu. A card materialized in his hand and he crushed it with ease. Izanagi materialized, slicing the TV in half putting a stop to the video and Adachi's laughter. "He did all of this for only one reason. It was fun. Am I right, Adachi?" Yu glared at the grinning officer, but the only answer he got was a smile as the illusion faded away.

Naoto approached Yu's side, but he turned his gaze onto Rise. "Do you have any idea where the real one is?"

"I think so... That way." Rise lifted her hand and pointed down the street.

"Let's not waste any time then." Yu marched forward, and the others followed.

The group walked without interruption for what felt like eternity. It was the silence that was most damning. There was just... nothing within the ruins of Inaba. Nothing, but rubble and broken pieces. There were no Shadows to fight them, and even Adachi's voice had become silent. No wind, or birds, not even clouds. Nothing. The eight just continued to walk through the empty town, searching for any signs of the killer.

"Now I remember!" Adachi suddenly screamed from the nothingness around them.

"Ah!" Teddie cried, and the bear leaped forward, clinging to Yosuke's back.

"Ack! Let go, Teddie!"
"Saki, right? Took me a while, but I finally remember her." The group found another Adachi in their path, this one sitting on top of another old TV. The screen flickered to life as Yu tried to grab Yosuke's shoulder.

"Yosuke, don't -"

But the brunette pushed forward, staring at the screen with heartache and regret. "Saki...?"

"Nothing happened between! That guy just wanted to talk to me! I think he was trying to warn me about something, but... Stop it! What are you doing?!" Saki was caught between the TV of the interrogation room and Adachi. He licked her cheek, and Yu could see the gleam of utter satisfaction in the detective's eyes. Adachi was loving this.

The power. Lording it over someone weaker. Dining on their their pain, their fear. It was addicting. Saki was like a bottle of aged, vintage wine. Adachi wanted to savor popping her open.

"Saki! Saki!" Yosuke screamed. His hands were on the TV screen, pressing against it, but nothing happened. Adachi laughed at his pain, almost falling off the TV.

"'Ah! Oh, Saki, Saki!'" he mocked. "Get a load of this guy!" Adachi's grey eyes fell on Yu. "You actually hang around this loser?"

"You bastard!" Yosuke swung at the illusion, but it was like trying to hit air.

Saki's hand slapped Adachi's face in the video as the illusion smirked. "I don't know why you're crying. That bitch was probably as loose as Mayumi. Her dying is really more of a blessing, than a-"

"You son of a bitch! I'll make you pay!" Yosuke swore.

Adachi had just pushed Saki through the TV, listening to her scream as she fell into the abyss. Jiraiya appeared over the TV, crushing it with a single kick. Saki's wails lingered in the air as the fake Adachi chuckled. He faded away with a crooked grin on his face.

"Damn it!" Yosuke screamed, clawing at his head. Chie and Yu approached him as he cursed, stomping his feet and swinging at the empty air. Chie embraced him from behind as Yu placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Damn it...!"

"It's okay, Yosuke. We'll catch this freak," the young girl promised.

Yu said nothing, merely hoping his presence would help him. He tried to be there for Yosuke, the brunette deserved that, but Yu couldn't shake Adachi's voice from his ears. It sounded too similar. Too much like someone Yu knew.

"We need to keep moving," he told the others. His silver eyes connected with Naoto's, and the two stared at one another for a moment. She was worried about him. He put on a small smile, trying to ease her nerves. "Come on, team." He didn't meet Naoto's stare, too scared that his fear and dread were obvious to her.

The group forced themselves through the wasteland of Inaba, every step like trekking through mud and sludge. Rise would point which direction felt right, and Yu and Naoto would push the group forward, leading them through the gross parody of their town.

They walked for what felt like forever, no one daring to break the silence that blanketed the ruins.
Adachi was silent, but his eyes were felt on their skin.

"Guys, get ready. He's close." Rise lifted up her hand, pointing at the ruins of a gas station at the end of the long, empty street. Yu, after a moment of staring, recognized the area. It was the same one by the train station, the one where his uncle had stopped for gas after picking the silverette up. Adachi sat on top of the fallen ceiling, smiling at he noticed the eight. "There! That's the real him!"

"Wow, you actually found me. Bravo. Took ya long enough," Adachi chuckled, applauding the eight. "Got to say, for a while, I just sort of forgot you were looking for me." His smile turned sharp, like a smirk, but then it was just brushed aside as he let out a loud yawn. "Can we hurry this up? It's getting late, and I need some sleep."

Yu could see Naoto fighting back a curse, before she marched forward. The others followed as she spoke. "Tohru Adachi, you are under arrest for the murder of Saki Konishi, and Mayumi Yamano. I also suspect you had something to do with Mitsuo Kubo. Am I correct?"

Adachi sighed, shaking his head as he loudly muttered. "How do you put up with this girl, Yu? She never shuts up, and when she does, she acts like a total frigid bitch," he lamented. "Yeah, I put that Kubo kid in here too. Had to, or else he'd ruin my game. Can't believe you stupid kids saved him... Oh well. Doesn't matter, does it? Mr. Hero Complex kept on kidnapping people for me, didn't he?"

"You had a hand in that too, didn't you?" Yu spat, glaring at the detective. "What did you say to Taro Namatame?"

"Heh. I might have offered an idea or two about keeping possible murder victims somewhere safe. What he did with that advise, I really can't say," Adachi admitted. "But man... I would have loved to have seen his stupid face when he realized he got your cousin killed! I was scared he'd stop kidnapping people after Kubo got arrested, but he kept at it! Being a hero must turn him on or something... What a freak!" Adachi ridiculed.

"My little sister almost died because of you," snarled Yu. "You took advantage of a broken man, murdered two people, led a student to murder a teacher, and you're laughing about all of it?!"

"Wow. Mr. High and Mighty, how does the view look from your glass house?" Adachi chuckled.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!" Kanji growled, moving in front of Yu, rising to his defense. "I've had it with the crap you keep spewing! Let's kick his ass, senpai!"

"I couldn't agree more." Yu and Kanji ran forward, leading the charge against Adachi.

"Wow, eight against one? How the hell's that fair?" The murderer sighed, turning his head away. "Kids are such pieces of shit nowadays. Back in my day, I knew how to play fair."

The earth quaked under the footsteps of the Investigation Team, when suddenly pools of black ink began to burst through the cracks. From the puddles of ebony came towers of TVs, stacked on top of one another. They shot out of the ground like trees, and Yosuke barely dodged running into one as more shot out of the ground between the group and Adachi.

"Stay together!" Yu shouted, watching as a pillar of TVs sprouted out from the ground below him. He almost ran straight into it, before dashing around.

"W-whoa! Help! This bear doesn't like climbing trees!" Teddie cried, as a stack of TVs shot out from under him, carrying them upwards as they grew.

"Down here, Teddie! Jump!" Yosuke waved his arms at the bear-suited boy, catching his attention.
Teddie nodded his head, before leaping towards the brunette. "Jiraiya!" The Persona appeared above Yosuke, catching the colorful bear in his hands.

"My hero!" Teddie cheered, embracing the Persona.

"Good catch, Yosuke!" Chie complimented, running past the two with Yukiko by her side.

"Come on, Ted." Jiraiya placed the bear back onto the ground, before vanishing in a blue light. The two boys began to chase after their friends, only to come to a skidding stop as an entire wall of TVs shot up between them and the others. "Crap!"

"Huh? Yosuke!" Chie gasped, stopping her run to stare at the rising wall of TVs. "Guys, wait!" She ran towards the wall, slamming a kick against one of the televisions, but it was like kicking steel. Her foot stung as the wall was left unmoved. "Damn it..." She summoned her Persona, and Tomoe slammed her foot against the wall, but once again it refused to budge. She threw a series of punches and kicks at it, but the wall would not break.

Yu and Kanji turned their heads to the martial artist and her Persona, only for their eyes to widen as they saw the screens at the top of the wall were shaking. Several televisions fell from their place, falling down towards Chie.

"Izanagi!"

"Take-Mikazuchi!"

The two Personas flew forward, Izanagi grabbing Chie and picking her up into his arms as the far larger Persona swung his lightning bolt shaped sword, smashing the TVs into broken bits of plastic, wire, and glass while they were in the air. Izanagi gently dropped Chie onto the ground, as the six tried to regroup, even as more walls and pillars rose around them.

"Teddie and Yosuke are tough, they'll be okay. We have to keep moving," Yu explained. "I promise, we'll come back for them, but we need to focus on Adachi."

"R-right." Chie nodded her head. Yu could see the conflict in her eyes, but she did her best to focus herself. "Yosuke! We're coming back for you and Teddie, got it?!" she screamed, turning her head to the wall that separated the two.

"No problem! Get going Chie, we'll be fine!" Yosuke shouted back.

"Incoming!" Rise warned, pointing towards Adachi.

Shadows were on the ground now, and racing towards the group. These Shadows had yet to take their true form, resembling piles of black slime with masks stuck to them, but that made them no less dangerous. They shot towards the six like wild animals, arms bursting out of them. Naoto fired her revolver at them, stunning several as another reached out towards the group's navigator.

"Rise, look out!" Kanji tackled the girl, pushing her out of the way of the Shadow's range. The two fell to the ground by Naoto, who moved to help the two up. Yu's eyes widened as he saw the trap that was about to spring, and he shouted out a warning to the three, but it was too late. More TVs shot from the ground, cutting Yu, Yukiko, and Chie from the other three.

"Damn it," cursed Yu. "Naoto, are you okay?!" he shouted over the wall.

"Yes, we're fine! Keep going!" Naoto's voice answered back.
"Right..." Yu felt his heart being twisted, but he pushed the frustration aside. He turned his silver eyes to Yukiko and Chie, and the three glared at the pack of Shadows that attacked them. "Izanagi, attack!"

"Come, Konohana Sakuya!"

"Get them, Tomoe!"

The three Personas shot forward. Izanagi and Konohana Sakuya rained lightning and fire down, stunning the pack of Shadows. Tomoe made short work of the rest, freezing them in place, before shattering them with a single swing of her weapon.

"We can't waste our time fighting Shadows," Yu thought aloud, his fists tightening as more Shadows rose up to replace their fallen brethren.

"Yukiko and I can clear a path for you," suggested Chie, taking a fighting stance as Tomoe tossed Shadows around.

"What?" Yu could see the logic in the plan. After all, he was the best fighter on the team, but there was still something about the idea that felt wrong. Was he worried about leaving their side? Or was it fear of facing Adachi alone? Maybe both. "I won't abandon you two."

"You're not abandoning us," Yukiko corrected. "We'll catch up. All of us," she explained, as her Persona rained flames and infernos down on what Shadows remained. "But there's no way the three of us can get out with so many Shadows in our way."

"Come on, we're wasting time! It's like you said! Primo into paras, or whatever! Two votes against one!" Chie shouted. "You got to take this bastard down!"

Yu knew they were right. A small part of him couldn't believe they were the ones pushing him to make the smart, logical decision. He fought back a laugh, but a smile still found its way to his lips. "Alright. Let's go."

The three ran forward, their Personas cleaving a path for them through the Shadows. Yu was several steps ahead of the girls as Shadows swarmed over them from all directions. Konohana Sakuya unleashed a torrent of fire, burning several Shadows as Tomoe slammed her fist onto the ground. The punch sent a shockwave, wiping out the fires and knocking the remaining Shadows aside without even touching them. TVs were rising out of the ground as Yu jumped forward. He could hear Chie and Yukiko wishing him good luck as the walls rose up behind him, separating the three.

He landed on the ground, panting, glaring at the ground as a slow clap welcomed him. "Boy, you kids sure are dramatic. Nice entrance though. I really liked the part where you pretended to give a shit about those two bitches." Yu didn't dignify his words with a response. He merely placed a hand on his sword, slowly pulling it out as he glared at the detective.

"Silent treatment, huh? Man, you must be pissed." Adachi stood up on his own two feet, dusting himself off as he slowly walked closer to the young man. "You know, I knew there was something off about you the moment I saw you. It's the eyes, right? Windows to the soul." Adachi pointed at his own eyes, snicking as Yu glared at him.

"Spare me the crap."

"Always so dramatic," Adachi sighed, shaking his head as Yu summoned Izanagi. The metal entity shot forward, reaching out a hand to grab the detective. Adachi didn't even move as a dark figure
formed in front of him, grabbing and pushing Izanagi's hand with ease.

"What the hell?!" Yu was stunned at what he saw. This thing was superficially similar to Izanagi. Same mask, same trenchcoat, same weapon, but the colors were wrong. Instead of silver and black, this creature was black and crimson, as if it had been drenched in blood. It glared at Yu with amber-colored eyes, just like Izanagi's, just like a Shadow.

"Meet Magatsu-Izanagi." Adachi's teeth gleamed in the light of the scarlet sky as he commanded his other half. "Kill them."

Kanji grunted as his fists slammed into the wall of TVs. His Persona stood above him, punching and slamming itself against the makeshift barrier. Rise scanned the structure, trying to find a weakness as Naoto examined it with her own eyes. She placed a hand on the wall, feeling the slight crack where two TVs met.

It's as if they're magnetized to one another. Unfortunately, the fact that Adachi has such control over this part of the world renders nearly all previous facts moot. Hmm...

Naoto's eyes scanned the room. Three walls made out of televisions, with a fourth wall simply being the ruins of some store in the real Inaba. Perhaps there's something we can use in there? Doubtful... She glanced upward, and noticed that the prison they were in had no ceiling. The scarlet sky was completely visible to her. That's it. "Kanji, Rise, I-

"Guys, get away from the TVs! Something's coming out!" Rise's voice screamed. Naoto jumped back out of reflex, but Kanji turned his head to the idol in confusion.

"What'd y-"

A slimy, inky black hand shot out of the glass of a TV near Take-Mikazuchi, punching the large Persona back and causing a bolt of pain to shoot through Kanji's body. More of the liquid shadows flooded from the TVs, falling onto the ground and amassing themselves into a single entity. Kanji stumbled back as the figure rose to its full height.

The Shadow was tall, towering over the three, even looming over Take-Mikazuchi. It was covered in tattered, blood-stained robes that fell to the ground, obscuring its feet. Its head was covered in a white bag, rope tied around its neck. Splotches of blood stained the bag, same as the clothes, but it was the small opening that churned the pits of their stomachs. A single, yellow, sickly eye surrounded by rotting flesh, glared at them.

"W-what is that thing...?" Kanji's voice was trembling. He couldn't explain it, but it was like there was an aura of terror around the creature. It just stared back at them, glaring a hole through each of them, slowly moving from one to the next.

"I-I don't know, but it's crazy strong. You guys have to be careful," warned Rise, before jumping as a familiar voice laughed at them.

"Like it? I call them Reapers." The three first-years saw Adachi's face smirking at them from one of the ground level televisions. Static clouded his image as another Adachi appeared on a separate television screen. He chuckled at their surprise. "They're completely loyal to me, and as Risette pointed out, crazy strong. You have fun now, got it? I know your friends are."

Both screens became clouded in static, before the three saw their older friends in the middle of battle. One Reaper was in the middle of trying to grab and crush Yosuke and Teddie. Both boys summoned their Personas to try and attack the Reaper, but their attacks did little more than slow the
beast down. Chie and Yukiko were in similar positions. The two girls were firing a barrage of ice and fire, but nothing was keeping the Reaper down for long.

As the three watched their friends fight for their, a loud click caught their attention. The Reaper they were fighting held a long pistol in its hand, aiming at Rise. It pulled the trigger, and the bang was deafening. The bullet flew at Rise, slicing through the air with ease, but it never touched her.

"K-Kanji?" Take-Mikazuchi stood in front of Rise, towering over the human girl. The massive Persona held his injured chest, as Kanji walked forward with heavy footsteps.

"Stay away from her," he snarled. "Wreck his shit, Take-Mikazuchi!"

The Persona flew forward, arms raised to defend himself as the Reaper opened fire. Naoto quickly moved in front of Rise and summoned her own Persona. Sukuna-Hikona appeared in a flash of blue light, before darting after the larger Persona. Rise stood behind them, nails digging into her palms as she wished she could match their speed and strength.

Take-Mikazuchi punched the Reaper's gut, before throwing another punch across the Shadow's face. The robotic Persona was preparing for a third strike, when the Reaper caught his hand and glared into his eyeless face. Kanji felt his Persona's pain as the Reaper slammed a hand into the giant's metal chest. The blow dented and bent the steel, before the Reaper suddenly ran forward, pushing Take-Mikazuchi back.

The three jumped out of the way as the two entities slammed into the store behind them, reducing the shop into rubble. Dust and smoke rose up to blind them, but when it cleared, they saw Take-Mikazuchi on the ground, a hand wrapped around his throat as a pistol aimed at his head. The Reaper tried to pull the trigger, only for a blue blur to slice the gun in two, tearing through it with his sword.

"Thanks, Naoto," Kanji panted. The Detective Prince nodded in reply, before both focused on the fight.

Take-Mikazuchi tried to break free from the Reaper's grasp, but the creature's hold was too powerful. Sukuna-Hikona flew towards the two to help, only to be caught in the Reaper's other hand. With ease, the giant began to crush the smaller Persona, with Take-Mikazuchi unable to help his ally.

"Ahh!" Naoto screamed, feeling the pain her other half felt. Her body stiffened, contorting as if she was being crushed too.

"Kanji, aim for the eye!" Rise advised, pointing at the Reaper's sole eyeball.

"Right!" Kanji nodded his head, ignoring the pain in his throat as he threw his shield like a large frisbee. It spun through air, before slamming right into the Reaper's eye. Blood gushed from the wound as it released the two Personas and stumbled back. "Yes!"

"Naoto, are you okay?" The idol ran to the detective's side, helping her stay on her feet.

"I-I'm fine. Thank you. Both of you... Rise-chan, does this thing have any sort of weakness we can exploit?"

"I-I don't know. I'm trying to find something, but it's so powerful..." Naoto could see the girl's fear preying on her mind, but Kanji shouted at them before she could say anything.

"That's quitter talk! Senpai's counting on us to beat this thing and join him for the final battle. We
Izanagi blocked his counterpart's attacks, as Yu dodged Adachi's fist and tried to knee him in the stomach. The detective pushed Yu back, barely avoiding the hit, but the silver-haired boy kept the distance between them as small as possible.

_That gun is dangerous. I have to keep close so he can't use it properly._ Yu grabbed Adachi's arm, the one that had the gun at the end of it, and he slammed his free hand into the detective's stomach. _Got to make him drop it!_

"That all you got?" Adachi mocked, despite the strain in his voice. Yu tried to punch him again, only for the younger man to cry out in pain.

It was like his shoulder was on fire. Adachi kicked him down, and Yu could see Magatsu-Izanagi's spear lodged in the original's shoulder. Izanagi and Yu felt each other's pain, and right now Yu could feel steel tearing into his shoulder. His fingers grabbed onto his shoulder as he tried to fight through the agony, only to get the wind knocked out of him as Adachi's foot slammed into his stomach.

"What the hell is even the point of fighting me?! I just don't get you, kid. No matter what you do, the other world is still going to get swallowed up by this one. So who cares about the murders?! Who cares about the truth?! Why do you keep fighting?! Are you just too stupid to know when to quit?!" he laughed. "The world will be a better place with Shadows in it. Why are you trying to ruin it for everyone...?"

"Do you ever stop talking?!" Yu snarled.

His eyes shined with rage as Izanagi grabbed Magatsu-Izanagi's spear and forced it out his body, surprising both Adachi and Adachi's Persona by the sudden burst of strength. Yu then moved forward, and while the thought of impaling Adachi on his sword was appealing, he went with a less lethal option, and slammed his shoulder into the older man.

Adachi hit the ground, his gun falling beside him. Yu quickly ran forward, kicking the gun away as Izanagi tackled his opponent into a nearby store, reducing the shop to rubble.

"What's the point of even having a sword if you don't use it? It's like having a gun and not using it to blow someone's brains out," Adachi chuckled, palming his face with his hands. "I just don't get you, kid."

"Don't tempt me. I'd love to gut you, but I made a promise to try and see justice done." Yu glanced at the wall of TVs that hid Naoto, before glaring down at Adachi. "You're going to suffer for everything you've done."

"Like anyone would believe this shit. Starting to buy your own shit, Narukami-san?"

"What?" Yu's brow rose as Adachi stood up on trembling legs. The two Izanagis were fighting each other with renewed vigor as their other halves glared at one another.

"I saw it in your eyes the moment I saw you. You and me? We're a lot alike." Yu snarled in response, and he decked Adachi's face, knocking the officer back once more, but this time Adachi kept his footing. He laughed at the blow, wiping blood from his cheek as his dull, grey eyes peered right into Yu's soul. "What's wrong? I thought you and your friends were all about embracing the truth. Did I crack your mask a bit? Huh? Made you break character?!"
Yu opened his mouth to silence the murderer, but Adachi spoke first. "Oh, I get it. If the world ends, you'll run out of bitches to fuck, right? I guess I can understand that."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Are you freakin' stupid or something?! Have you forgotten I'm a cop? Do you think I couldn't do my own investigation? While you were chasing your own tail trying to find me, I was making calls to your old schools. Asking about who you were close to, and hearing what they had to say about you." Adachi's smile grew, wider and wider as realization dawned on Yu.

"That's how I know you and I are so alike," explained the murderer. "But I got to tell you, some of the shit you did to those kids... That's just mean. But I get it. They were all sluts, right? Bitches. Whores."

"Shut your damn mouth!" Yu swung another punch at Adachi, but the detective dodged it this time.

"Want to hear what I found investigating your past? I found out one girl jumped off a bridge a month after you left. I bet she made a nice, pretty smear on the pavement!" Yu grabbed his sword, pulling it free from its sheath as he tried to strike at Adachi. The detective's tie lost a chunk of cloth, but the murderer was untouched. "How can you think I'm some kind of monster for what I did to those whores, when you treat everyone even worse?! I kill them, no more pain, but you? You break them. Then they go off and kill themselves!"

"I'm nothing like you!" Yu roared. His sword cut through the air as he sent it down towards Adachi, intent on cleaving the sick bastard in half. The swing was sloppy, barbaric, and Adachi saw it coming. He moved out of the way at the last second, and the sword slammed into the stone pavement under their feet. The blade trembled as cracks formed on the silver blade.

"Liar." Adachi's fist hit Yu's face, and a loud crack echoed throughout the broken world. Yu's blood stained the cop's knuckles as the silverette stumbled back. The young man fought back tears as he tried to stay on his feet. His glasses barely clung to his face. He could taste his own blood dripping from his nose onto his lips. "You wouldn't believe the trail of broken hearts and bodies I've found. It all leads back to you. Do you want to know how many people tried offing themselves because of you? Do your friends know?"

"Shut up!" Yu charged at him once more, but Adachi dodged him again. The detective's brow furrowed, before he smirked.

"They don't know? How could they not know?! Shit, you and me are so alike! We've both got secrets." Adachi's smile grew and he flashed his teeth as he effortlessly dodged another wild swing. "But you brought my little secret out into the open, and ruined my game. Only fair if I do the same to you."

"Stop it!" Yu had fallen into Adachi's trap. Adachi knew what buttons to push. He knew exactly where to hit Yu, poisoning his fighting style. Rage and anger made Yu sloppy, and he swung his sword once again at Adachi. The black-haired man rolled out of the way and Yu's sword slammed into a large piece of debris. The sword hit a stone wall, and it shattered on impact.

The bottom half of the sword was still usable, but the top half was completely gone, reduced to shards of metal on the ground. The shock of his sword shattering in his hands, and the simple, but intense, vibrations that traveled along the blade made Yu tremble where he stood. His hands stung, and he dropped the broken blade onto the ground. He tried to take deep, calming breaths as he realized just how stupid he had been.
Calm down. Deep breaths. Don't let him in your head. Focus! he told himself, but he fell to the ground as Adachi's foot connected the back of his leg. He was on his knees as he felt the barrel of a gun press against the back of his head.

"You're a hypocrite. You act like I'm such a bad guy, but you're supposed to be the big hero? That's a load of shit." Adachi kicked at the sword, sending it sliding far out of Yu's reach.

"You're a murderer. You killed people." Yu spun around, hoping to catch Adachi off guard, but the cop just pistol whipped him across the cheek, knocking the silverette to the ground. "Don't act like you're anything more than a worthless criminal!"

"Maybe," Adachi chuckled. "But if I'm the kettle, you must be the pot, because I know the only difference between you and me is a couple of years."

Izanagi saw his wielder being held at gunpoint, and he charged forward to help him, only to be caught off guard by his clone. Magatsu-Izanagi's eyes glowed as an invisible force wrapped around Izanagi's arms. The Persona's eyes widened as he felt his arms stick to the sides of his chest. Magatsu-Izanagi then grabbed him by the back of his head and slammed him into the ground. The crimson Persona made sure to grind Izanagi's masked face into the pavement.

"I want you to stop for a minute, and think." Yu couldn't move his arms. Like Izanagi, his arms felt like they were being bound to the sides of his chest. "Think long and hard. If they knew just how bad you were, do you think any of them would care about you?"

Magatsu-Izanagi exhaled smoke from his mask, breathing it into the air. The smoke moved like a snake, slithering and writhing in the air, before slipping into Izanagi's mask. Yu could feel his throat tighten, and his eyes widened as he began to choke on something. His eyes widened as a voice called out to him.

"You are nothing." Misuru Kubo stared down at him. He was bleeding, bruised from Yu's relentless beating.

"Please. I didn't do it," Taro cried, blood falling from his eyes. There were bruises around his neck from where Yu had choked him.

"He called us leeches."

"Weaklings."

"Parasites."

"S-stop. Please, stop," Yu begged as the bloodied remains of his friends shambled forward. Naoto stared at him with dead, hollow eyes as she spoke.

"How could I ever love something like you?"

"Guys, something's wrong with Yu! He's in trouble!" Rise shouted, looking to Kanji and Naoto.

"Narukami!" Naoto screamed, hoping he could hear her. "Narukami, can you hear me?!" There was no answer. She turned her eyes to Rise, desperate for an answer as worry and dread filled the detective's mind. "What's happening to him, Rise?!"

"I-I don't know!
"Damn it! We can't waste anymore time with this guy!" Kanji cursed, watching as the two Personas fought the Reaper. "Okay, I have a plan."

"Wait, seriously?" Rise asked, and while Naoto didn't speak, she stared at Kanji as if he had gone made.

"Shut up, and listen! Alright, I'm going to bust that wall down. Naoto, you get out as soon as you can and go save Yu! Got it?!"

"I'm supposed to leave you? That isn't a plan, Kanji-kun!"

"I said, shut up, and listen!" Kanji roared, silencing the sleuth and surprising both girls. "You and senpai are the best of us, okay? No matter what anyone says, you two are the smart ones. You're the leaders. You're the ones who have the best chance at beating Adachi, and you guys are the ones who are going to save the day! And right now, he needs you, Naoto." His voice became tempered. He took a deep breath as his heart finally let go, and a wound became a scar.

"He needs you, and you need him. You're at your best together. That's why you need to go to him. Okay?"

The double meaning was not lost on Naoto. Her cheeks flared scarlet as Kanji turned his head to Rise. "You too, Rise. They're gonna need your help, okay?" The idol's eyes widened as Kanji turned his head to glare at the Reaper. "No time to argue, just do it, okay?! On the count of three, you two start running, got it?" Kanji looked at his Persona, and Take-Mikazuchi nodded at his other half, understanding the plan. "Three!"

Take-Mikazuchi suddenly threw himself at the Reaper, tackling it into the wall of TVs. Before the Reaper could recover, Take-Mikazuchi grabbed the monster's head and began to bash it into the wall behind it. It was almost like a boxing glove, taking the brunt of the force as the Persona began to slowly break open the wall. Again and again, the Shadow's head slammed into the wall. The wall was cracking, denting, before suddenly a hole was shattered as Take-Mikazuchi made a hole in the wall with the Reaper's head.

"Go! Go go go!" Kanji commanded.

"R-right!" Naoto summoned her own Persona, and Sukuna-Hikona appeared behind her, picking the detective up and turning into a blue blur. They made a line for the hole, even as the TVs tried to close it.

"No way!" Take-Mikazuchi made sure to stuff the Reaper's head into the wall, letting the TVs slowly crush it, and keeping an opening for Naoto and her Persona.

Naoto spared a single glance to her friends, noticing that Rise had yet to move. The copper-haired girl stared back at Naoto, and the two shared a silent confession. Rise couldn't leave Kanji's side, just like how Naoto had to reach Narukami. They had to be where they were needed. Where they needed to be. Naoto nodded her head at the idol, smiling at her as the Reaper began to slowly break free from Take-Mikazuchi's hold.

"Rise! Go!"

"No."

"What!? The hell did you just say?!"

"I said, no!" Rise stomped her foot down, glaring at Kanji as Himiko formed behind the young
woman. "I'm staying with you!"

"Damn it, Rise, this is no time to-" Kanji nearly fell back as Take-Mikazuchi was thrown back. The Persona hit the ground as the Reaper cracked his head back into place. The bag that masked it was covered in fresh blood as it glared at the two. Rise caught Kanji's back, helping the young man straighten himself out. "You should have gone after Naoto! Yu needs you and-"

"And I need you." Kanji's eyes widened as Rise clung to his collar with a shaking hand. "You're right. Naoto and Yu need each other, but I... I need you too, Kanji!" she confessed, her cheeks becoming a light crimson. The blond didn't know what to say, but he knew what he felt. His neck began to feel hot as his mouth dried up. She leaned closer, pulling him down to her height as she shouted. "I'm not abandoning you! I'm not leaving you! We're going to beat this thing together, you and me, and then we're going to help Yu and Naoto!"

"I-"

A bright glow suddenly blinded the two, and the Reaper. Himiko stepped forward, glowing with a strange energy as the satellite around her head began to open. Long red hair spilled out from the back of her head, reaching down her back like a waterfall as a human face formed on Himiko's head. Ruby lips opened, releasing a breath of air as the dress she wore split open, revealing long, slender legs and a curvaceous form. Small metal orbs began to circle around her body as she stretched out her arms, and then reached down to help Take-Mikazuchi up.

The larger Persona stood up and stared at the beautiful woman, and it trembled where it stood as Himiko began to stoke his metal chest. She giggled in response as Rise and Kanji's jaws dropped.

"H-Himiko...?"

"Whoa... She's... hot."

The Reaper's body twisted, contorting as it glared at the two. It charged at them, only to be blocked as the metal orbs shot away from Himiko and slammed into the Shadow's body, pushing it back.

"Alright!" Rise beamed. She looked at the ground behind her, and she ran back. "Kanji, here!" She lifted up the blond's shield, before tossing it as best she could to him. He caught it as Rise lifted up a long, metal pipe. She analyzed it for a moment, before nodding in approval as she twirled it in her hand like a quarterstaff. "You ready, partner!?"

Kanji blinked once, twice, before gulping down spit. Rise smiled back at him, and the young man felt something burn in his stomach. It was hot, it was warm, and it made him feel... nice. He grinned at her, nodding his head as he lifted up his shield.

"Hell yeah!"

"Himiko!"

"Take-Mikazuchi!"

"Go!" The two Personas shot forward, attacking the Reaper together. Their attacks were fast and brutal, with a teamwork that just came natural for them.

Naoto hit the ground running. She dashed as quickly as she could towards Yu, even as another illusion of Adachi manifested in front of her. She ran right through it as she saw her friend laying on the ground, trembling. Adachi stood over him, smiling at her as he kicked at Yu's body.
"And here comes the Detective Prince to save her damsel in distress. Oh, man. This is gonna be good."

"Please... Stop." Yu was sobbing, tears falling down his face his eyes turned red from what they saw.

Adachi's foot slammed into Yu's side. "Now, now. You're supposed to be about finding the truth. Well, I think it's only fair if they know the truth about you."

"I'm sorry..." Yu's sobs were ignored as Adachi showed the Investigation Team just what their friend truly was.

Every TV in the area suddenly came to life, each of them playing Yu's nightmares. The Reapers came to a grinding halt, allowing the seven teens to fully appreciate what they saw.

Naoto told herself to ignore what she heard and saw, even as the TVs sprouted out of the ground around her, but it was impossible not to hear Yu's voice, and the moans of his past lovers.

"I love you, Kaiyo."

"Ikue, you and I were made for each other."

"Mikoto..."

There were so many names. Boys and girls that Yu manipulated and ensnared. Then came the crying. The sobbing. Yu's voice echoed into the emptiness of the other world, mocking the wails of all he hurt.

"If you're going to jump, then jump. I'm not wasting my time with you."

"Here's some money. You were a pretty good fuck."

"How can you hate me? You were the one begging for me to love you. You were so pathetically desperate for me to love you."

"Leeches," Yu hissed as the television screen showed Yosuke's smiling face. "But Saki's death could work in my favor. Yosuke needs to know someone needs him. He's desperate for it. So he'll be perfect to use."

"W-what the hell is this...?" Yosuke whispered, staring at the world from Yu's point of view. He knew what it was though. In his heart, he knew this was how Yu saw the world. How he saw his friends.

"And Teddie... He's perfect. He's lonely, malleable. I could make him look like such a piece of shit, the girls will push him away. They'll see me as a hero, as a wise mentor when I rein him in. God, this is perfect!"

"Yu...?"

His face appeared on the screen, grinning, almost mocking the two as he laughed. "I'm actually glad this murderer started killing people. They need me. And I'll play with them until they break."

Yukiko and Chie watched as the screens showed their moaning faces cry out his name. They were on separate beds, dividing the screens right now the middle. Yu kissed their bodies, slowly taking
their clothes off as he nibbled on their necks.

"I've always loved you, Yukiko."

"But, Chie, I'm worried about the others."

"What if they don't accept us, Ayane?" One of the screens changed, revealing a topless Yu slowly stripping a younger girl on her bed.

"What if they think less of you, Rise?" Another girl on his bed.

"Naoto."

"Shuya."

"Nagisa."

"I love you..." The walls of TV showed different lovers, different piece of meat. Some they knew, most they didn't. Yu had caught the hearts of so many, and the two realized that they could have easily been another notch in his belt.

Chie tore her eyes away, her cheeks burning as she ground her teeth. Yukiko closed her eyes, the feelings that still lingered in her heart battling against what she knew to be true.

"Love is like a fruit. You need to nurture it. Tend to it. Let it grow... Then it tastes all the sweeter when you bite into it." Yu laughed at them, his cackles melting into the moans of all he had planned to take.

"H-he... He wouldn't..."

"I have to save everyone... Who am I kidding? I need to save myself," Yu's voice bitterly laughed from the screen. "Sorry, Risette, but one of us has to die, and I won't let it be me."

Rise covered her mouth, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes as she watched the man she called her brother hold a sword over her sleeping body. Her Shadow was rampaging behind him. No one else could see what Yu was doing as he aimed the sword at Rise.

"I promise, I'll try to make it painless. Not that you'll care."

"T-this..." Kanji's eyes widened and he trembled in place. His nails dug into his hands as he realized Yu had almost killed Rise. Kanji had been right there. He could see himself in the background of the screen. He was right there, and he never knew. "Shit..."

"I'll tell them I had to do what needed to be done. I'll imply that if they had been stronger, I wouldn't have had to kill her. Yeah. I'll make them hate themselves, that'll make them work harder to be stronger. This will work out. I can still win this," Yu muttered. And then Teddie attacked Rise's Shadow, and the idol began to awaken.

They watched as Yu tossed his sword away, and Rise felt sick to her stomach as she saw her past self fall in love with him.

Naoto remembered Narukami telling her how awful he was before knowing her. Hearing him talk about it, and seeing it for herself weren't even comparable.
She walked by the TVs, unable to block out their sounds as she marched through them, trying to reach her friend. The sounds, and what she saw, whittled down her resolve, cracking and biting at it.

She saw the kind of man he was. He was greedy, selfish, and vile. He used his intellect and cunning to manipulate and control others. To break others. There was no mercy in his actions, and she saw that clearly as his voice filled the air around her.

She saw the very worst in him, and in return, the very worst of her came out. Every sin of the television screens was like another bullet, or a whip against her back. They told her to stop. They told her to give up on him. They told her it wasn't worth it. Not for him.

The worst part was, some part of Naoto wanted to stop. Some part wanted the criminal to face justice.

Her foot hit something, and she broke out of her stupor to find a broken sword laying on the ground. It was Yu's sword, clearly. She picked it up and examined the shattered blade, before lifting her head up. The voices battered her small body, screaming at her now. Yu's voice screamed out his crimes as she fingers dug into the hilt of the blade.

"Because I'm better than you."

"I never loved you."

"You're what? Fifteen? You'll get over it."

"Where's your boyfriend now?"

"You don't deserve to touch me."

"You're pathetic."

"I'm a bad guy! I'm a liar, and a cheater, and I do it all for shits and giggles!"

And then a single voice cut through the fog of sound, and Naoto's resolved was renewed.

"I'm Yu Narukami. I used to be happy with who I was, before I met a pint sized detective who helped me realize I was kind of a jerk. Now I'm trying to be better." He stayed with her, fed her, cared for her after she had nearly die. They started over, and he promised that he would be better. They had both made that promise.

"I forgive you. None of this is your fault, but if you need to hear it, I forgive you." He forgave her.

"I'm glad you're a girl." Comforted her.

"Meeting you was a catalyst for... well, a lot of changes." Confessed to her.

He signed himself up to be humiliated on stage, took a bullet for her, laughed with her, danced with her, he had become her best friend.

"I love you."

He was so much more than just a friend to her.

Naoto took his sword in hand, and she ran. She pushed past through the fog of voices, and Sukuna-Hikona tore a hole through a wall of TVs. She jumped through the hole, quietly landing on the
ground as she saw Yu. He was on his knees in front of Adachi, and the killer had a gun to his head. Neither realized she was there as Naoto quickly formulated a plan.

"You're a sick freak, and I hope you rot here," Rise whispered into Yu's ear.

"You're just like Adachi. No, you're worse!" Kanji shouted, kicking the silver-eyed boy's ribs. Yu cried out in pain, only to become silent as Yukiko slammed her foot on his back.

"Be quiet. You're a monster!"

"Go to hell, Narukami!"

"Leeches, huh? Fine. See how well you do on your own."

"You were right, Yu. You don't deserve to be my sensei. You don't deserve anything, but to lay here and die."

Yu felt his arms become free, and he used them to hold his head as his fears stabbed and cut away at his mind. He saw himself at his worst, using and abusing innocent people, taking advantage of them, hurting his friends. He wiped the tears away as the illusions of his friends began to leave him, walking into the fog.

"Please... I've changed. I'm sorry..." Yosuke walked away. Chie walked away. "I swear, I've changed. D-don't leave!" Teddie sidestepped out of Yu's reach, while Yukiko kicked at his hands, before they both left his side. "I'm sorry!" Kanji's glare frightened the trembling boy, and the blond shook his head in disgust.

"You're pathetic. Not a man. Not even a boy. Just a piece of shit."

"I can't believe I called you brother. I'll make sure Nanako knows everything you've done. She'll know just what kind of freak you are." Rise spat venom from her lips, before leaving Yu with Kanji.

Naoto was the only one left. She stared down at him, but he couldn't meet her gaze. "Get up," she commanded him, and he obeyed, getting on his knees and forcing his body up. He stared at the ground, shaking under her icy gaze. "It's your choice." She waved her revolver in front of his eyes. "What do you think? Should I pull the trigger?" She pressed the barrel against her forehead, and his eyes widened as she smiled with sadistic glee. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Yu was quiet. He said nothing as the question lingered in his mind. Then he leaned forward, pressing the barrel of the gun against his head. He knew this had to be done. A second chance? Friends? Love? He didn't deserve that. His sins were thrown on his back, and the weight of them was crushing. It broke him. He was a broken man, and he knew that if he lived, he would just keep hurting people.

He couldn't do that to Naoto. He couldn't do that to his friends. He loved them. He needed to die to save them.

"Please."

"Please, what?"

"Please, don't let me hurt them..."
"Eh. Close enough." Adachi shrugged his shoulders, before grinding the barrel of the gun against Yu's head. "Time to die."

There was a loud bang. Then a scream.

"Fuck!" Adachi cried out in pain, placing a hand on his bleeding ear as he tried to understand what just happened. He'd been shot. Shot right through the ear. Blood stained his hand as he turned his head to where the shot had come from. Naoto stood there, aiming a gun at Adachi, Yu's broken sword in her hand.

"Get away from him." She fired, and Adachi dived to the ground as Magatsu-Izanagi formed to defend him. The crimson Persona glared at Naoto, watching as Sukuna-Hikona raced to their other half. "You won't hurt him!" Naoto's cobalt eyes glanced at Narukami. It was like he was in a trance. He didn't move, didn't even react to the gunfire.

*Hold on, Yu... I'll save you. I promise!*

"Okay, Detective." Adachi wiped his bloody hand against his coat, scowling at Naoto as his brow twitched. "Your turn."

The two Personas flew at one another. Naoto ran towards cover. Adachi opened fire.

The battle was far from over.

**END**
Naoto did a mental checklist of everything she would need for her trip. She had packed pens, papers, spare ammo for her revolver, and, of course, several books to read while she was there. She picked up her father's hat and placed it onto her head, and slipped an indigo-colored coat onto her arms. As she was buttoning it up, there was a knock on her door.

"Naoto? May I come in?" her grandfather, Norio Shirogane, asked.

"Go ahead, grandfather," replied Naoto as she finished buttoning up her coat.

The senior Shirogane stepped inside. He was certainly an older man, but there was a clear youthful energy to his smiling face. He gave off a sense of ease, and had a gift for comforting others. Of course, the fact that he was here with that smile on his face, meant he thought she needed to be comforted.

"You'll be going soon?"

"The train leaves within the hour. Yakushiji-san is getting the car ready."

Her grandfather nodded his head, before he placed a hand on her shoulder. "You promise you'll be careful, won't you? This is probably the most dangerous case you've ever taken, and I'm worried that-"

Naoto had captured thieves, kidnappers, and con artists. She had even found missing children, and lost lovers, but her grandfather was right. She had never encountered a murderer before, but this case was exactly what she needed to be recognized by the wider community. She needed to be seen as a Shirogane, and as the righteous heir to the Shirogane legacy.

She needed to make her parents proud.

"I understand your hesitation, grandfather, but I will be fine."

"I know you will be. You're a Shirogane, and more than that, you're Naoto," he smiled, though the young woman had difficulty understand just what he meant by that. "I was actually going ask you to find some friends while you were there."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your deductive reasoning skills and intellect are not in question, Naoto. I'm worried about your interpersonal skills, or lack thereof," the older man explained. He tried to lessen the blow with a teasing smile, but Naoto knew what he was really after. Her grandfather had commented on it before, and every discussion just made Naoto more and more frustrated.

"Grandfather, I respect your opinion, and I will always consider your counsel, but I don't need to be fostering relationships. I need to show the world what I'm capable of."

"How can you do that if you don't show them the real you?" he asked, sighing. "You want to be recognized, but you refuse to let anyone see what you're really like. You are just as guilty as the men who frown down upon you." Naoto felt her brow wrinkle, but she did her best to keep her expression unfettered and stoic. "It'd be one thing if you truly didn't accept your gender, Naoto, but
rejecting it because others reject it? That's-

"Grandfrather." Naoto silenced him with a single word, but she knew it was out of respect for her, rather than him choosing to stop. "I appreciate your advice, but I have to go. Yakushiji is waiting."

Norio Shirogane stepped out of his granddaughter's way, but he called out to her as she reached her doorway. "There are people out there who will accept you, Naoto. They won't care about your gender, or your age. They'll care about you, for you, but you'll never find them if you don't open-

"I'm sorry, grandfather." Naoto closed the door, leaving her grandfather alone with his thoughts.

Yosuke stared at Yu's laughing faces with disgust in his eyes. Each TV screen around him had the same video of Yu laughing on them, and they all spoke at once as their silver eyes smiled at Yosuke. "God, Saki dying was so perfect. I found out about my powers, and Yosuke thinks I'm his new best friend. God, does he even listen to himself?" Yu laughed. "He's so desperate, it'd be sad if it weren't so pathetic."

The words sickened Yosuke. He could still remember how it felt to lose Saki. Yu had been there for him, and the brunette thought he finally found a real friend. Then he found out it had all been a lie, and it was like he'd been punched in the gut.

"You weren't man enough to save Saki, now you're not even man enough to fight me? You really are worthless." That was what Yu had said to him that night at Junes. Yosuke saw the very worst of Yu that night. The real him was a spiteful, smug bastard. He knew exactly what to say piss Yosuke off, and it got to the point where Yosuke couldn't even stop himself from whaling on him.

Yosuke couldn't help being angry at Yu, just like the brunette couldn't help acting the same way against his Shadow.

"And that Senpai you were sweet on? Her death was the perfect excuse!"

Yosuke remembered what his own worst self was like. All his anger, frustration, and doubt that he'd felt was staring back at him. His Shadow had been a prick, an asshole, but he hadn't been wrong. Not entirely, at least. Maybe you're right, he thought, glaring at the TV screen. Maybe I was pathetic. Maybe I was desperate. A blue card materialized in front of Yosuke's face, and his fingers tightened around his kunai. But I'm not anymore!

He aimed his arm at the floating card, staring at it as Chie's voice echoed in his mind. "It's just... When did you get all leadery?"

Yosuke wasn't the same boy he was when he stepped into this world. He wasn't some dumb, goofball who was looking for adventure. His Persona, Jiraiya, was evidence of that. He had grown stronger, and accepted not only his own truth, but the truth about his supposed partner. Yu wasn't who Yosuke thought he was, but was that so bad?

"You, Chie, Rise... Everyone would better off without me... Tell everyone I'm sorry."

Yu saved Namatame's life when everyone had wanted him dead. Yu had cried, terrified he was going to kill everything he held dear. Yosuke had hugged him to try and calm him down. That night, he saw the real Yu, and he was so much more than that arrogant bastard on the TV screen.

"Jiraiya!" Yosuke's Persona appeared in a flash of blue, and without a single word, began to spin around in place. The wind around Yosuke, Teddie, and the Reaper was picking up. A green whirlwind surrounded the Persona, before it suddenly shot forward within a spinning cone of wind.
The drill slammed into the Reaper, who raised his guns in defense. The drill slammed into the metal guns, sparks flying as Yosuke watched.

Yosuke's fists tightened as Jiraiya began to glow with an intense blue light. His resolve was on fire as a long locks of red began to break free from Jiraiya's black mask. *I know you're more than this, Yu... Now it's time I proved I'm more than just some goofball!* Jiraiya's white outfit changed into a light shade of blue as the Persona began to spin even faster, tearing through the guns like they were made of styrofoam.

*Jiraiya?* No, Yosuke could hear his Persona's new name in his ear. The young man grinned, slamming his fist into open hand. "Alright! Kick some ass, Susano-o!" The Persona obeyed, flying up into the air as a metal band formed around his body. The outside of the ring resembled a saw blade, and Susano-o knew just how to use it. The evolved Persona spun, launching the ring like it was fired from a cannon, and it slammed into the Reaper's head, wedging itself halfway into the creature, black mist pouring from the gash.

_Hold on, partner...!_

Teddie felt the wind blow against his furry suit, and he felt the earth tremble underneath his paws, but his eyes were on the TV screens. He stared into his ex-Sensei's eyes, and he wondered.

*It's like my Shadow,* Teddie realized. That thing that had told Teddie he was nothing, that he'd never find his real self. That giant version of himself was mean, and used words that Teddie didn't know, but that thing had still been Teddie.

The Yu on the television screens wasn't his Shadow, but it was still him, Teddie realized. It was the him Yu had warned Teddie about.

*_People were like thread, and I could wrap them around my fingers with ease._*

It sounded completely backwards, but Teddie was beginning to understand what his ex-Sensei had meant. The other Yu on the television was all too similar to Teddie's Shadow, or even Adachi. He was a jerk, he was a complete and utter jerk. Maybe Yu really had been like this at some point...

*_I want you to think of you and me as equals from now on. That, or maybe I should call you Sensei._*

But it didn't matter what Yu had been like, because Teddie knew the real thing. Teddie's Shadow had been wrong about who the bear was, and this Yu was wrong about how he felt towards his friends. Teddie had found a place to call home, a place where he was surrounded by friends and family, and he had Yu to thank for that.

*_At your core, you know this... You just cannot accept it. So you seek an alternate form... a denial of your nature._" That's what his Shadow had said, and at the time, Teddie didn't really understand what he meant. Now he did, though. He was a Shadow, and that should have meant he was doomed to live an existence of unhappiness, lashing out at everything he saw.

But Teddie refused that possibility. The little bear strove to be more than just a hollow, little bear, and he succeeded. He had his own Persona, he had his own human form, and most importantly, he had his friends. Teddie made his own reason to live, and it was all thanks to his family.

Teddie found his own truth, and the truth was it didn't matter who he was.

_*I mean, you had to be something, right? Besides, not like it matters._*" His bear-ther, Yosuke.
"Who the hell cares what you are or were? Only thing that matters is what you is!" Kanji.

"Whether the ego masters its Shadow, or the Shadow awakens to its ego, the only difference I see is the order in which the process occurred." Naoto.

"So... That means Teddie's practically human, right?" Chie-chan.

"I'd say he's as human as any of us, bear costume or no bear costume." Yuki-chan.

"Totally! Teddie, you're one of us, simple as that." Rise-chan.

And, of course, he had Yu. "I know it sounds crazy, but they helped me find my true self. I think they can do the same for you." Friends helped friends be happy! They helped them improve!

Teddie glared at the grinning face of his ex-Sensei, and he growled like the bear he was! This isn't who Yu wants to be anymore. That's what he told me... So I'll help him change! I'll help him find the real him, just like he helped me! I'm going to be the best friend I can be! Because he's my best friend!

"Kintoki-Douji!" The rotund Persona appeared above Teddie's head, and it flew forward with the missile in his hands. "Kaboom!" Yosuke had beaten the Reaper down. Now it was Teddie's job to finish the monster off! Originally the bear was planning on slamming a missile down on the Reaper, but then he saw a blue aura radiate from his Persona.

"Huh? Whoa...!" Teddie watched his Persona change right before his eyes. The small dome head of Kintoki vanished as his hands grew into massive bear claws. The missile in his hands vanished, only for a larger missile to suddenly begin to grow out of the Persona's back. Fire burst from the rocket as a wide grin, plus a pair of eyes, formed on the Persona's metal belly.

"Wow! Beartastic!" Teddie cheered, jumping with joy over his Persona's new form, and the new strength he felt brimming from it. "Alright... Kaumi! Bear pile!" The rocket burned with a wild fire as it suddenly shot the Persona forward, spiraling through the air. Kamui rose up high, only to make a sudden U-turn and come racing down towards the twitching Reaper.

"Yu doesn't care whether or not I'm a Shadow. He just wants me to be happy. Because he's my friend! And I'm his friend! Teddie let out his fiercest growl as his Persona slammed into the fallen Reaper. Hold on, Yu! I'll help you! That's what friends are for!

There was a flash of light, and the ground trembled as a huge explosion rocked the area. The walls of TVs fell apart from the blast as two boys grinned at one another.

In the air above them, Sukunda-Hikona and Magatsu-Izanagi fought one another. Their clashing blades rained sparks down onto the battlefield, neither giving the other any ground. They were evenly matched for the moment as they raced across the battlefield, both struggling to gain an advantage over their enemy. The smaller Persona lacked her opponent's strength and raw elemental ferocity, but she made up for it with blinding speed.

The two continued to battle one another in the air as their other halves challenged each other on the ground. In contrast, the battle on the ground was akin to a game of cat and mouse. Which was simply depended on who fell in the others' crosshairs. Naoto moved behind a broken wall as another shot filled the air. The bang was deafening, and she could feel her ears ring from the sound, but she pushed the pain aside and focused.

"Why are you trying to save this world? We both knows it's nothing but shit! What's worth saving?
Can't you see how rotten the world is? People can't survive unless they're born with every advantage of the book!” Adachi shouted. Naoto could clearly hear him, but she did her best not to fall for his trap. "Or are you just doing this for the fame and glory?” She took a deep breath, hoping the cool air would help pacify her growing anger.

Stay calm. That's the most important part. Don't let Adachi get into your head.

There was silence for several moments, before Adachi's voice called out to her once more. He sounded close, and Naoto's already racing heart began to pick up as Adachi taunted her. "You know, before our world and this one become one, maybe I'll give Inaba one more murder victim. How do you think your old man is going to feel when he sees his precious little granddaughter's corpse hanging from an antenna?"

"Don't let him get under your skin..." she begged herself, repeating the mantra as Adachi's laugh taunted at her., but it was impossible for her blood not to boil. She could feel her grip on her gun tighten as her fingers trembled. The fingertips were becoming a paler color as Naoto tried to tame her own rage.

As hard as it was to admit, Adachi was deceptively intelligent. He knew how to attack a person's insecurities. If his prey, or opponent did that, then their blows would be sloppy and predictable, like a thick sludge was covering her body as he tried to escape.

Like a damn fool, she had bitten the bait. Adachi knew what to say to rile her, and he knew exactly what to mock to make her do something stupid. Naoto repeated to herself that she had to remain calm, but it was getting harder with every passing moment.

Another bullet flew, and this time she felt it hit her. The shot went through the wall, and she bit down on her lip to keep from crying out. She had been lucky. The shot had only grazed her, but blood still seeped from the wound as her heart raced.

Damn it... When Naoto first met Adachi, she mistook him for some simpering moron who didn't deserve his badge. She cursed her own stupidity. She had fallen for his deception, giving him the power to manipulate the case behind the scenes. To manipulate her.

"I know we're going to catch this killer because I believe in you, Naoto. You're smart, clever, and cool." There hadn't been an ounce of sarcasm or deceit in Yu's voice when he told her that. Naoto could feel the words echo in her mind, and she felt her fingers cease to shake. Calm. You need to be calm. Narukami has put his faith in you. Remain calm, and think. Like water on a fire, the pain from her injured arm vanished as her mind began to formulate a plan.

Adachi continued to taunt her, but now his words were like venom spat at an ironclad ship. She allowed them to slide off of her, refusing to allow him any victory over her. "You're lucky, detective. I never had what you did. No, people like me actually need to try. Begging, pleading, scratching for a portion of the good fortune you got!" He shot at the air, but she remained calm, bending low to keep from being hit. "I fought tooth and nail to got where I am now! You? You got everything fed you on a silver spoon!" He fired once more, but there was no bang. Just a click.

It happened in an instant. A plan formed in Naoto's mind as she nodded her head, working out the pieces to herself. It was a gamble, honestly, it was more of a Narukami plan than a Shirogane strategy, yet she felt confident in it. She allowed herself only a moment to smile, before her lips were pressed thin. She steeled herself for the act, before she began to play Adachi's game.

Chie tore her eyes from the screens. She felt like throwing up at what she saw. Was this really her
friend? The thing on the screen had his eyes, and his hair, and his face, but the way he acted... His voice was like a cold knife against her neck. It terrified her, and it sent chills down her spine.

Yu thought she was weak. He thought she would have thrown herself into his arms. Just submitted herself to him. The worst part was that Chie wondered if he was right. There had been a point in her life where she was desperate for approval, hungry to be needed. Yu would have given her that, and she would have bit the hook without hesitation.

But that part of her life was over, wasn't it? Chie had closed that chapter, and she refused to go back. She told herself that, repeated it as she lifted her gaze to glare at Yu's grinning face.

"Old Yu was an asshole, I'm not denying that."

Now I know what he meant, she realized, bitterly. But I wasn't much better a few months ago... Her Shadow's mocking voice echoed in her skull. Her amber eyes, lazily glancing at Chie like she was an afterthought, lips curled into a grin as she laughed.

"When Yukiko looked at me with such jealousy... Man, did I get a charge out of that! Yukiko knows the score. She can't do anything if I'm not around." Chie knew that Yukiko was wrapped around her finger, and rather than loosen her grip, she made Yukiko hold on tighter. She was so desperate for Chie's friendship, and in a way, Chie was just as desperate... Maybe more so.

The young martial artist had been so pathetic, once upon a time, but she refused to act like that ever again.

"Chie, you're one of the strongest human beings I've ever known."

Just like her, Yu was trying to improve himself. He was trying to be better, trying to get stronger for their friends. To Chie, that meant they were heroes of justice! And they were going to leave footprints on Adachi's stupid face! It was that simple. Chie's Shadow, the Yu on the TVs, they could say whatever they wanted, and maybe it was true, but that didn't change a single thing!

"Tomoe!" Chie shattered the card with a single kick, and she watched as her Persona appeared.

Without a single order, Tomoe charged forward, and the Reaper tried to smack the Persona out of the air with a quick backhand. But the Shadow was shocked as his knuckles almost broke on impact. The small Persona didn't budge an inch, and instead Tomoe smacked the Reaper's hand away from her. Tomoe was glowing, her body like sapphire as she began to change.

Her yellow jumpsuit had turned black, with golden highlights as large, silver armor began to form on her hands and waist. Chie could feel the energy burning up inside of her. It was like the biggest sugar rush of her life. Like she needed to run a mile, like if she didn't use up this new energy, she'd pop. Thankfully, she had the perfect punching bag right in front of her. All she needed was to attack. Her Persona turned her head as a black and silver helmet appeared on her. Tomoe glanced at Chie with crimson eyes as the young girl flashed a toothy smirk.

"Suzuka Gongen!" Chie readied her body, before pushing herself forward. She began to wildly kick at the air, striking at the open air as her Persona mimicked her moves, right on the Reaper's face.

She felt good, but she also felt pissed. Pissed that some people, like Adachi, or the old Yu, or even herself, thought they could just take advantage of people. Beating the Reaper's face was the perfect way to work out that anger. She kept up the barrage for what felt like a full minute, before stopping. There were dozens of footprints on the Reaper's face as it slowly stumbled back, black
mist pouring from the wounds.

"I've made mistakes," Chie told herself. "But the biggest mistake I could make is beating myself up about it! No! I'm going to be like Yu! I'm going to be true to myself! I'm going to walk the path of improvement, right by his side! And I'm going to support my friends, and be a real... Hero. Of. Justice!

Each thought was laced with a series of punches, each aimed at the Reaper's head. It could barely stand as Chie grinned. She could see fire rising up from the ground below the Shadow...

"Yu and I made a promise to improve ourselves, she thought. Now I'm going to show him how far I've come!"

Yukiko squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out what she heard and what she had seen, but the image of Narukami and her in each other's arms was burned into her eyes. She could hear her own mocking laughter, the twisted unity of their moans as they kissed each other. The sights and sound were plucked right from her fantasy.

Yes. She had fallen in love with Yu Narukami, and maybe in a way, she had never stopped loving him. Even when he told her who he was and how he had lied to her, some part of her still wanted him. It wasn't real love, she knew that now. It was more like desperation, an empty hole in Yukiko's chest that her thought only he could heal.

Mere months ago, she would have desired nothing but his touch, for his voice to whisper sweet nothings to her. Back when she saw him as her prince charming, as the key to her fairy tale ending. Even after that night at her family's inn, some part of her wanted him...

"I have no hope if I stay, and no courage to leave... So I sit on my ass hoping that someday my Prince will come!"

Her Shadow's words reminded Yukiko how foolish she had been. She acted like Yu was some kind of solution, a key, not a person. Just like how other people saw her as some innocent maiden, a simple girl who needed to be saved... Yu breaking her heart was the wake up call she needed. It forced her to grow, and she knew that she and Yu were simply not meant to be.

"Yukiko, I'm sorry." Even if the truth was ugly, at least it was real. The love Yukiko had for Yu wasn't gone. It simple changed. instead she saw him as her friend.

"You're not a bad person." Yu wasn't the prince she wanted, but he was the friend he needed. He wasn't perfect, but he didn't have to be. He shouldn't be who Yukiko imagined him to be. He and Yukiko just had to be themselves.

"You were angry. It happens to the best of us." Reality was better than any dream. Her bond with Yu was stronger than it had ever been...

And if Adachi thought these illusions were going to stop her from helping her friend, he was sorely mistaken.

"How dare you!" Adachi thought he could just peel open her scar, play with her emotions, and expect to just walk away?! I don't think so, she growled. "Come! "Konohana Sakuya!" she roared, cutting through her card with her fan.

The Persona formed behind her, but there was something different about her. She was glowing, but it was more like her insides her glowing. Like the pink clothes and armor was just holding
something else inside. Small cracks formed on Konohana Sakuya's body, with a blue light shining out from inside of it. The helmet and clothing broke off of her, revealing a golden, featureless body underneath. Yukiko watched with stunned eyes as the feminine, golden figure grew silver, metal feathers on her arms.

A katana formed in one hand, complete with a scabbard. She pulled the blade out of the sheath, before twirling it in the air, practicing with the weightless blade. Yukiko's shock turned into an excited grin as she pointed her evolved Persona to the Reaper. "Go! Amaterasu!"

A circle of fire surrounded the Reaper, before dozens of small, fiery bars rose up to trap the masked monster. "Agidyne!" Yukiko and Amaterasu both swung their weapons through the air, and a pillar of red-hot flames rose up within the circle. The torrent of fire was massive, and it burned the giant Shadow to a blackened crisp.

When the flames finally stopped, the Reaper was nothing more than ash on the ground. A gentle breeze carried the ashes towards Yukiko, who blew them away with a single dash of her hand. Now that the Reaper was taken care of, Yukiko had a friend to save.

Yu-kun... Yukiko's hands tightened to fists as she glanced at Chie. Her friend was smiling at her, and for a moment, Yukiko dropped her guard to return the gesture. *I'm on my way. Just hold on.*

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Adachi sang, eyes scanning the wasteland. There weren't many places for the Detective Bitch to hide, meaning it was just a matter of time before he found her. He glanced at Magatsu-Izanagi, and jerked his head to the side. The black and red Persona nodded, before taking flight and searching the area. As his bloodhound searched for her, Adachi decided to continue his little game with the terrified child.

"Oh, the things I'm going to do to you when I find you, detective," he chuckled, his grey eyes gleaming. "Or what I'll do to your little boyfriend if I find him first."

"Stay away from him!" Her voice betrayed her. Naoto wasn't strong enough to hide the tremble in her voice. She was terrified, and that made this all the more fun.

"No 'please?' Didn't your parents teach you any manners?"

"Shut the hell up!" He turned his head, eyes darting to the source of the sound. Naoto's pet was flying right at him. He fired three shots at the blue bug, but it dodged each shot. He fired a fourth one, and it hit, sending the small creature crashing to the ground. Momentum made it roll on the ground as Adachi summoned his own Persona.

"Magatsu-Izanagi, squash this bug for me." The blue insect took off flying, clearly scared for its life. Adachi's eyes followed it for a moment, before he brushed it aside. His Persona could take care of it. He reached for some ammo, only for his eyes to widen as he heard a distinct noise. Whimpering. It was close... Meaning Naoto was close, and terrified.

The sound had come from a nearby fallen sign for some store. It was made of a thin, weak metal. His smile widened as he saw her blue hat poking out from the corner of the sign. She was probably sobbing now... How pathetic.

Adachi raised his gun and aimed, painting a mental picture of where Naoto was hiding. "Do you want to know the reason I became a cop? It was so I could carry around a gun and shoot whoever I wanted. All in the name of justice." He pulled the trigger. The bullet cut through the air was ease, before piercing the metal sign. The scream he heard sent a tingle down his spine.
He never did get a chance to admire his work with Narukami. All he knew was that the brat took a bullet for the detective. There was no chance to admire his handiwork. Adachi wasn't going to have that problem with Naoto. He started to walk closer, confidence in every step.

"You know, we shouldn't be fighting. Society's a shitshow, full of assholes and idiots. Full of rules and pointless laws. It's unnatural. We're all just trapped, forced to suffer with each other. The world will be a better place once we're all Shadows..." He stepped around the sign, only for his smile to vanish as he found nothing behind the it. "What the-?"

Naoto wasn't there. There wasn't any blood. Where the hell-?

Adachi's eyes widened as he felt an agonizing, stabbing sensation in his side. He felt himself being pushed, nearly falling over, only to be pushed again as a small foot slammed into his back. He fell to the ground, feeling his blood gushing from the wound. He placed a hand over the wound, biting his lip as his warm blood stained his hand. He looked up, glaring at Naoto's cold eyes.

"Y-you bitch! You fucking bitch!" He raised his gun, eyes narrowing as he glared at her. He aimed right for her heart, and pulled the trigger.

The empty click from his gun was deafening.

"Smith & Wesson. Model number thirty-six. Standard issue for Japanese law enforcement. I noticed it when we first met." Adachi, for the first time in a week, felt afraid. He felt a chill run down his spine. He opened his mouth, but his jaw simply hung open as Naoto glared at him. "They have only five rounds. That's five shots, and you wasted all of them."

Kanji's fist slammed into the closest TV he could reach. The image of Yu standing over Rise's unconscious body, sword in hand, shattered. The broken glass left several cuts on the man's hand as he panted.

He was angry. He was angry at his senpai, and he was angry at himself. He never thought this kind of shit was going down behind his back... Yu had told Kanji about the kind of guy he used to be, but it was a hell of a difference to see it with his own two eyes.

He almost killed Rise... The very thought made him feel sick. It made him want to break every single damn television he could find. It pissed him off to hell and back. Kanji glanced at another screen. Yu-senpai was pulling Rise into his arms, leaning forward to steal a kiss. Kanji felt a familiar inferno burning in his gut, but it was much, much worse.

This was the same feeling Kanji experienced when he first saw the real Yu. It was the same burning Kanji felt when he saw Yu and Naoto together. It was jealousy, but when he saw Rise kissing Yu's lips, it felt so much worse. Maybe it was because it was happening again... or maybe it was because of Rise.

"I love Naoto." Three simple words that made Kanji want to punch something. But seeing Yu kissing Rise? Holding her? That made him want to punch someone.

Kanji lifted up his fist, pulling it back to shatter the screen, only to stop. It's easy to get pissed off. Anger's always easy. So's jealousy.

"Ohh, how I hate girls... So arrogant and self-centered! They cry if you get angry, they gossip behind your back, they spread nasty lies! They look at me like some... some disgusting THING and say that I'm a weirdo...!"
I don't want easy. I ain't looking for the easy route. I'm a man, he reminded himself. I'm going to handle this problem like a man should! By beating up the one really responsible for this!

He put his hand down and he took a deep breath. A card floated down in front of him, and just like his Senpai, he crushed it in his hand. His Persona appeared behind him, staring at him, waiting for an order.

"So does this mean we're cool? You and me?"

"Yeah, I think so. We're cool, Senpai."

Kanji and Yu were friends. They respected each other. They cared about one another. In a way, they were like brothers. The blond had never had a sibling before, but if he had to imagine what it was like, he'd guess it'd be like his relationship with Yu. There was kinship, jealousy, and even anger, but when the chips were down, Kanji had his friend's back.

That didn't change because of some slideshow.

"Kick his ass, Ta-" Kanji glanced down at his shadow. He was surrounded by a blue light. "Huh?" Kanji turned to his Persona, only for his eyes to widen as the giant behemoth began to change.

His black armor became a bright red, with fire decals accenting the arms, and legs. The already giant Persona grew a whole foot taller as his lightning bolt weapon became sharper, like an actual blade. Two golden eyes formed on his head, followed by a large, crown-like disk, and what looked like a giant, metallic mustache. Kanji blinked in utter shock, and confusion, as his Persona flexed his new muscles.

"Holy shit! That still you, Take-Mikazuchi?" The giant Persona nodded his head, before turning to glare at the Reaper. Kanji's gaze followed, and the blond man clenched his jaw. "Alright... Yeah, I get you. Let's kick that thing's ass, and then go save Yu." Kanji rolled his head on his neck, before snarling at the Reaper. "Hey, asshole! Your boss thought it'd be funny to piss me off and try to make me hate one of my best friends! You don't mind if I make a message out of you, do I?!"

The Reaper lifted up his guns, only to suddenly be disarmed by a brutal swing from Kanji's Persona. "Kick his ass, Rokuten Maou!" The guns were shattered into pieces by a single punch, before Rokuten Maou swung his sword. The blade cut a wide gash on the Shadow's chest, forcing it to stumble back.

Black smoke rose from the wound as the Reaper threw a punch at Rokuten Maou. Kanji could hear the Shadow's knuckles crack on impact.

"Yu's my friend." Rokuten Maou backhanded the Shadow, knocking it back. "He's my Senpai." Another punch. "He's an arrogant bastard, and he's one of the greatest guys I've ever met." Another cut on the Reaper's chest. The monster's eye shined with fear. "You thought I'd turn my back on him? Because you showed me what he's like at his worst? That shit ain't gonna work! I've seen the man at his best!"

Kanji reached forward, and his Persona mimicked him. They grabbed the Shadow's head, before turning around and flinging him at the wall of TVs. The Reaper slammed into it, shaking and breaking many of the screens. "Now let me show you my best."

Rise felt tears pool in the corners of her eyes. She tasted regret like bile in her throat. What she saw hurt. There was no gentle way of saying it. She felt like Yu's sword had actually made it through her chest...
To see someone she loved betraying her like that... They hadn't even known each other back then. She didn't even know his name. Rise wasn't sure if that made what she saw better or worse. The sight of one of her closest friends holding a sword over her slumbering body froze Rise's body, until something tugged on her mind.

It was so small. Nothing more than a feeling. But it was something. She summoned Himiko to her side, and the Persona placed Rise's visor over her eyes. She saw through the wall of televisions, and found Yu's body lying on the ground. His body was there, but his mind was trapped, she realized. It was like their fight against Mitsuo Kubo. He was trapped, locked out of his own body...

She had no idea what he was going through, but she knew she needed to help him. Whatever reservations she had were swept away as her fingers rubbed against one another. "Himiko..." Her hands slowly became fists as she realized how stupid it would be to give up on him. The truth of Rise's rescue hurt, but it was nothing compared to the loss of her brother.

"I'm sick of being some airhead cliché who chokes down everything she's fed and takes it all with a smile!" She came to Inaba so sure that no one would ever see the real her. That no one cared who Rise was.

"You might be the first friend I've ever really made." But Yu cared.

"He's like the big brother I never knew I needed." And she cared about him.

"I'm not who you think I am." He thought no one would ever see the real him.

"So? I'm not the girl all of Japan thinks I am." But she did. When he thought Naoto had given up on him, she pushed him to pursue her...

Their bond may not have been the most powerful of bonds, but there was something special about it. Rise had been the first person Yu let see the real him, maybe even before Naoto saw it. Yu came to her for advice on how to be better, and in a strange way, he helped herself improve.

All these little moments that made their lives... All these little moments that defined their friendship.

Himiko lifted the visor from Rise, before she began to change, glowing as her black skin turned white. The golden metal that surrounded her body shifted, turning into a bright crimson as Rise's resolve burned like a fire. Her white coat gained black stripes as the Persona held out her hand, materializing several golden orbs. Rise turned her gaze to the Reaper, watching as Kanji and his Persona beat it into submission.

The giant Persona began to slam the Shadow into the prison's walls, before Rise shouted out to him. "Kanji! Move." The blond looked at her, before grinning with a spark in his eyes. He and his Persona moved out of the way as Rise's new Persona, Kanzeon, aimed her hands at the wall. The golden orbs that surrounded her began to hum with energy, glowing with a pink tinge as a Kanzeon closed her eyes.

When she opened them, a light was forming between her hands, before it shot out at the wall like a rocket. The fallen Reaper lifted his head up just in time to be hit by the blast. The beam decimated the damaged wall, and it tore apart the defeated Reaper. The blast last a smoldering hole in the wall as bits of scrap fell to the ground. Kanji blinked, eyes wide as he stared at the hole.

He looked at Rise, and there was pride in his eyes, but also awe. She smiled back at him, before lifting her head up. Kanzeon placed her visor over her eyes again, and Rise saw Yu's comatose
"Yu and Naoto need help. Yosuke-senpai and the others are working on breaking out. They should be free in a minute."

"Alright, then let's go help Yu and-"

"Wait. There's something else." Rise's scans were picking up something in the sky. Something was forming high above the ruins of Inaba, but if Rise's scans were right, it was incredibly powerful. She felt a chill run down her spine, but she refused to let fear hold her back. "We need to hurry. Something big is about to appear, and I doubt it's on our side."

"Alright, what are we waiting for? Let's go back them up!" Kanji grinned, motioning for her to follow him. She nodded her head, and their Personas vanished as the two ran out of their prison.

*Just hold out a little longer Naoto! Yu! She ran faster than her legs had ever taken her. We're on our way! I'm going to fight by your side this time, I promise!*

Naoto stood over Adachi's body, and she watched the man bleed onto the ground. The man was at least partly right. He and Yu shared several traits. They were both arrogant, but that came with a weakness. All she had to do was pretend that Adachi's words were getting to her. He thought he had Naoto right where he wanted her, when really he had been walking right into her trap.

Just like Yu, Adachi underestimated others. The two thought they infallible. Once upon a time Naoto thought the same of herself. The difference was Yu and Naoto learned humility. Adachi was going to pay dearly for thinking Naoto could be so easily defeated.

As Adachi tried to stop his bleeding wound, she patiently waited for the clone of Izanagi to get closer to her. She could see Adachi trying to hide his smiling face. He really thought he had her... His mistake.

Magatsu-Izanagi raised his spear as he flew towards Naoto, aiming to impale her head on the end of his blade, but he never got the chance to. Sukunda-Hikona fired attacked him from behind, darting onto his back and bringing her blade at the soft, unguarded neck of the dark Persona. The cut was seamless and quick. His own forward momentum did half the work as Sukunda lobbed off the other Persona's head.

The sound of the headless body hitting the ground tore the smile from Adachi's face. He cried out in agonizing pain, clutching his neck as though he could feel the blade cut at his own skin. He gasped for air, eyes widening as his fingers clawed at his neck.

"That was for everyone you've hurt over these last few months." She stared down at Adachi with a contemptuous sneer on her face. "You talked about how awful life is, but I've seen you do nothing, but ruin the lives of others. You whine about how terrible life has been to you, but of course life would be hard when you do nothing but close yourself off from people. To put it simply? You're nothing more than an immature, egotistic brat."

Naoto had learned from her experiences that a person only had two options when faced with their own personal truth. Accept it, or reject it.

Adachi chose the latter. He pushed himself back up, screaming at her. "S-shut the hell up, you damn bitch! You have no idea the kind of suffering I've gone through! I-" Naoto's fist slammed into his face, her knuckles grinding into his eye, before the blow knocked him back down to the body. She turned her scans to her other friends, and while Naoto was locked in combat with Adachi, the rest of their time was on their way to breaking out.
ground. He fell to the ground, his eye swelling as the skin around it turned a dark shade of blue.

"Tohru Adachi, you are underarrest."

He sucked in air through his teeth, glaring at her with a single eye. His grey eyes burned with an intense hatred, only for it to slowly melt away. He sighed. "You're such a pest, you know that?" He chuckled, his eyes falling to the ground at her feet. He forced himself to sit down as he giggled. "God, what the hell...? To lose to something like you..." He slowly lifted his eyes to stare at Naoto. "It doesn't matter. Nothing does. The Shadows will...w-" His eyes widened, fear brimming in his grey eyes.

"Ah!" He stood up, no, it was liking something was picking him up. His arms rose up as Naoto watched a Shadow rip itself out from the floor, and lunge at Adachi. It bit into his arm, as another Shadow pounced onto the murderer, devouring his leg. More and more Shadows attacked Adachi, forcing their black skin to meld with his flesh. Naoto felt the wind pick up, and she struggled to hold her ground as it threatened to pick her up.

"The entire human race shall become Shadows." Adachi's mouth was moving, but that voice wasn't his. The voice was high-pitched, monotone, almost artificial. It echoed throughout the entire city. "And I shall descend upon the world, and rule it as the master of order."

"What... What is this?" Naoto whispered. *It's just like before... Adachi is fusing with the Shadows, just like Namatame did, but on a much larger scale!*

"Both this world and yours will soon be enclosed in a fog that never lifts. It will be the peaceful world that mankind has longed for..."

Hundreds of Shadows were flying off of the ground and melding into Adachi, until his body couldn't even be seen anymore. The swarms of Shadows swirled and twisted around one another, morphing and growing into a gigantic black orb. It hovered over the area like a black moon, before the black skin peeled open, revealing a single, mechanical eyeball staring at the detective.

"I am Ameno-sagiri. One who rules the fog. One awakened by man's desires. Their desires are my desires," he declared, his voice shaking the very earth Naoto stood. "Child of man, do what you will, but your world's erosion cannot be stopped."

"W-what...?" Naoto strained her eyes behind her glasses, staring at the behemoth as if the very sight of it confused her. "You're what's been behind this?! Behind Adachi?! Why?! What reasoning could you possibly have to destroy our world?!" This thing might have been made of Shadows, but it was nothing like the creatures that inhabited this world. It was like some sort of deity to the Shadows...

Ameno-sagiri spoke in a high-pitched tone, as if it was speaking through a filter or a microphone. "Mankind will soon become Shadows and live on in the darkness of the fog. They will be oblivious of their reality, not because I wish it, but because they do."

"That can't be true," Naoto muttered to herself. She stepped forward and she screamed at the entity, refusing to let it see fear in her own sapphire eyes. "Humanity would never want this for itself! They would never want what Adachi did, or what you're trying to do! You-"

The sound of his voice was booming, and Naoto struggled to hold her ground as the entity interrupted her. "I am merely the shepherd of their true desires. Humanity's desires are my desires. That is why I must meld the two worlds into one and seal them in fog." His singular eye glanced down at her, and Naoto wondered if there wasn't some mix of anger and amusement in his gaze.
She couldn't help but feel like an ant as the behemoth stared down at her. "I never considered the possibility that those challenged by their Shadows could create this strange power. You are each anomalies. You must all be tested."

"Tested?" Naoto's eyes widened as Ameno-sagiri's eye began to glow, before a single beam shot out. "Sukunda-Hikona!" Her Persona appeared to defend her, raising her blade to deflect the blast. The beam hit and the small Persona was slammed into the ground. She was brought down to her knee as the stone cracked underneath her. Despite the obvious difficulty she was experiencing, the beam was still reflected away from her. It hit a nearby store, utterly vaporizing it and everything behind it.

By the time the attack was over, Naoto and her Persona could barely stand. The detective panted from exhaustion as Ameno-sagiri watched her. "You deny the truth of humanity's desire? Then prove to me your own strength, but know this. The first of you has already fallen to humanity's desires. You will soon follow."

"The... the first of us?" Naoto repeated, brow wrinkling in confusion. Her eyes widened as she realized just what the entity meant. A figure was rising up from the ground, bathed in a black smoke. "Yu!" He was trapped in a cloud of shadows, his body convulsing as Ameno-sagiri lifted the young man closer to him.

"The first of you to awaken to his gift, and the first to fall to the truth. He drowned himself in lies, and now he seeks oblivion rather than living with the truth. You will follow him, or you will perish. No matter your fate, humanity's will shall be made true."

"Release him!" Naoto demanded, sending her Persona towards the giant eye. Ameno-sagiri fired several more beams down at the two, and Sukunda-Hikona was able to dodge several before a stray beam tore through her wing. She began to plummet to the ground, eyes wide as Naoto cried out in pain. No! I need to save him...!

Her fingers tightened into fists as she ground her teeth together. "I wouldn't be here, if it weren't for you." She could still feel his lips on her knuckles. She wanted to remember that feeling forever. She never wanted to forget it. The way he made her feel...

I need to tell him the truth, she realized. She felt the air turn hot as beams of light burned at her body, scorching skin and clothes as she wondered if she would ever get her chance...

Suddenly the attacks stopped, and Naoto felt herself being healed. Her red and black skin returned to a more natural, pale-pink tone. Her fatigued body became revitalized as she opened her to find several beams of like circling around Ameno-sagiri. Flames, ice, lightning, and bursts of wind attacked the giant eye, shattering the metal skin that protected it. Sukunda-Hikona, who was about to hit the ground, was caught by a strong breeze. It carried her gently to the ground as familiar voices called out to Naoto.

"Let go of our friend, you jerk!" Rise shouted, running to Naoto's side. "Yeah! Who the hell gave you the right to decide what humanity wanted?! We can decide our own fates, you damn bastard!" Kanji was right beside, glaring at Ameno-sagiri as he helped Naoto to her feet.

Yosuke smiled at Naoto as Sukunda-Hikona looked at the group of friends. "We heard everything. You okay, Naoto?"

"I'll be okay," she replied, before feeling a hand on her shoulder. She turned her head to Yukiko's smiling face.
"It's okay. You don't need to do this alone," Yukiko promised. "Let's save Yu together."

"You're fighting to save those who willingly surrender themselves to the fog? Idiotic. Illogical. Arrogant." The creature almost sounded outraged at the very notion of fighting back. "He has already surrendered himself to the lies of oblivion. Why fight for him? For the masses of humanity?"

"Do you really need to ask? Well, I'll tell you! Cause we're heroes of justice! Cause some people may want to give up, but we don't! And because that's what friends do for each other! They save each other when things are at their worst!" Chie grinned, watching her Persona strike at Ameno-sagiri's black hide, tearing a wide gash on the metal armor.

"You thought Adachi-baby's evil clip show was going to stop us? Wrong! It just made us go bear-zerk!" Teddie roared, watching his Persona fire several chunks of ice at the eye. "Our bonds with each other are too strong for you! We'll never give up on each other!"

"Our bonds..." Naoto felt a fire in the pit of her stomach as she watched Sukunda-Hikona glow. That's right... I'm not the only one who cares about Yu. Each of us has a unique bond with him, a thread made of genuine friendship and camaraderie... My own bond with him is... He... Naoto took a deep breath as she realized the truth. Yu... I promise I'll save you. I promise we'll all return to our world, and I'll... I'll tell you how I truly feel!

Sukunda-Hikona's body shattered like glass, revealing a taller, stronger being beneath it. Naoto stared at Yamato-Takeru with wide, memorized eyes. Her Persona stared back at her, adorned in a princely uniform. A helmet that reminded Naoto of her childhood stared back at her, almost smiling, before the Persona brandashed her long rapier.

Naoto's spirit was reignited as she smiled at the masked Persona. Yes... I will save you, Narukami! And then, I'm going to tell you that I love you too! Yamato-Takeru shot off like a rocket, blade aimed at the heart of the monster.

Yu felt like he was in a dream. He had waited for Naoto to take the shot, to put him out of her misery, but it never came. So he was left in a limbo as he wished for a painless death. His voice had gone unanswered as he drifted in a waking slumber. He felt weightless, like he was swimming through a cloud.

I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry. Guilt ate away at his mind as his eyes closed. Naoto, I'm sorry. He wondered what would happen now that he was going to die. What would Naoto do? She'd probably be relieved, he imagined. She was free of him. She could be with anyone she wanted, and she could finally forget about the parasite that had nearly ruined her life.

His nails dug into the palms of his hands as he cursed his own life. But then something forced itself between his fingers. Something held his hand and tugged on it. Was this supposed to be the ending he craved?

Then something caught his other hand, and he was no longer drifting. Faint whispers echoed in his skull, prodding at his mind as he tried open his eyes.

"Huh...?" It hurt to speak. Like his throat was too tight for the words to get out. He tried again to open his eyes, but they felt like they had been welded shut. Or maybe he was too scared to open them.

"Senpai!" one of the voices called out to him. "Can you hear me?!"
Rise...?
"Come on, man! Wake up! You can't let this thing beat you!"

Kanji...?

He felt his eyes relax, and he opened them to see nothing but darkness. No, that wasn't right. There was more than just darkness. It was like a net, or a smokescreen. He had tiny glimpses of something through the shadows, but his vision was obscured by the dark cloud. He tried to move, but it was like moving through sludge. His body felt heavy...

It'd be so easy to just give up...

Then a gust of wind hit him, and he almost felt himself being carried away by it. The dark mist was almost completely gone. He was still trapped, but his body felt easier to move, and light began to break the dark shroud.

"Yu! Can you hear us!? We're gonna save you, partner!"

Yosuke? The hell's going on? He lifted his arm up to try and push the dark fog away, batting at it with slow, sluggish arms as he glared at the voices of his friends. "Stop... Leave me..." They shouldn't be trying to save him. They should have just left him behind. He was supposed to die. It was the only thing he could do to make up for everything he had done to them.

"Teddie, wait! Be careful!" Yukiko warned.

"Friends don't let friends get eaten by monsters! Hold on, Yu-buddy! We're gonna rescue you!"

"Yeah! That's a promise!" Chie and Teddie's voices could be heard clearly through the veil. They were trying to rescue him. But Yu couldn't understand why.

What are those idiots doing...? Can't they see I'm just going to hurt them?! Yu felt his body tingle with warmth, before a powerful, golden blaze burned the fog around him. He was freed, staring at the red sky as his body began to fall.

"I've got him!" And then someone caught him. Whoever it was, they were clearly bigger than he was, yet their embrace felt oddly familiar. Warm. Soft. They smelled vaguely of vanilla. They pressed his face into their chest and Yu felt them slowly descending together. As they fell, Yu realized who had just spoken out.

"Naoto?" He looked at the head of his rescuer with tired, grey eyes. A face he had never seen before greeted him, yet he still saw who it was underneath. "Sukunda...?" And then the Persona dropped him onto his own two feet, and another pair of arms caught him, wrapping around his neck.

Naoto was embracing him, burrying her face into his shoulder. She let out a breath she had been holding for God knows how long as Yu saw the faces of his friends staring back at him. They looked happy. Relieved. But why? He hadn't die. He should have died. He-

"Is he okay?" Yosuke questioned.

"What's wrong with him? Why ain't he saying anything?!" Kanji added.

"Senpai? Senpai?" Rise snapped her fingers in front of him as Naoto pulled away. He felt cold without her touch, and he tried to speak, but all that came out was a whimper.
"Adachi must have done something to him during their fight," Naoto assumed. "What matters is that he's safe now. We have to hurry and defeat Ameno-sagiri. Hopefully his defeat will help Yu return to normal..." She looked away from him. She probably couldn't stand the sight of him. None of them could.

But then why did Yukiko heal him? Why did Chie promise to protect him? Why did Teddie smile at him, like nothing had happened between the two? It didn't make sense...

Yu lifted his eyes to the sky, and he watched as something both familiar and strange stared back at him. The single, robotic eye scanned the battlefield as seven familiar Personas flew around him. Just like the entity, there was something strangely familiar about them. They were given some bells and whistles, but the seven were still the Personas of his friends. And the giant eye? It reeked of Adachi, no matter what it looked like.

"Alright! Another hit! We've got this thing on the ropes!" Kanji announced.

As if rising to meet the challenge, Ameno-sagiri formed dozens of cannons on his body. The barrels stuck out of his metal shell as he watched the eight. He waited for only a moment, before he opened fire with a massive array of lasers.

"You just had to say something!" Yosuke groaned.

"Holy shit!"

"Everyone, hold on!" Naoto commanded, and once again she was embracing Yu. Rise hugged his other side as Kanji pushed the three girls down, shielding his body with his. Yosuke and Chie took one side, their bodies press tightly to each other and Yu as Teddie and Yukiko took the other. The eight stood bundled up tightly with one another as the earth quaked and the air became scorching hot.

Yu felt scared, no, a better word for it would have been terrified. He found himself pressing against Naoto, and his arms caught onto her as powerful winds tried to blow them away. He had an epiphany at that moment, or at least he considered a strange possibility.

Were the others trying to protect him? Did they want him to be safe? But why? He was Yu Narukami. He was as bad as Adachi. He was a monster, a bastard, a sicko. They shouldn't be trying to protect him. They should have killed him. Left him to die. Yet Naoto held him like she... like she cared. Like she really, truly cared about him...

The attack finally ended, and the eight slowly pulled away from one another.

"Guys, we've almost got this thing," Rise panted. "It's running low on health. It's getting desperate."

"Then we have to press on our offensive," Naoto said. "Overwhelm him together." The others nodded in agreement, and together they went on the offensive. They were striking at Ameno-sagiri together, and Yu watched in awe. Not just because of their strength, but because of how well they worked together.

The seven were friends. That had always been true; it was always meant to be, but he didn't deserve to be a part of their bond. Then he felt something warm squeeze his hand, and he glanced down to find Naoto's fingers intertwined with his. She held his hand as Yu watched Ameno-sagiri wildly fired at the attacking Personas. Most of his shots missed, before he suddenly swerved and aimed his single eye at Sukunda's new body. His eye began to glow as a loud hum could be heard.

A brilliant, white beam shot out of Ameno-sagiri's eye, aimed right for Naoto's Persona.
"No!" Yu squeezed the detective's hand as Izanagi materialized in front of the attack. He spun his spear, before swinging it. It cleaved the beam in two, sending two separate beams into the wide nothingness that surrounded the area. Naoto's eyes widened as she looked at Yu, but he just stared back at her. "Together?" he whispered, and she nodded her head with a smile on his face.

"Yamato-Takeru!"

"Izanagi!"

The two Personas flew side by side with one another, dashing towards the creature's artificial eye. He was already charging up another attack, but it was too late. They slammed into the monster with such force that it began to plummet to the ground. It was like watching a meteor hit the earth. Once again the group huddled together for safety as the shockwave of the falling monster nearly threw them to the ground.

When the dust settled, Ameno-sagiri's eye stared at Yu and the others, a rapier and spear stabbed through the glass and into the inner workings of the machine-like entity.

"Most impressive, children of man. I see your desire. I recognize your strength. I understand now... I shall take the fog from your world, and allow humanity to make their own path. Until a new destiny has been forged, I will watch, and I will wait..." Ameno-sagiri's single eye closed, before the metal began to melt away. "Time will show the path humanity takes... Children of the new potential."

"What...? What happened...?" Yu wondered, earning everyone's stares. He looked down, trembling as he expected nothing but their hatred and outrage. They should beat him into the ground, before throwing him to the cops with Adachi. Instead he felt Rise's arms wrap around his neck as she hugged him.

"You're okay!" she cheered.

"And here I thought we'd never get to hear you crack a joke again," Yosuke sighed, shaking his head.

"Holy shit... Did we just win?! We won!" Kanji laughed, throwing his arms to the sky.

"Whoohoo!"

"Yay! Bear hug!" Teddie joined in, hugging Yu with Rise as the silverette's hand still linked him to Naoto. He blinked, staring at his friends as the fog in his mind finally faded away.

Grey eyes turned to silver as Yu blinked. He felt Naoto's fingers pull away from his as he awoke from his waking nightmare. He looked at his friends, jaw hanging open as his brow wrinkled. He closed his mouth and stared at Ameno-sagiri, before pulling from the seven and dashing towards the decomposing eye.

"Senpai?"

"Huh? Where's he going?"

Yu ran to melting sphere, and he found exactly what he was looking for. Adachi was on the ground, the Shadows leaving his body as he stared at the red sky. Yu glanced up, and he found himself smiling as the red sky turned a serene blue. He quickly walked to Adachi's side, staring down at the fallen officer. The raven-haired murderer looked half-asleep, his stare blank, but there was a spark of life.
"Adachi. I know you can hear me." His grey eyes stared at Yu, but he said nothing. "It's over. You're going to jail. You're going to pay for everything you did." Yu was firm, clearly unsympathetic to the killer. "That isn't going to change."

He stepped closer, and bent his knees to crouch beside Adachi. "But I want you to know that it isn't too late. You're right. We are a lot alike. A few years was our only difference. I could have easily been just like you, but you know what that means?" Adachi didn't say anything, just staring at him with a fake smile. Yu reflected the gesture, but his was as real as the blue sky above them. "It means you could have been just like me."

"Those seven idiots over there? They saved my life, but more than that, they saved me. My soul. My life. Whatever you want to call it. They turned it all around for me. I owe them everything, because everything my life becomes now is thanks to them. They're my friends. I know it's cheesy, and stupid as hell, but it's the truth. They're what's going to stop me from becoming you."

Yu and Adachi scoffed. They both knew how ridiculous it sounded. "It isn't too late for you, Adachi. You don't have to be alone." The killer's eyes widened for only a moment, before they became sharp. Yu imagined Adachi felt insulted. He probably saw the pity in Yu's eyes. "It's your choice." And then Yu's fist decked Adachi, knocking him out in one swift blow.

The silverette stared at Adachi's twitching body, and he sighed. Part of him truly hoped Adachi found something real in the world. Something true. The other part of him really enjoyed punching the bastard.

Yu was quiet as the group brought Adachi back to reality. They left him for the police, watching as he confessed to everything without even being asked. He even pushed one of the officers who came to arrest him, doing everything he could to make sure he was taken in. The eight watched as Adachi was taken away. It was something all of them felt the need to see. To know that this really was over...

Once he was taken in by the police, the eight could finally say the case was closed. The day had been saved. The town was safe. The eight heroes had earned their rest. They walked into Inaba, and they watched as the fog retreated from once it came. They admired the rising sun and clear, blue sky as the citizens of Inaba wondered about the town's strange weather.

It felt unreal. Like a dream. But it was the truth. The reality was that they had saved the world...

Yu allowed his friends to bask in their victory, before he asked for the others to follow him into an empty alley, away from prying eyes. The confused group followed him, and he had his back from them as they asked the obvious question.

"What's going on, Yu-senpai?" Rise inquired.

"Yeah, why'd you bring us here?" Chie asked.

Yu took in slow, calming breaths as he repeated the words in his mind over and over again. He felt their eyes on him as he dropped his mask. He hoped he would never need to wear the damn thing again.

"I'm sorry." His voice was quiet, nothing like the confident tone he usually spoke with. "I am so, so sorry." He turned to face the group and he fell to his knees, bowing to the group. It felt dramatic, yet considering what he had done, what he had planned to do, it didn't feel like enough. Nothing would ever be enough. "I am so, sorry," he repeated.
Yu kept his eyes on the ground. He had no right to look at them. His vision blurred as he stared at the grey sidewalk. Teardrops fell to the ground as he found it hard to breathe.

"I know what you all must have seen. I... I could feel it. You saw the man I am. The truth of who I am. The truth is I'm no better than Adachi. The things I had planned on doing to you, the things I did do, nothing can make up for it. I'm dirt. I'm... I'm pathetic," he confessed, and he couldn't stop his voice from wavering. The truth fell from his mouth like a wave, and he gasped for air as he began to cry.

He must have looked so pathetic. He used to pride himself on his confidence, on his perfect appearance. Now...

"I'm worthless," he whispered, as if the realization just dawned on him. "I-I'm nothing but a parasite in your lives. I-I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but I know that I need to beg for-" He felt someone touch his shoulder. The touch was so familiar, and it was all that was needed to shatter his mask. "I'm sorry!" he sobbed as Naoto embraced him. He didn't try to pull away, not even as Rise stepped forward. Kanji soon followed after her. Then Yukiko. Then Yosuke and Chie, before finally Teddie surrounded him.

"I'm sorry...!" he cried, wiping his tears against Naoto's coat. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" It was all he could say. He had treated them all so horribly. He saw them as nothing more than his pawns. Now his crown had fallen, and he was left pleading for their forgiveness.

"It's alright, Narukami. Let it out," Naoto uttered.

"I wanted to die," he muttered. "I wanted nothing more than to lay there and die... But then I heard all of you." He wiped the sleeve of his arm against his face, wiping snot and tears onto the cloth as he panted. "I-I couldn't understand why any of you wanted to save me..."

"You've changed, Yu," Rise answered. "We all saw what was on the television, but there's no way that's who you are now." She placed one arm on Naoto's back, before gently pulling Kanji closer to her. She embraced all three of them as tears began to fall down her own face. "You're like a brother to me, Yu... I know you'd never do anything to hurt me."

"You're like... the best pal a guy could ask for," Kanji muttered, his cheeks pink as he spoke from his heart. "I mean, you're the best, man. I-I ain't really good at talking about my feelings or whatever, but... you know," he mumbled. "There ain't a guy I trust more than you... Whatever shit you used to pull, it's all water under the bridge or whatever..." He hugged Yu, Rise, and Naoto tighter, his red cheeks burning even brighter as he glared at the wall. "Um... I-is this okay?" Yu could only chuckle through his tears.

"Yeah..." Yosuke scratched at his hair as he refused to stare into Yu's eyes. It wasn't out of shame, Yu realized. Yosuke was trying to hide his own pooling tears. "It's okay, man. I... I get it. You're not like that anymore, that's what matters. We're friends. Nothing's gonna change that..."

Chie smiled at Yu, nodding her head in agreement. "T-totally! I-"

"Oh, just hug him!" Yukiko shouted, pushing Yosuke and Chie forward. She was crying now too, and she hugged the others, trapping Chie and Yosuke under her embrace.

"H-hey! Yukiko, quit it!" Chie sniffled, trying to hold back her own tears. "Man, if you start, I'm going to..." She tore her eyes from the raven-haired girl, looking at Yu. "I-I've never really... I just-" She wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her jacket and took a deep breath. "You're a good friend, Yu. I accept your apology, and-and I just that it's okay. Everyone does stupid stuff, right?" He
nodded his head, sniffling like a child.

No one judged him. They only embraced and consoled him.

"Ahhh!" Teddie wailed, hugging everyone. "I love you all so much! Yu, why can't we have group bear-hugs more often!?"

Yu was stunned by the seven, and in that moment, he realized they weren't his friends. They could never simply be his friends. No, they were all so much more than that. He hugged as many of them as he could, as tightly as he could, and he let the tears fall down his face. The seven were his family, he realized. They were his brothers, and his sisters, and his everything.

They looked at him, and either through their united bond, or pure luck, they told him what he needed to hear. What he had always wanted to hear, but never thought he could. "We forgive you."

And for the first time in his life, Yu understood what it meant to be at home.

The Dojima Residence was, for the first time in a long time, filled with laughter and smiles. Yu and Teddie were preparing a feast fit for a pair of kings, or at least two foolish princes. The battle was over, and Christmas was just around the corner. Yu did nothing to hide himself from the blond bear, openly showing his own arrogance and mischievous nature.

Of course, Yu's cooking skills were no such lie. The silver-haired man watched as Teddie took a spoonful of fried rice from the pot, before biting down on it.

"What do you think it needs, Teddie?" Yu asked, watching as the bear sampled his cooking.

"Mmm! It's so yummy, Yu! I think it's beary good!" replied the younger boy.

"I suppose that's good enough," chuckled Yu. "Grab some bowls, and we can-" The two stopped as someone knocked on the door. Yu raised his brow, and after glancing at an equally confused Teddie, the silverette approached the door. He opened it, and he found a familiar woman behind it. "Naoto?"

"N-Narukami!" she greeted him with wide eyes and rosy cheeks. "I-I'm glad I was able to find you. I-I was hoping to discuss the final details of the case with you." She coughed into her hand, glancing at his sock-covered feet. "I-if you can spare the time, of course."

Yu gawked at the navy-haired woman, before smiling in amusement. "One sec." Yu quickly stepped back inside his home, picking up a grey hoodie and shouting to Teddie. "Help yourself to dinner, Teddie. I'm going to step out for a bit to talk to Naoto, okay?"

"Alrighty, Yu!"

Yu stepped outside and closed the door behind him. Naoto stepped out of his way, keeping a measured distance between them. It was night out, and the cool, winter air nipped at their bodies, even as Yu zipped up his jacket. "Chilly," he commented, shivering as he glanced at his breath.

"I-indeed..."

"So, you wanted to talk?" He couldn't hide the smile on his face. He had an idea of why she was here, but he dared not hoped... Still, he could smile at her, even tease her. "About the case, right?"

"I... Y-yes. There were matters on the case that have been left... unanswered."
"Oh? Such as?" He smirked at her, and he noticed her cheeks turning a scarlet hue. He leaned closer, but she stood her ground. She glared at him, daring him to try and scare her away. He saw the resolve in his eyes, and suddenly his own cheeks felt hot. He was grinning though, despite the blush. He loved getting her riled up, but he loved it even more when she challenged him.

Yu was trying to intimidate her, but Naoto refused to be so easily swayed. She remained where she stood as he drew closer. His smell tickled her nose, and she did her best to keep her lips tightly pressed flat, even as she found the odor to be rather pleasant. "You know what this is about," she muttered.

"Remind me," he teased, and he was so close that she could feel his breath on her lips. Naoto moved closer, and she finally allowed herself to smile. He was surprised at the bold move, and his own cheeks began to turn pink.

"You knew me that once the case was over, we would need to talk. About how you felt for me, and where are relationship was going to go now that we were no longer obligated to be around one another," she explained. Her feet were firmly planted on the ground, but her body felt ready to topple over. Despite that, she still smiled at him, and he returned the gesture.

"I did. So is that why you're here?" He lifted a hand to stroke the underside of her chin, teasing her as he smirked. He was so like a snake. Predatory. A hunter. He acted so in control... Naoto's eyes sharpened for a moment, and she lifted a hand to catch his wrist. She glared into his silver pools, and he ended his game. "I love you, Naoto."

Those four simple words made her hear skip a beat. They made her legs tremble, and her face turn hot. She felt sweaty, she felt scared, but she also felt excited. She felt a hunger to hear those words again. She felt a desire to hear him say it, again and again, for as long as he was willing to. She felt a fire in the pit of her heart, growing with every passing moment as she stood on the edge of a new chapter of her life.

But before she could step turn the page, she had to speak her own truth. "I'm rather jealous, Narukami." His brow rose as her hand gently stroked his. "You say those words so easily. So casually. While I find myself terrified of them." Her sapphire eyes stared into his, and she saw the fear brimming below the surface. "Not because I don't mean them, but because I am terrified if I speak the truth, everything will come spilling out..."

She leaned closer, their lips almost touching. Naoto's fingers gently grazed his hand as her other hand reached out to his. They held each other's hands as Naoto opened her heart to Yu. "I love you." Yu's eyes widened, and he seemed to stop breathing as the sleuth swallowed down spit.

There was an deafening silence. Naoto feared that she had somehow said the wrong thing. Then Yu closed the gap between them, pressing his lips against hers. Her eyes widen as his soft lips covered hers, and she felt herself melt. Her hands slipped out of his and hung uselessly by her side as her eyes fell shut. The sensation of their lips touching intensified. She felt her heart pound in her chest as electricity coursed through her body.

Naoto had read about the 'spark' that occurred when two people kissed. This felt nothing like that. This felt like lightning, and thunder, and an inferno. It felt like that night when they played the King's Game. She felt her breath being stolen away as he nibbled on her bottom lip. His hands gently stroked her neck, one hand caressing her skin as the other played with her hair.

She felt like the ground underneath her cracked and blew away. It was just her and Yu, drifting in a cloud. It was like firecrackers going off in her head, filling her body with euphoria. The winter
winds couldn't touch her. She felt nothing, but warm... Their lips pulled apart and Naoto opened her eyes to see his handsome face. He smiled at her, and she hated utterly charming he was.

"I love you to-"

Naoto's hands suddenly caught his collar, and his eyes widened as she pulled him down. Their lips came together again, but this time Yu was the one who melted against her touch. Naoto had no idea what to do with her hands, but she found her arms moving around his neck as their lips pushed against one another. Yu was completely hers, and that feeling was intoxicating. His hands finally came to life, and he placed one on her back as the other played with her hair on the back of her head.

Naoto's tongue teased his lips, poking at them. It was so unlike her. It was the kind of behavior she would expect from Yu, but no. She was the one instigating this... this intercourse. He pulled away all too soon and licked his lips. The sight made her knees weak.

"Um... W-wow. Okay. That was... Wow," Yu muttered.

"S-sorry," she replied, eyes falling to the ground. What was that?! Where did that come from...?

"Don't be. That was amazing," he replied. His hand touched her cheek, stroking the soft skin. She had to resist the urge to nuzzle against his palm, as her blush grew hotter. "Teddie's going to Yukiko's for Christmas. I was going to spend it on my own, but i-if you're free we could spend it together," he suggested. "Around ten in the morning?"

"I-I'd like that, Narukami," she replied, staring into his silver eyes. "I'd like that very much."

"Good, good." He kicked at the dirt, and Naoto felt an iota of pride from seeing him act like some blushing innocent. "Um... T-Teddie and I were about to have dinner. Care to join us?"

"I-I don't mean to intrude..."

"It's no intrusion, my little princess," he teased. She rolled her eyes as he opened the door behind him. "Would you like to...?"

"Yes! I-I mean, thank you." They smiled at one another, before Yu walked inside. Naoto stood outside the front door, the light from inside coating her legs as she thought to herself. She had told Yu about her feelings, and it was clear that he felt the same. Christmas would tell where their relationship would lead them, but she smiled. She felt warm. Ecstatic. She felt like she had found a place to stay, a reason to be herself. Nothing else mattered but being with the man that she loved. The man I love... Naoto Shirogane had found what she had always needed. Allies who trusted her, friends who cared about her, and someone who loved her for her. Her gender, title, profession... Nothing like that mattered to him.

"Naoto? You okay?" Yu looked at her, concern in her eyes.

She smiled and nodded her head. Naoto Shirogane stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "I'm alright, Narukami. What's for dinner?" He grinned back, a glimmer in his eye.

END
The End of Arc 2. Arc 3 will begin in a few months, probably.
Teddie watched.

_I am not. Letting this. Ruin. Today._ Yu rose up and wiped snow from his face, marching forward with as much dignity as he had left.

Naoto was sound asleep the morning of Christmas Eve. After agreeing on a time and location, Naoto had been spending what free time she had left to focus on the perfect gift for Yu Narukami, her... special friend. Unfortunately gift giving was not one of the Shirogane Family's famed traits or skills. She was completely at odds with herself, before she finally decided on the best choice of action.

But even the best choice had a few flaws. Naoto had spent all of last night working on Yu's gift, and now she was asleep at her desk, drool pooling on the wooden frame as she quietly slept. She didn't wake up for several hours, until the sound of children laughing outside woke her from her slumber.

"Huh...?" Naoto yawned as she slowly lifted her head up from the table. She scratched at her blue locks as she blinked away her sleep. _What time is it...?_ Her sleeping mind wondered. She glanced at a nearby clock on the wall, and she nearly jumped out of her seat. _Eleven?! How?!_ Her eyes widened as she felt the strange sensation of something wet against her face. She put a finger to her chin to find some of her own saliva on her, causing her to groan in disgust. "Ahh!"

She wiped her sleeve against her face as her eyes darted around the room. _Clothes! His gift!_ _Shower! Ahh! I don't have time for this!_ She quickly grabbed a nearby towel on the ground and ran into her shower. She threw her clothes off and hopped inside as she began to bathe herself.

"Ahh!" Once again the famed Detective Prince jumped, this time from the sudden impact of cold water. She quickly worked to heat the water as her teeth began to click against one another. _Okay, focus. What do I need to do before I arrive at Yu's house? What order would be the most practical?_

She reached for her shampoo, only to suddenly find the contents of the bottle to be one of the most important factors of her life. _What if he doesn't like the smell? What if I don't put on enough and he notices how dirty my hair is?_ It only took Naoto a moment to realize how utterly stupid that sounded, but was that the side effect of her feelings for Narukami? Lapses in judgement? If she spent more time around him, would she continue to find herself asking more strange questions?

_Worth it._ Naoto felt her cheeks burn at that simple realization. She quickly applied the shampoo to her head, repeating to herself that the way her hair smelled would not determine her future.

_Clothes on the other hand..._

Naoto stepped out of the shower and quickly began drying herself off. She'd go through the usual process of wrapping her chest up and dressing herself, and everything would work out well for her. Except once again, she found her mind wondering...

_Would Yu like...?_ She stared at the wrapping she used to hide her breasts. For just a brief moment, she imagined what it would be like not to wrap herself with it. Would Yu like her more? Less? She knew that she was more... gifted in that area than most girls her age. Would Yu like that? Would she?

The very thought sent her cheeks on fire, and Naoto buried her face in her cold, wet hands as she tried to breathe. _Question for another day, question for another day... Focus on the matter at hand._

Naoto went to her closet and opened the doors. What she found was barely enough for one outfit,
and certainly nothing she could wear for a... a date. I... What should I wear?! She had never had to worry about such things before, meaning she had absolutely nothing fitted for this case! She slammed the closet doors closed and looked around her apartment for anything she could wear. A better question might be 'What can I wear?' she sighed.

She had nothing very adventurous or fashionable, and the idea of wearing a simple sweater for this occasion felt utterly foolish. In the end, she found only one outfit she could wear and not look utterly foolish, but even Naoto wasn't sure about that second part...

My school uniform...? It will have to do. Yu is used to seeing me in it. It should work fine, she told herself. But doubts were only prodding at her mind. What if that's exactly the problem? What if he thinks you think this date is nothing special? What if that hurts his feelings? What if-

Naoto groaned, quickly stepping into her kitchen to put some butter on a bagel. A quick breakfast and then she'd hurry to the Dojima Residence. She hoped these worries would end once she was her best friend...

The Amagi Inn was in a peaceful state of rest. Most guests were either in their rooms with their families, or out in the town. Snow fell on the humble inn as four young individuals worked in the lobby. A large green tree towered to the roof of the spacious room, as Chie stepped onto a ladder to hang up a red orb. Yosuke was behind her, digging through a box of decorations as Yukiko and Teddie brought them plates full of snacks.

The large bear licked his lips as he stared at the tray of treats, only to smile sheepishly as Yukiko warned him with a glare. The two approached their friends and held the food out to them, and the two were only two happy to take a break.

"I can't believe your parents weren't going to put up decorations!" Chie commented, her cheek full of cookie pieces. She swallowed the sweet, before declaring, "It's Christmas! Ya gotta have decorations!"

"Well, they've been really busy lately, not to mention we usually do it as a family," explained Yukiko. "And I've been so busy too with school and the... you know." She smiled at her friends. "But I'm glad we could all get together to celebrate it. Are Rise and Kanji still on their way?"

"I texted them," Yosuke replied. "Rise's helping her grandma out before heading over. Kanji said he had something he needed to work on before he could get here, but he said he'd make it."

"What about Yu and Naoto?" Chie asked, biting into another cookie.

"Naoto said she was honored, but she had plans for today. Maybe she's going to go see her grandfather?" Yukiko thought aloud.

"Yu told me that he wouldn't be able to make it," Teddie explained, before reaching into his suit's red pockets. "But he gave me these to give to all of you!" He produced several red envelopes, each marked with a different name.

"Gifts? Cool!" Yosuke grinned. "Wonder what he got us?" He shook the large envelope a few times, before looking at the others. "Why don't we open these gifts? It's not like he's going to be here for the actual gift exchange."

"Well..." Yukiko stared at her own gift, before a small smile formed on her lips. "Why not? Let's open them."
The four smiled at one another, before each began to open their own envelope. Some of them were respective of their gift, gently pulling at the paper, leaving the wrapping intact as they found their gift. Others, like Teddie, tore the envelope to shreds and stared with shimmering eyes at the gift.

"Cash?" Yosuke held the paper bills between his fingers, eyes widening. "Whoa. A lot of cash."

"There's like over ten thousand yen in mine!" Chie realized.

"Me too!" cheered Teddie.

"Did you guys get a note too?" Yukiko pulled out the small piece of paper, unfolding it. 'You will always mean a lot to me, Yukiko. Come hell, or high water. I hope you know you can trust me to watch your back, and to be your friend. Forever by your side, Yu Narukami. Merry Christmas...’ She smiled at the message, closing her eyes as she stroked the thin paper with her thumb.

'Chie, remember where true strength lies. You are worthy of everything you have, and I eagerly await to see where you go from here. If you ever need help, I'm always available. Merry Christmas. Chie's lips turned into a wide smile at the note, before slipping it into her pocket. She glanced at Yukiko and smiled at her, and the taller girl smiled back.

'Hard to believe we're still the same out-of-town kids who got arrested for waving weapons around, huh? You've come a long way, Yosuke. Saki would be proud of you. I know I am. More important than that though, you should be proud of yourself. You're a hell of a hero, Yosuke. Merry Christmas.' "Wow... This is... That's pretty nice of him," commented the brunette. "So this is the New Yu, right? He's not pretending or messing with us?"

"Yep! The new and improved Yu! He's one hundred percent hero!" Teddie beamed, after reading his own card. 'You've earned the right to live life as your own man, Teddie. I couldn't be prouder. A Shadow that became human... I'll have to work my butt off to be your equal. Merry Christmas, Teddie. "He's really nice," the bear commented, before realizing there was one thing left in the envelope. "Huh? What's this?"

At the same time, the other three realized their own gifts had something else hidden within. Each of them pulled out a small picture, and half of them recoiled in disgust. Yukiko blushed, her cheeks flaring scarlet as Teddie cocked his head slightly in confusion.

The photo was of Yu Narukami, shirtless, smiling on his bed. His half naked form was the focus of the picture as he held a rose between his lips, winking at whoever was looking at the picture. He smirked at them, eyes an ethereal silver as the four read the black, bold letters beside him. "One free peepshow?!" Yosuke read.

"Yep. This is the new Yu, alright," sighed Chie, rubbing her crimson face.

"This is going to take some getting used to..."

Neither Yosuke or Chie noticed Yukiko slipping the card into her pocket as Teddie stared at the picture. "What's a peepshow?" he asked.

What do I get her?! Yu ran through Junes, looking for the perfect gift for the perfect woman. The search was as difficult was one would expect.

Yu glared at the ugly Christmas sweater hanging on the wall. He quickly killed the idea of getting such a thing for his Naoto for their first Christmas together. Their first date together. Even as he
ran himself ragged, just the thought of dating Naoto made the young man smile. If he played his cards right, this could really be the end of his womanizing lifestyle.

He'd give up every beautiful person in the world for a chance to be with Naoto Shirogane...

Yu felt his cheeks turn a pinkish hue as he walked through the large store. It was strange feeling so embarrassed, but he found himself almost enjoying the sensation. Naoto always did have a way of making him feel something new.

He passed by the ladies' underwear section, and his blush only intensified. He'd seen dozens of people naked, but Naoto? Just imagining that gorgeous woman without her bandages was enough to make him feel faint. Just like how it wasn't egotistical to admire his own good looks, it wasn't perverted imagining his beautiful lover's body.

It was love. Love, and a bit of lust.

Yu kept walking, a smirk on his features as he continued to search for the perfect gift. He passed by the jewelry section, and his silver eye spotted a glittering ring adorned with a sapphire. His stare lingered for several moments, before he felt his cheeks light themselves on fire.

*Don't even think about it, Narukami.* Yu quickly walked away, his eye glancing at a nearby sign. It was pointing out a small sale they were having, and Yu considered something simple for the holiday.

Simple... *Would she like simple? I mean, who doesn't like simple? I'm simple, and she likes me.* He thought, only to scowl. *Oh, who am I kidding? I'm stupidly complicated.* He walked over to the books they were having on sale, and glanced through the titles. Most of the books were instruction manuals, nothing that either he or his girlfriend would be very interested in.

*Is that what we are now? Boyfriend and girlfriend? The thought made him freeze. She wants that right...? I mean, why else would she agree on the date? Then the possibility of failure stabbed at his racing mind, and Yu groaned in frustration. If I fuck this up, that's it. I'm as good as dead. Might as well shoot me now.*

Yu's head jerked up, and he looked up and down the isle, expecting some deranged murderer to take the shot. When nothing came, Yu sighed and plucked a book from the shelf.

*I hope Naoto likes this...*

Naoto walked towards Yu's home at a steady pace. She pulled her school coat tighter against her body as she walked through the field of snow. Sometimes she'd pass a smiling person or two, and they'd wish her a merry Christmas. She did her best to return the gestures.

By her calculations, if she kept at this pace for the next twenty minutes or so, she'd be at the Dojima residence just on time.

*Nothing to worry about it. Everything is going well. I'll be there soon enough... But what if I should be late? Naoto's pace slowed down considerably, and she stared at her feet. The term fashionably late is a saying for a reason, after all. But that's simply a way of proving one's social status. It isn't a romantic gesture!*

Her pace picked up again as she walked, but her mind was still addled with her own frustration. *What if I should arrive sooner than the agreed time? Then I can show him I'm eager to share his company. Or I'll end up looking desperate and foolish,* she sighed. *Darn it... What if I
walk in on him wrapping up my gift? What if he needs help preparing food for us or...?

Naoto stopped in her tracks, and she gently tapped her hands again her pockets. She felt her phone, wallet, and keys, but there was a fourth item that was missing. No, no, no... Darn it! She cursed her own stupidity as she realized Yu's gift was back home, still laying on her desk. She quickly turned around and ran back to her home. As she ran, she took out her phone and quickly began to text a message to Yu.

What should I say...? Something simple. Short. Straight to the point. She quickly typed up a message and sent it to Yu, when she suddenly fell back from walking into someone. Once again she scolded herself as she stumbled back, falling onto the snow covered ground. "I'm sorry," she quickly apologized.

"It's alright. I wasn't looking where I was going either. Do you need some help?" The young man held his hand out to Naoto, and she took it.

"Thank you." Judging by their yellow and red uniform, they seemed to be a gas station attendant. "Once again, I'm very sorry."

"Don't worry about it. You seem like you're in a rush. Everything okay?"

"Yes. I just had to run back to get the gift for my-" Naoto hesitated to find the right word for her and Yu's relationship. With a blush on her cheeks, she muttered, "-friend."

"I see. Well, I wish you and your friend best wishes this holiday."

"Thank you. Same to you."

"Have a good day, Naoto," the gas station attendant tipped their hat, before walking past the young woman. Naoto's brow rose as she began her own walk.

A tad forward to refer to me by my first name like that... Oh well, Naoto shrugged her shoulders. She had more important matters to attend to.

"Yuki-chan! Look what I found in the kitchen!" Teddie ran to the young woman, something in his red paw. He held it out to her, grinning as she realized what it was. "Mistletoe!"

"That just looks like some cabbage tapped to a cherry tomato," Yosuke commented from a nearby chair.

"It is not! It's mistletoe!" Teddie argued, glaring at Yosuke. He returned his attention to Yukiko, who stared at the supposed 'mistletoe.' "You know what that means!" He puckered his lips, kissing the air as Yukiko smiled.

"Okay."

"Wait, what?!"

"What did she say?!" Chie's jaw fell open as her head swung to stare at the two.

"W-wait, really? You mean it?! You'll kiss me?!" Teddie was practically jumping in place as Yukiko stood up from her chair and stretched her hands out to Teddie's head.

"N-no way! Seriously?!" Chie and Yosuke both leaned closer, nearly falling out of their seats. They wondered if this is what people mean when they talk about Christmas miracles... "Is she really
Yukiko plucked Teddie's head off of his bear body, revealing the blond boy's confused face. Yukiko pressed her lips against the lifeless costume, before pulling it away. She smiled at Teddie's befuddled expression, barely holding back her own giggles. "There you go! One kiss."

She placed Teddie's head into his arms, before sitting back down. She laughed at her own little joke, and soon Teddie was doing the same, laughing as he hugged his bear head. He happily declared that he had just 'scored a stud,' as Chie and Yosuke watched in confusion.

"They are so weird," Chie muttered.

"Seriously." The two relaxed in their seats, sighing as they both reached for their cups of hot coco. Yosuke quietly sipped from his hot drink as he glanced at Chie. "Hey, Chie?"

"Huh? What's up?"

"Here." Yosuke reached to the ground, and pulled out a small present for the girl. It was wrapped up in striped green paper, with a yellow bow on top. It wasn't hard for Chie to realize it resembled her favorite jacket. "Merry Christmas." Yosuke scratched at the base of his neck, trying to hide his flushed cheeks as she took the gift and peeled the colorful paper off.

"Yosuke..." It was a new 'Trial of the Dragon' DVD, but it also had the words 'Remastered Edition' on it, right below the title. "T-this is the special edition... It has director's commentary, a-and behind the scenes footage!"

"Yep." Yosuke allowed himself to grin in pride. "So... How-?"

"I love it!" Chie pulled Yosuke into a hug, beaming with joy as she nearly pulled the boy out of his seat.

"H-hey! Easy! Watch it! Chie!"

Chie released her prisoner, before the corners of her lips fell flat. She stared at her gift, before looking at Yosuke. "Man, I... my gifts aren't nearly as good as this..." All she had gotten Yosuke were some more kung fu movies and coupons for her favorite restaurants. *Yosuke got me this really great gift...* Her brow furrowed, before Yu's words echoed in her head.

"Don't sweat it, Chie. I-" Yosuke was stunned silent as his friend leaned towards him. He opened his mouth to ask what she was doing, before he felt her soft lips press against his cheek. It wasn't a passionate kiss, it wasn't some magical moment that froze time itself, but it was nice, he realized. Her lips were soft. Really soft. "I-"

"W-who wants hot coco?! Yukiko?! Okay, I'll be right back!" Chie quickly grabbed her cup and ran, leaving Yosuke with the lingering sensation of her kiss. As she dashed away, *Yosuke* smiled.

*Merry Christmas, Chie...*
shirt had several stains on it from the rushed baking.

"A quick change and I'll be all ready for our date," he grinned. He tossed the shirt into a bin full of dirty clothes as he walked back upstairs. He entered his room and looked for an outfit to wear. Unfortunately he had a distinct lack of clean clothes. With everything that had been happening lately, laundry felt like the least important thing...

He only found one outfit he could wear. His school uniform.

"Shit." The uniform was a spare he bought just in case, and while he was thankful to have clean clothes, a school uniform didn't exactly scream 'sexual god.' He shrugged his shoulders and accepted the outfit without anymore arguing. He still looked good in the outfit, because of course he did, but doubt had begun to eat away at him.

Yu was a confident man, even after finding his true self and opening up to others, he still carried an air of confidence and pride in himself. But Naoto always did have a special effect on the silver-haired man. She cracked his confidence, made his knees shake, and his cheeks burn. He loved and hated that about her.

_I got this. She's going to love the cake, and you're going to have a great Christmas._ Yu took a deep breath, and sighed. _Go downstairs and clean the place up... I got this._ Yu nodded to himself, before walking downstairs to the kitchen. He quietly began to work on cleaning the place up. It was quiet work that distracted him from his doubts as he eagerly awaited Naoto's arrival.

He soon heard someone knock on the door, and he rushed to open it. Naoto Shirogane stood there, a small present in hand as he beamed. "Hello there, detective."

"N-Narukami," she muttered in reply, avoiding his silver eyes.

Yu was about to tease the beautiful sleuth, only to notice something. "Why are you in your school uniform?"

Naoto opened her mouth to explain, but she saw something out of the corner of her eye. "Why are you?"

The two stood there in silence for a long moment, before they smiled at one another. They chuckled as Yu motioned Naoto to enter. "You forgot to do laundry too?"

"Indeed."

"And we're supposed to be the smart ones?" Yu chuckled at the irony as he closed the door behind Naoto. "Merry Christmas, Naoto."

"Merry Christmas to you, Narukami."

---

Marukyu Tofu was open for Christmas morning, and Rise had willingly volunteered to help her grandmother with the store. Now that they were finally closing though, Rise was free to hang out with her friends. The young woman wore a white sweater, and a pink jacket over that, before picking up bags full of small presents. She began to walk towards the door as Her grandma quietly cleaned the kitchen with a small broom.

"Alright, grandma, I'm going to head over to my friends now!"

"Have fun, sweetheart! Don't be out too late!"
"I won't!" Rise pulled open the door of the shop, only to be greeted by a familiar face right outside her door. "Kanji?"

"R-Rise! W-what are you doing here?" His eyes widened, and his cheeks practically radiated crimson. Rise glanced down, noticing his hands were pulled behind his back.

**Is he hiding something?** "Uh, I live here, remember?" Rise's brow rose up, and she stared at the taller boy in confusion.

"Right. I-I knew that..."

"Kanji, is everything o-?"

"Merry Christmas!" Kanji practically screamed the words out as he handed her a large paper bag. "T-this is for you."

Rise blinked, as if she hadn't realized what he had said at first. She placed her own bags down and took the gift. Whatever was inside the bag, it was covered in crumpled up colored paper. "That's really sweet of you, Kanji-kun! But you know we're going to the party together, right?"

"I just... I wanted to give it to ya early. That's all..."

Rise nodded in understanding, smiling at him. "You want to come inside?" He nodded his head, stepping into the small shop. Rise closed the door behind him, before reaching inside the large bag.

She felt something soft brush against her fingers, before she pulled out a large stuffed animal. It was a penguin with pink feathers on his back and head, and a soft, white belly in the shape of a heart. Bright blue eyes stared at her as his small, yellow beak seemed to smile at the sight of the idol. Rise's fingers stroked the toy, her eyes gleaming. "Kanji, this... this is-"

"There's something else in there."

Rise blinked, before holding the penguin tightly to her own body with one arm. The other arm dug through back, finding a small keychain at the bottom of it. Her eyes widened at the sight of the small trinket. It was a pink penguin, wings spread wide, and sapphire-eyes glittering. The little keychain resembled the stuffed animal perfectly.

"Kanji..." Rise stared at the two gifts for a long moment, before placed both of them back in the bag. "Okay. Time for me to give you your gift."

"You don't have to. I just wanted to-"

"No buts." Rise put her foot down on the matter, before smiling at him. "Now, close your eyes?" She noticed his hesitation, and she leaned forward, eyes glittering as they stared into his. "Please?"

There was no way Kanji could resist her. He sighed, nodding his head as he closed his eyes. "Alright, alright."

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There was no way Kanji could resist her. He sighed, nodding his head as he closed his eyes. "Alright, alright."

Rise stared at him, making sure his eyes really were shut, before she reached into her bag. She opened one of her own gifts, quickly tearing the paper off of the box. She hoped and prayed that the young man would like the simple gift. She had spent all night on it...

Kanji could feel something soft touch his neck, before Rise's voice asked him to open his eyes. He did so, and immediately glanced down to find a scarf loosely wrapped around his neck. It looked handmade, made of a light shade of purple that slowly became darker as it went. "Did you make
"Y-yeah. Grandma's been teaching me how to knit. I know it's nowhere near your level, but I really wanted to give it a shot. Um, is it okay?" she asked, her own cheeks turning red as he stared at her. Her foot shifted slightly as she blushed, suddenly finding herself rather scared of Kanji's response. Thankfully, she had nothing to fear. "It's actually not too bad, Rise. Gotta hand it to you, you did good." She beamed with pride at the compliment, only to take slight offense at his next words. "You're a lot better at sewing than you are at cooking, that's for sure."

"Oh, shut up," she giggled, smacking Kanji's shoulder. The two laughed, a sensation that they had both missed the last few days. "Merry Christmas, Kanji." She hugged her penguin tightly.

"Merry Christmas, Rise."

The two friends stared into one another's eyes. Rise could appreciate the irony of the moment. The two barely spoke to each other once. Now they were the best of friends, always by each other's side, and in a way, it was all thanks to Yu. She chuckled at the idea. Yu might have been the catalyst, but their bond was made by them, and them alone.

"Pretty crazy to think that-"

"Oh, just kiss the poor boy already, Rise!" The copper-haired woman's cheeks flared up yet again, and she turned her head to glare at her whistling grandmother.

"Grandma!" Rise turned her attention back to Kanji, trying to brush off her relative's comment. "I-ignore her, we should probably... Huh?" Kanji stepped closer to Rise, and in one single step, there was no more space between. He was in front of her, cheeks red, hands raised up. "Kanji...?"

She could hear him swallowing his nerves as he opened his mouth. "R-Rise, I... T-the gift wasn't the only thing I wanted t-to give to ya. I wanted to ask you if you were... If you were planning on doing anything tomorrow?"

"N-not really..." She could feel his breath on her lips. He bit his lower lip, clearly nervous, before he took a deep breath.

"I'm not going to tiptoe around it this time, Rise," he confessed. "I got to put my cards on the table. The truth is Rise, I like you a lot, a-and I've been thinking about you a lot. Like as more than just my friend."

"Like... as a bro?" she teased, heart pounding in her chest.

"Rise..."

"Like a best bro?" Her smile was wiped away as his hand touched her cheek. His skin was surprisingly warm. She felt her breath being stolen away as he pulled her closely, gently. He gave her the chance to pull away as his eyes fell shut, and he leaned down, lips spread apart. Rise met him halfway, pressing her lips against his as they shared their fist kiss.

Rise melted into his embrace as the stuffed animal fell to their feet. Rise's arms found their way around his neck as she finally felt the love she had always dreamed of.

Yu and Naoto sat in his room, each seated at opposite ends of a small table. Naoto swallowed down her worries as Yu smiled at her. He was nervous too, but he was also genuinely happy. Here
he was, Yu Narukami, on a date with Naoto Shirogane, the girl of his dreams.

Could life get any better?

"I-it's pretty cold outside, isn't it?" she asked, earning an amused raise of his brow. "Ah... Well, um... T-that's a wonderful cake! It reminds me of being a kid again."

"Nervous, Naoto?" he inquired.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "It's just... it's only us here," she confessed.

"Don't worry about it. That should put you at ease. You can just be yourself around me. Unless-" And he happily curled his lips into a sharp smirk, flashing his teeth. "-you're scared of me?"

"I am not scared," she retorted, as if challenged. He chuckled in response, and after a moment, Naoto sighed. "You are incorrigible."

"Aww, it's part of my charm, admit it," he laughed.

"I suppose it is," she confessed, surprising the silverette. He beamed at her as her lips formed a small smile. "Now then, I believe I still have to give you my gift, correct?" Naoto reached into her coat pocket as Yu watched, curiously. "Just please promise me you won't call it stupid? Or childish? Okay?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," he swore.

"It's been some time since I've made something like this," she explained. "If I was back at the estate, I could add a radio, or even a transceiver to it..."

Okay, now I'm really curious. "Quit teasing, beautiful. What is it?"

Naoto's cheeks were crimson as she pulled out a small police badge from her coat. On closer inspection, Yu realized that the badge was fake, made of a hard plastic. It was made out of a silver material, with the words 'Junior Detective' clearly molded on the bottom surface. Yu's eyes widened as Naoto pressed down on the side of the badge, and it began to flash a white light.

"The title of 'detective' was a burden to me, before I came here. I thought I had nothing else to offer besides being a detective. I worried that my last name held all my worth, but you proved me wrong. To you, it didn't matter if I was a man, or a woman, a peer your age, or an adult... You accepted me for me, and you helped me find a place where I could be myself..."

"That's why I made you this badge. Because I want us to wear the title together. You and I..." She held her hand out to him, fingers trembling. "Please, accept it...?" Yu didn't hesitate to take the gift into his hand. He grinned at her as he clipped the badge onto his coat.

"I'd say it's safe to say you won our first date." Yu spoke the words with a hint of fear, terrified that he had overstepped himself. Naoto's cheeks turned a bright red once more, but she didn't refute the claim. She just stared at him as he continued. "Is it okay to think of you as my girlfriend?" Her blush went down her neck. "And me as your boyfriend?"

"I... Y-yes. I-I would v-very much like it if you thought of me in such a manner... a-and if I could think of you as my... um... Yes..."

Yu had to resist jumping for joy as he grinned. She's so perfect, he thought as he stared at her. "Man, wait until Rise hears this..."
“W-wait!” Yu looked at Naoto, concern in his eyes. "I-I was hoping that we could take this slow? Perhaps keep it among ourselves for a few days? Maybe even weeks?” The request clearly wasn't easy for her to put forth.

Yu couldn't deny feeling some level of disappointment at the idea. After all, if a man had the greatest girlfriend in the world, he'd want to scream it to the heavens. It was just logical. It was just simple logic. He wanted everyone to know how much he loved Naoto, shout the truth through town... but he accepted the request with a smile. "Alright, Naoto. I understand. Just you and me..."

Naoto let out a breath of relief, smiling in gratitude. "Thank you, Narukami."

"But it is just us in here," Yu reminded. His smile turned snakeish, and Naoto knew what was coming. She steeled herself as best she could, but even her best defenses seemed to melt against his silver eyes. "And I feel a mighty need to show my girlfriend-" Oh, how he loved calling her that. "-my gratitude. And no simple cake could ever be good enough to do that..."

He stood up and began walking around the table, and Naoto was reminded of a shark stalking his prey. Naoto felt her throat tightened, yet there was an excitement in her racing heart. She knew she wasn't trapped, nor was she prey. She was Yu's equal, his partner in this dance of theirs. She found herself smiling as he sat by her side, placing a gentle hand around her waist.

"I love you, Naoto..." She melted from hearing those words alone, and she took in his familiar scent.

"A-and I love you," she admitted, and the words lifted a weight off of her. "I love you," she repeated, smiling into his gaze. She leaned forward, kissing his lips, and now he was the one to turn limp. But the blow lasted for only a moment as his tongue pushed between her lips, touching hers and sending a storm down her spine.

Naoto trembled in a unique kind of ecstasy, before countering with her own tongue. The two lovers fell to the ground together, Naoto pinned under her more experienced partners. His hands stroked her skin through her clothing, and she shuddered at his warm fingertips. She gave herself to him, as she accepted Yu's loving embrace.

He peppered her neck with butterfly kisses as he whispered in her ear. "Merry Christmas, my love."

She mustered up the energy to reply, "Merry Christmas, Yu..." before the two lovers felt time melt away. For them, there was no one else but the one they loved...

END

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