Summary

When Yu Narukami appears on the Midnight Channel, the Investigation Team rapidly learn that they don’t actually know that much about his past. Their attempts to save him quickly lead them to realise that he’s not the person they thought he was – and reconciling their image of him with what they now know won’t be easy. And how will Yu handle it when he finds out that they know the truth?
“Well,” Chie said, “it’s definitely raining.”

“Amazing deduction, Chie-chan.”

Chie turned away from the classroom window to glare at Yosuke, who’d stuck his feet up on his desk. Yukiko burst into a fit of giggles at the sight of her best friend’s face. Chie’s expression softened a little at that.

“The question is,” Yu said, not looking up from his crane in progress, “will it keep raining until midnight?”

The group all thought about it while Yukiko struggled to get her giggles under control. Eventually, Yosuke reached a verdict.

“Solid maybe.”

“Amazing deduction, Yosuke!”

Yosuke glared back at Chie, who was now smirking. Yu coughed politely before Yukiko could interrupt with yet more giggles.

“‘Solid maybe’ isn’t a no,” he said, “which means we need to stay up to watch the Midnight Channel in case it comes on tonight. Spread the word.”

Yu turned and put the crane on Yosuke’s leg, which was in the way of his desk. He picked up his schoolbag, stood, and stretched out like one of his beloved cats. Yukiko raised an eyebrow.

“Are you going somewhere, Yu-kun?”

“I’ve got a fish to catch for a fox,” he said with an air of utmost seriousness. “Well, I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Before the others could raise the obvious question of why exactly the fox wanted a fish – and why this would require such a degree of seriousness from their fearless leader – Yu walked out of the classroom and into the corridor. Students were dragging their heels, chatting to friends, sharing the latest gossips and complaints about the many bizarre teachers at Yasogami High.

(Though, none of them were as weird as that guy who’d lectured them at Gekkoukan. He was just plain strange.)

Yu made his way through the idling students. A long time ago, they would’ve parted like the Red Sea around him. These days, he mostly had to get past with an “excuse me” and a bit of nudging. It wasn’t one of the things he missed, truth be told.

He’d just made it out to the front of the building, when –

“Ah, speak of the devil! Narukami-kun, over here, please.”

The headmaster of the school was talking to a reporter, who was flanked by a sound guy and a man with a camera. Yu felt a feeling of dread twist in his stomach. He considered blowing the headmaster off for a moment, but relented. He went over to the group.
“Yes, sir?”

The headmaster smiled at the reporter.

“This young man here, you see, is Yu Narukami, the top student in the second year.” The headmaster patted Yu on the back. “He transferred here in the spring of this year, and since then his grades have improved quite a bit, his teachers tell me…”

The reporter smiled in that obnoxiously over-the-top way that was classic of reporters. Yu clenched his fist, keeping it out of view of the camera. It was a small comfort.

“Really? Well, young man, what do you think of Yasogami High School?”

She thrust the microphone into Yu’s face. Yu paused, then responded:

“I like it here. I have a lot of friends, and the teachers know what they’re doing.” Weird or not, the staff of Yasogami High really were all good at their jobs. Yu just wished their jobs involved less cleavage and hand puppets. “It’s a good school. I’ve been to a lot, but I think I’ve fit in best here.”

“Would you say your improved grades are the result of this school, then?”

The truth here would have been that studying resulted in being more popular, which was an important thing to work on when your immense supernatural powers required popularity to function correctly. The power of friendship was real. Of course, he couldn’t exactly say that on TV, so:

“I suppose, yes.”

“I see. Thank you.”

The headmaster patted Yu on the back again.

“I’m sure Narukami-kun has things he needs to do,” the headmaster said gently.

“Yes, sir.”

Yu quickly got out of the way of the cameras and set off down the road to the floodplain. He sincerely hoped that he wouldn’t have to rescue his school’s headmaster from the TV any time soon. What the hell kind of Shadow would he have, anyway?

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Yu’s attempt to locate the Sea Guardian ended once more in failure. He returned home with aching limbs, to find that his uncle had brought Tohru Adachi home with him. Adachi’s attempts to entertain Nanako with magic tricks were interrupted by the little girl springing to her feet and racing over to give her brother a hug the moment she saw him. Yu bent down and hugged her back, feeling better already.

“Welcome home, big bro!”

“Hi, sis.”

Yu let go and ruffled Nanako’s hair, watching her bounce back to her seat at the table.

“Hello, uncle, Adachi-san.”

“You’re home late.”
Dojima had one eyebrow raised suspiciously, but at this point such remarks were made largely in jest. Yu’s uncle had to keep an eye on him, but a few months had taught him that whatever Yu got into, he could get himself out of without causing any real trouble or paperwork.

“Really, Dojima-san?” Adachi laughed. “Wow, you’re hard on that kid. Almost as hard as you are on me.”

Dojima turned his glare to Adachi, who play-wilted under it. Nanako pouted.

“No fighting at the dinner table!”

All three men made their apologies to the tiny but terrifying little girl, who brightened up the moment they did so. Yu sat down at the table in his usual spot just in time for the doorbell to ring.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it.”

Dojima got up and went to the door, exchanged some words with the person there, and came back in with bags from Aiya. Yu immediately felt twenty times as hungry as he had done before the bell had rung. Aiya was good at making him want more to eat than was reasonable.

“Ooh, Chinese,” Adachi said. “Man, I wonder if you can get that super-sized bowl to deliver? It is a rainy day…”

“You can’t,” Yu said sadly, “I’ve tried.”

Before long, the entire group were chowing down on Chinese food and talking about their days. Dojima and Adachi had spent the entire day dealing with mountains of paperwork; Nanako’s class had finished the book they were reading together; and Yu had plenty to complain about in terms of always being the one called on by his teachers.

Partway through the meal, Nanako turned on the TV in the hopes of hearing the Junes theme song. Instead, she got the news.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Adachi said through a mouthful of rice, “isn’t that the head at Yasogami…? I remember talking to him back when those murders happened.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Dojima replied, watching curiously. “I wonder what they’re interviewing him about?”

(Of course,” the headmaster said on-screen, “the improvements at this school over the year are partly thanks to the work-ethic of our students. In fact, there’s many students who have made a marked individual improvement… Speak of the devil! Narukami-kun, over here, please.”

Nanako dropped her chopsticks in shock as Yu appeared on-screen. She didn’t blink the entire time that Yu was speaking to the reporter. When Yu was dismissed, she turned to her brother, eyes wide.

“Big bro! You didn’t say you were going to be on TV!”

“It, uh, slipped my mind.”

“My big bro was on TV!” Nanako giggled gleefully. “I’m going to tell everyone at school!”

“Ha!” Adachi clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t let it go to your head, kid. Though, I’m kind of surprised to hear that your grades improved. I figured you were just an egghead from the start…”

Dojima coughed.
“Well, settling into a new town can’t be easy, especially given what happened at the start of the year.”

“That’s true, I guess.”

Adachi went back to his meal. Yu looked over at his uncle nervously. He was bad at reading expressions, but Dojima seemed proud and pleased. Yu felt proud himself, but at the same time, that pit of resentment in the bottom of his stomach still boiled a little that this was the first time anyone had…

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Yu took it out and flipped it open, curiously.

**From: Naoto. WE NEED 2 TLK. CALL ME WHN U CAN.**

It wasn’t until Yu got up to his room after helping with the washing-up that he got the chance to call Naoto back.

“I’m guessing you saw the news, Naoto-kun?”

“Correct.” Naoto’s tone was serious. “If what we’ve put together about the pattern of the kidnappings is correct – and we have no reason to think that it isn’t – then you may be in danger.”

“I couldn’t exactly run away. Besides, there was a lot of other stuff on the news…”

“Yes, but need I remind you that you’ve spent your entire time in Inaba trying to be everybody’s best friend? Everyone in town is going to notice it. We have to consider the possibility that you could become a target.”

They were right, of course.

“Well, it’s still raining. The Midnight Channel will be on tonight, and we can discuss it tomorrow. You remember how to watch it, right?”

“Ah… yes. Look into a turned-off television at midnight on a rainy night, correct?”

“That’s it. See you at school.”

Yu hung up and closed his phone with a satisfying click. He glanced at the clock – it was eight pm. He had a few hours to kill, and some translations to get done. This, at least, was falling into place well.

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Yu’s phone alarm buzzed to inform him that it was five to midnight. He blinked the English words swimming in his vision out of his eyes and turned the alarm off before it could wake his relatives up. Five minutes until he found out if the killer had made a really, really bad decision.

Yu tidied all of his translation work onto the desk in the corner. It hadn’t gone particularly well, but translation rarely did, especially when the original text contained more idioms than made any sense at all. Was it even comprehensible to a native English speaker? He doubted it. When that was done, he turned to the TV and counted down the seconds.

The Midnight Channel came to life on its cue. Yu’s heart sank into his stomach. The figure on the screen was a moderately tall teenage boy in the Yasogami jacket, his hair obscuring his brow. He held one hand lightly on his hip, and let the other hang by his side.
GREAT.

The moment it faded, Yu’s phone rang.

“Hello?”

“S-Senpai!” Kanji was extremely flustered. “The Midnight Channel just now!”

“Calm down, Kanji-kun.”

“Calm down?! Senpai, that was YOU on there!”

“I’m all right – for now, at least. Panicking isn’t going to make this any better. We should just meet tomorrow to discuss it, okay?”

“Y-yeah, you’re right...” Kanji sighed. “I just... you can’t blame me for worryin’, Senpai.”

“I know. Get some sleep, all right?”


“Night.”

Kanji hung up. Yu quickly sent a mass text to the entire team – *We’ll discuss this at Junes after school tomorrow. Don’t worry, I’m fine.* – and put the phone back in his pocket.

So. He was the killer’s target, was he? On the one hand, this was the perfect opportunity to set up an ambush and get the killer done for attempted kidnapping at the very least. On the other hand, the killer had gone undetected for months. Doubtless they had a few tricks up their sleeve. There was always the possibility, therefore, that Yu would end up in the TV anyway.

He didn’t have a Shadow. He’d *never* had a Shadow. Izanagi had come to him naturally, and the rest had followed behind. If Yu ended up in the TV, the biggest threat would be the lesser Shadows that might flock to him like moths to a light. Even then, he still had his Personae, and he always kept his glasses with him just in case.

So why was this making him so nervous?
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

With the revelation that their leader is now in the firing line, the Investigation Team plan their next moves, hoping to catch the killer in the act. Of course, they're the unluckiest people on the planet, so it doesn't quite work the way they planned...

The Investigation Team had gathered in their customary spot in the Junes food court. Teddie and Yosuke had abused their employee discounts to obtain drinks for the group, which had been a good idea, because none of them wanted to discuss this matter without something to wash it down. Naoto in particular was glaring nervously at their tea.

“So,” Chie said after a while, “we all saw that last night, right?”

Rise nodded.

“There’s no mistaking it – that was definitely Yu-senpai, wasn’t it?”

“Like looking in an unusually blurry mirror,” Yu agreed.

“You seem really unconcerned about this,” Yosuke said. “You okay, partner?”

“I’m screaming on the inside.”

Yu’s expression remained blank. Everyone gave him a confused look, then decided that it probably wasn’t worth pursuing.

“You think the killer knows Senpai’s after him?” Kanji said.

“Would they really try to kill Yu-kun if they knew?” Yukiko said. “If it was me, it’s true I’d want him out of the way, but at the same time it’d be a very risky move.”

“Maybe we should just assume the killer knows,” Rise suggested.

“There didn’t seem be anything weird about the Midnight Channel last night,” Teddie said, poking at his glass of cola. “I dunno, but I feel like if the killer knew, we’d have seen something bear-y different in his intentions…”

“That’s true,” Naoto said. “As far as you’ve all indicated to me, the Midnight Channel somehow reflects the culprit’s intentions. Teddie is right to say that nothing seemed out of the ordinary last night. With that in mind, I’d like to suggest that we take the opportunity to set some kind of trap.”

Everyone turned their attention to Naoto, who reached into their schoolbag and took out a small case. They opened it up, revealing eight bizarre-looking devices, which they handed out to the others. The devices looked like they were cased with parts of toy mecha or other pieces of brightly-coloured. The one Naoto gave to Yu had a large button.

“I created these while I was recovering from my own kidnapping,” they explained, “but they’re rather rudimentary, I’m afraid. If Yu-senpai presses the button on his, the others will all vibrate.”
“Ooh, it’s like a spy gadget!” Chie admired hers. “I get it. If he presses the button, we’ll know he’s in trouble, right?”

“Indeed.”

Yu felt a little sick, looking at the device. Nerves, again. What was wrong with him?

“But Nao-chan,” Teddie said, “what if none of us are close enough to Sensei to stop the killer…? Ooh! We could give one to Nanako-chan, so she could warn her dad!”

Naoto laughed.

“Not necessary. We know that the culprit always strikes in the evenings – that’s been the time of disappearance for every victim so far. So, why don’t we all take turns going to Senpai’s house in the evenings?”

Yosuke made a face like a lightbulb had just gone off over his head.

“I know! Why don’t we tell Dojima-san that because Yu was on TV, we started talking about exams and stuff, and Yu’s agreed to help us out?”

“He’d believe that,” Yu said. “And Lil Sis would like to see you all.”

Everyone perked up at the idea of spending time with Nanako. She was a ray of pink-clad sunshine in a time of murders, kidnappings, and creepy fog. She’d help take their minds off the impending doom that apparently faced their fearless leader. Right?

“Well,” Yu said, “I believe we have a plan. Nobody lose these things Naoto-kun made, all right?”

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The first night of Operation: Study And Stop A Kidnapping At The Same Time went reasonably well. Nanako was delighted that Yosuke had come to visit, and even more delighted that Teddie had insisted on tagging along. Yosuke was enthusiastic, until Yu revealed that he actually did intend to help Yosuke with his schoolwork instead of goofing off playing video games and watching movies.

“Are you serious?”

“Remind me what your English grade is right now, partner.”

“I hate you, man, why are we friends?”

“Because I beat the shit out of your psychological issues with a golf club?”


The night passed smoothly, save for a brief hiccup when a delivery came from the shopping channel. Yosuke went with Yu to sign for it. Yu had a brief but pleasant chat with the delivery driver about the weather (not raining for once), then brought in his order of medicinal products.

“This explains so much,” Yosuke said.

“Tanaka’s saved your life more than once,” Yu replied, neatly storing the medicine away.

The next night went similarly, but with Chie instead of Yosuke. She, too, whined about actually having to do schoolwork instead of watching one of the many martial arts movies she’d brought with
her. Yu’s stern gaze wore her down eventually, though.

“I know! If I get all of these right, we can watch one of the films, okay?”

“Fair enough.”

Sure enough, Chie got every single question right, and in record time. Yu made a mental note to encourage her with a trip to the cinema in Okina come the next set of exams. He kept his word, and even produced a bowl of popcorn from the depths of the Dojima kitchen.

The film was a fairly standard martial arts flick. Perhaps the acting was sub-par, but that wasn’t the point of it. The point was the action sequences, which were genuinely entertaining to watch. Chie got extremely into it as she always did. She whooped and cheered for the good guys, and said many things that Nanako was not allowed to hear whenever she saw the bad guys.

By the end of the film – and the popcorn – it was far too late for them to do any more studying. Chie packed the films and books up, though she left Yu the sequel to the film they’d watched in case he wanted to see more of it. (He sort of did.)

Chie gave Nanako a big hug good-bye and left for home. As she walked down the street, she saw a strange vehicle across the road from the Dojima residence. She couldn’t quite make out the details in the gloom, but it was definitely a large van. Chie eyed it suspiciously. The moment the driver saw her, the van roared into life and drove off.

She opened her phone and sent a quick text.

*hey yu, there was this weird van outside your house, thought i’d warn you…*

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Yu opened his eyes, and everything was blue.

He blinked. Sure enough, the faces of Igor, Margaret and Marie came into view. Marie was hurriedly stuffing a piece of paper and a pen into her bag. Doubtless he’d find another poem on the floor of the limousine soon enough. Margaret and Igor, however, were watching Yu’s face carefully. The tarot spread from Yu’s first visit to the room was laid out on the table.

“Welcome.”

“Hello,” Yu said. “I have a feeling I know what this is about…”

“Indeed. You are sailing into a storm, one which has been brewing for quite some time.” Igor gestured to the cards. “Do you recall your first visit to this place, many months ago?”

Yu nodded.

“At that time, I foretold your future; so far, the cards have not proven false. But this storm which threatens you did not brew merely in the events of the prophesised catastrophe. No, it came from deep within your past.”

Yu’s past. The memories flooded back, vivid as the day. Perhaps it was an effect of the Velvet Room that it all seemed so real and new, or perhaps the memories had just never really left him at all. He remembered his rise, reign and fall, and bit his tongue at the memories. That wasn’t him, not any more.
Margaret leant forwards, interrupting his chain of thought.

“We all come from somewhere. This storm is not something you can avoid.”

“Perhaps it once would have been possible for you to avoid,” Igor continued, “but you have steered your destiny into the way of this storm. Trust in your Social Links; they will be your guide out of it.”

Yu bit his cheek to stop himself from talking back. The action did not go unnoticed by the residents, who gave him disapproving looks. Well, Igor and Margaret gave him disapproving looks, but Marie mostly just looked curious and confused.

“…Where did you come from, anyway?”

Yu opened his mouth to answer – then stopped.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I don’t know how you two know about it, but that’s not me anymore. That’s not been me for months now. I’m a different person.”

“Are you?”

That smile of Igor’s was insufferable.

“Yes! I don’t do things like that now…”

Margaret tightened her grip on the Compendium.

“I see,” Igor said. “Well, I will speak with you once more when the storm has passed…”

The world blurred to a murky blue, then faded away altogether.

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The next morning, Yu didn’t come to school. Whispers shot through class 2-2 when they saw that Kashiwagi had beaten him there. The whispers turned to murmurs of great concern when Yu didn’t appear at any point later in the day. It was confirmed that Ai Ebihara – the only reason anyone could conceive of for why Yu would skip school – was present in her own class.

By the end of the day, word had spread all around school that Yu Narukami wasn’t present. The Investigation Team, on some silent agreement, gathered on the school roof. Even Teddie was present. Before their discussion could begin, however, Naoto’s phone rang.

“Shirogane speaking?”

“Hey, uh, Shirogane?” It was Adachi’s voice on the other end. “Uh, you know Yu Narukami, right? Dojima-san’s nephew?”

“We’re friends, yes, though I haven’t seen him at school today.” A sinking pit of dread opened up in Naoto’s stomach. “Is something wrong with him?”

“Kinda, yeah. Dojima-san left home this morning and found Yu’s schoolbag lying on the ground in front of the house. His phone’s not here, but when Dojima-san tried to call him, the call didn’t connect…”

“Hold on.”

Naoto lowered the phone.
“Chie-senpai, you were at the Dojima residence last night…”

“I was about to tell you guys, yeah,” she said. “When I left, I saw this weird van across the street. The moment the driver saw me, though, he drove away really fast…”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Yosuke said, “he texted me this morning, like an hour before school, to tell me he was going to set off a bit early. Just in case.”

Naoto relayed that to Adachi, who thought it over.

“So, he texted his best friend before he went to school, saying that he was leaving early, and then he disappears? And there was a weird van, too… That’s pretty suspicious, all right. Don’t mention this to anyone at your school, but personally, I think this sounds like a kidnapping…”

“You may be right,” Naoto said. “I’ll talk to some of his schoolfriends, see if any of them know anything more. It’s unlikely, but…”

“Yeah, but try not to start a panic. Anyway, I’m gonna tell Dojima-san this. Guy’s practically in hysterics…”

The line went dead. Naoto closed their phone, seemingly calm, until they slammed their hand down on their knee.

“Damn it! The devices were worthless…”

“He’s gone, isn’t he?” Yosuke sighed in resignation. “Figures…”

“So, if he texted Yosuke-senpai this morning, that means the killer changed time?” Rise shuddered. “I mean, maybe we should have seen it coming, but…”

Chie stamped her foot.

“Ugh! I bet he attacked in the morning because he saw me and Yosuke! We should’ve had a sleepover!”

The group all stared at their feet, despondent. This was with the exception of Teddie. Of course, Teddie was worried about his Sensei, but the title implied a level of respect, and that level of respect proved itself now. Teddie patted Naoto on the back reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, everyone!” He smiled confidently. “This is Sensei we’re talking about! He doesn’t have a Shadow, and he’s got his Bearsonas. He’ll be okay while we work to get to him!”

“That’s true,” Yosuke said. “He just got Izanagi without ever facing himself. Guess he doesn’t have anything to hide.”

“So!” Kanji fist-pumped. “If Senpai’s in the TV, we gotta go get ‘im out. Time we paid him back for all the times he saved our asses, huh? Then what’re we waitin’ for? Let’s just freakin’ go!”

“Kanji-kun’s right,” Yukiko said. “Since he doesn’t have a Shadow, and we already know he’s gone, we don’t need to wait for the Midnight Channel.”

With their resolve strengthened and spirits raised, the group set off to Junes for their latest rescue mission. None of them were particularly surprised to see the fox from the shrine curled up underneath their usual table, out of view of the staff and customers. Yu had stopped bothering to call it months prior. It just knew. (Yukiko became more convinced every day that the damn thing was a
The fog of the world inside the TV was the same as ever. Rise stepped forwards, peering through it. A blue card appeared before her, then shattered into a million pieces, revealing Kanzeon. Rise watched through her enhanced senses for a moment.

“Huh…? I can’t see Senpai…”

“What?” Yosuke frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It really doesn’t!” Rise shook her head. “Even only knowing a bit about Kubo and Naoto-kun, I was able to find them. I know Senpai really well, and I can’t pin him down!”

“Maybe he ain’t here yet?” Kanji suggested.

“Perhaps, but that just raises more questions,” Naoto said. “When I was kidnapped, there was only a brief journey between my capture and being thrown in. Why would there be a delay for this case, when the killer has already gone away from their usual tactics?”

“He’s in here,” Rise replied, “I just can’t work out where he is! It’s like he’s everywhere at once, but also nowhere.”

Teddie scowled as far as a cuddly mascot toy could scowl.

“Rise-chan, that doesn’t make any sense!”

“I know!”

Kanzeon flickered out of view as Rise dropped to her knees in frustration. Chie ran over to make sure she was all right. Rise batted away the hand that was meant to help her up.

“I’m okay. But I don’t think I can find Senpai right now.”

Dejected, the group returned to the real world, where they all slumped in chairs around their usual table.

“I know!” Teddie said after a moment. “Maybe Rise-chan can’t find Sensei because he’s already a Bearsona-user!”

“Yeah, but I can see you guys just fine,” Rise pointed out.

“Oh. Right.”

“Maybe it’s because of the Wild Card?” Yukiko suggested. “I don’t know, maybe something about entering the world in that way did something…?”

“Or maybe, because he doesn’t have a Shadow, Rise-chan can’t pick it up?” Chie frowned. “Nah, she’d just be able to see Yu-kun then, wouldn’t she?”

“I think we’re all avoiding the obvious answer,” Naoto said.

The group all turned to look at Naoto. The detective looked as though they’d just been given some extremely foul-tasting medicine, or perhaps some devastating news.

“And what’s that?” Kanji asked.
“That we don’t know Senpai half as well as we think we do.”

Yosuke shook his head angrily.

“No way in hell! He’s my partner, we’re best friends!”

“We’ve known him for months,” Yukiko said. “If we don’t know him that well, that means he was lying about who he was the entire time…”

“Sensei wouldn’t do that!” Teddie looked as angry as Yosuke. “And anyway, that would make a Shadow Sensei appear!”

“Well…”

Everyone’s attention snapped to Chie, who now looked extremely doubtful. She stared at her can of cola as she spoke.

“We don’t know how his power works,” she said after a moment. “Why can he summon more than one Persona? I don’t think even he’s really sure. Maybe… maybe something about it stops a Shadow from forming at all, because he can just call it another side of himself and use it as a Persona. Or something? I dunno.”

“So Senpai was lyin’?” Kanji looked halfway between angry and broken-hearted. “How the hell’re we meant to figure out the truth, then?”

Everyone slumped further down in their seats. The reality rapidly set in that Naoto’s answer to their problem was the most logical and probably the most correct. They had, in all their months of knowing and fighting alongside Yu Narukami, missed some important detail about him. Or rather, they’d been lied to. Both were incredibly disheartening thoughts.

Eventually, Yosuke sat up straight and coughed to get the others’ attention.

“Look,” he said, “we need to watch the Midnight Channel. Every time someone’s in the TV and it comes on, we find out something about how they’re really feeling, right? I mean, it never makes much sense, but it’s a clue, right?”

As if on cue, rain began to spit down around them. The grey clouds brewing above promised more rain to come – and with it, the hope of some kind of clue as to what the hell Yu was hiding from his closest friends.

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Even if Yosuke had wanted to go to sleep, he wouldn’t have been able to. His head was too full of dread for what the hell it was that his best friend was hiding from him. Yu Narukami was full of surprises, but after fighting by his side, Yosuke had become sure that he knew what made his partner tick. Now he knew he was wrong. What was Yu hiding? Why would he hide it?

Yosuke glanced at the clock. A minute to midnight.

“Ted? It’s nearly midnight.”

The closet creaked open, and Teddie slipped out, leaving the manga he’d been reading behind. He looked as confused and hurt as Yosuke felt. Hell, he probably felt even worse. The bear looked at Yu like he was the stars in the sky. How could Yu have lied to him? To any of them?
…No. Yosuke refused to believe it. There was a reason for this, or there had been a misunderstanding, or something.

The clock struck midnight. On cue, the TV tuned into the Midnight Channel. The image was as clear as the daytime programming. Yu Narukami was on the screen, as predicted. Or rather, his Shadow was. The Shadow was dressed in what looked like a school uniform, but its jacket had been replaced by a long, tattered coat. A surgical mask was hung around its neck, and it wore some heavy-looking boots in place of school regulation shoes. Rings decorated its fingers, some of them large and heavy, others more discreet. Its ears were pierced in multiple places. In one hand, it held a golf club, which it rested on its shoulder. The figure on the screen was definitely Yu Narukami, but a wilder, more dangerous version of him. Hell, he looked like he was the sort of person who Kanji Tatsumi would beat the crap out of just for breathing within a hundred-mile radius of Mrs Tatsumi…

“Welcome,” Shadow Yu said, “to a very special airin’ of the Midnight Channel! The name’s Yu Narukami, and I’m gonna be your host for the night! This is Kingpin Narukami’s Ultimate Beatdown!”

A garish sign flickered into life above Shadow Yu’s head. A phantom crowd wooped and cheered. Shadow Yu grinned in a terrifying, off-kilter kind of way.

“That’s right,” it continued, “it’s time for what you’ve all been waiting for! All eyes on me, and don’t you dare take ‘em off for a second! I’m gonna prove that I’m the strongest of all of you, and I don’t need anyone’s help to do it! Get ready for some brutal, blow-by-blow action! I’ll be waitin’ for any challengers who think they can take me on!”

Shadow Yu turned and – for lack of a better term – swaggered his way into the building behind him. From what Yosuke could see of it, it looked completely abandoned, save for the lights shining from inside.

The Midnight Channel switched off.
Yu opened his eyes. Ow. What the hell had just happened to him? He’d left for school early, in case that strange van was planning to show up as he left. Then... he’d texted Yosuke, while standing in the door. Everything after that was something of a blur.

He groaned and got to his feet. The fog around him was overwhelmingly thick. Luckily, his glasses were in his inside jacket pocket. He quickly put them on, and the fog faded to a more manageable level. The area around him wasn’t one he recognised. Ripped posters covered battered concrete walls. Broken bottles and crushed cans had been brushed into the corners, clearing a space in the middle of the room. A set of steel doors stood at one end of the room.

Naturally, Yu went right for the doors. He pulled on them, but they didn’t move an inch. Locked. Well, he should have seen that coming. None of the others had ever managed to escape their captivity alone. Even Rise hadn’t been able to get through the curtain between her and freedom.

An idea occurred to him. He focused on himself, willing a Persona to appear. But nothing happened. “Yeaaaah, that’s not going to work.”

Yu span around, chest tightening with panic. At the other end of the room was a hollow mockery of a throne, made from taped-together crates and decade-old cushions. Sitting on it was a creature wearing Yu’s own face, but wearing a costume that marked him out as something else entirely. Yu remembered the rings and piercings very well. He still had them, in a little box in his room. It hadn’t been opened in months. He just couldn’t make himself get rid of it.

Sentiment.

“Well,” Yu said flatly, “I don’t suppose you’ve got a magazine anywhere in this mess?”

The Shadow’s expression didn’t really change, but Yu could tell it was irritated.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’, then.” He paused. “Aren’t you meant to be taunting me?”

“No point in that unless there’s someone here to see it.” The edge of the Shadow’s mouth quirked upwards. “You’re all meek and calm here, but the moment they come in, you’re gonna have a reputation to uphold. That’s one thing that’ll never change, huh?”

Yu clenched his jaw shut. This was going to be unbearable. And worst of all, he had no idea how long it would take. He’d read a book, once, about a man who’d planned to spend a month in a place with no way to count the time, to see what the effects were. The other people working on it had removed him from that place with force when the month ended, because he’d insisted he still had a week left. Yu’s own perception of time was already out of place. How long had passed since he’d been thrown in? He had no way to know. And combined with the strange properties of this world...
He sank down, back against the door, and closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to look at the beast that wore his face.

--

“Look,” Chie said, “I know we’ve all joked about him being a bancho, especially with how Izanagi looks, but that was taking it a little far…”

It was a Sunday, and they were all sat around the table at Junes, talking.

“I thought he looked kind of cool,” Yukiko offered. “But it doesn’t really help us figure out what he’s hiding.”

Yosuke groaned.

“Yeah, I was being kind of optimistic there, wasn’t I?”

“How did you all research the victims before?” Naoto asked. “I’m an extremely private person – I don’t see how you could have found out anything that I wouldn’t have willingly shown you.”

“Well, different people saw different sides of you,” Rise explained. “When we asked the police about you, we managed to find something out from them that gave us a hint.”

“Ooh!” Teddie slammed his hands down on the table dramatically. “Sooo, we just ask Sensei’s other friends about him!”

“Yeah, that should work.” Kanji then hesitated. “Uh, how many friends does he have…?”

Everyone tried to count it and quickly ran out of fingers with which to keep track. The potential weight of the task ahead of them was now apparent. Even if one of these people knew something about Yu that they did, there was no guarantee that it’d be useful information. That, and if Yu had concealed the truth from the people he fought alongside in battle, would he really have not hidden it from everyone else?

Teddie stood up.

“Well,” he said, “we better go ask about Sensei!”

He was right, of course. There was nothing to be done except to ask around.

--

Chie nearly ran right into Ai Ebihara in Junes. Why the girl was shopping in Junes of all places wasn’t exactly clear. Surely she could get much nicer chocolate in Okina? Price wouldn’t exactly be an issue for her, would it?

“Hey, Ebihara-san…!”

Ai turned and glared suspiciously at Chie.

“Oh, hey, Satonaka. Do you need something?”

“Oh, kinda. It’s about Yu-kun.”

Ai’s shoulders sank.
“Yeah. I heard he wasn’t at school yesterday. Is that true?”

“Um, yeah, he kinda went missing…” Ai’s reaction turned to one of panic. “It’s okay! But, uh, Naoto-kun wanted me to help them ask around, just in case. Did you ever notice anything weird about him?”

Ai just stared at her.

“I mean, beyond his normal weirdness.”

Ai thought about it, tapping her foot.

“I don’t really know. I mean, he always seems really on top of everything, which is weird given how, y’know, spacey he is. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Chie sighed. “Well, thanks, Ebihara-san. I guess I’ll go ask around some more.”

“Okay. Tell Shirogane they better find him quick, okay?”

The moment Chie was away from Ai, she opened her phone and texted to everyone else to use the cover of “helping Naoto-kun”. It seemed like a good way to get answers without looking suspicious.

--

Kanji found Naoki Konishi praying at the shrine. Well, it was more like the fox had found him. Kanji had seen the fox sitting by the entrance. The moment it had seen him, it had yipped in his general direction and hurried into the shrine’s main area. Kanji had followed, and there he’d found Naoki. He waited until his friend was done before asking.

“Hey, Naoki-kun…”


“Yeah.” Then Kanji remembered Chie’s idea. “Hey, uh, actually, Naoto-kun’s helpin’ with the investigation, and wanted me to help out too…”

“Oh, is this an interrogation? You two would make a good bad cop-good cop team.”

“H-hey! Uh, shit. What I mean is, uh…” He took a deep breath. “S’about Senpai. He been acting any weirder than usual, lately…?”

Naoki thought about it for a long time.

“Hard to say. That guy is really weird, you know.” Naoki laughed. “Sorry, I don’t really know what to say.”

“S’okay, man… Thanks anyway.”

Before he left, Kanji threw a few coins into the box. The fox had tried to help, and that was what counted. Anyway, it would probably nip him a few times if he didn’t donate. Damn thing was beyond greedy.

--

To Yukiko’s surprise, Marie was leaning against the front of Daidara’s shop. She looked deeply troubled by something – well, moreso than she usually did. Her arms were crossed, and her jaw was
set. She was staring off into the sky.

“Hello, Marie-chan,” Yukiko said carefully. “Listen, um…”

“You’re looking for him, aren’t you?”

Marie was still staring off into the sky.

“How did you guess?”

“Not a guess.” Marie turned her head to look at Yukiko. “I can’t help you. I only know what the Nose has told me. But… do you know anything about where he’s from?”

Marie may as well have just declared that she was secretly a purple-headed alien, from the amount of sense that had made to Yukiko.

“The city, right?”

“That’s not what I meant!” Marie rolled her eyes. “Margaret told me that everyone comes from somewhere, and that makes you who you are. But Yu wouldn’t tell me where he’s from.”

What Marie was saying still made no sense in context. It had, however, given Yukiko an idea. If Yu was hiding something, it’d be something in his past – from before he came to Inaba. So, why wouldn’t they ask about his past?

“Well, I need to get back to the Room,” Marie said. “See you.”

“--

“So he’s seriously missing?” Kou frowned deeply. “Man, that sucks. I hope he’s okay.”

Yosuke had found Kou and Daisuke hanging around in Shiroku. Daisuke was eying up the sports magazines on the rack, while Kou sipped from an already paid for can of TaP.

“Yeah,” Yosuke said. “Hey, uh, speaking of which… Naoto-kun asked me to ask around. Did you notice anything weird about him? Asides from the normal stuff.”

“What,” Daisuke snorted, “like the fact he can actually finish one of those beef bowls?”

Kou elbowed him.

“Do you have any more specifics?” Kou said. “Kind of hard to narrow it down with that criteria.”

Yosuke thought about it as Daisuke picked out his magazine.

“Something that didn’t seem right,” he eventually said. “Something that didn’t quite add up about him. Any ideas?”

“He never talks about his parents,” Daisuke said. “I thought they were dead for three months, and that was why he moved here! Hell, come to think of it… Kou, did he ever talk to you about the city?”

“Uh…” Kou scratched his chin. “Not really? I asked a couple of times, but he always changed the subject. Does that count as weird, Yosuke?”

The same thing had occurred to Yosuke as Daisuke had mentioned it. Yu really didn’t talk about the
city a lot. He’d mention particular facts about living in a large city that he’d liked or disliked, but he’d never talked about his personal life before Inaba. The most Yosuke knew was that Yu’s parents were busy people. Yu had never mentioned friends, or teachers, or neighbours, or… anything at all, really.

“Yeah,” he said, “that definitely counts as weird.”

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YOSUKE: hey guys, did partner ever talk 2 u about life in the city??

YUKIKO: Everyone, try asking people if Yu’s ever spoken to them about what his life was like before he moved.

These two texts had set off alarm bells in Naoto’s head, and they’d run through their list of people whom Yu might have spoken to about that. The obvious answer had been a certain platypus-loving little girl.

Who, as it turned out, Teddie had also thought to ask. Naoto found them sitting under the covered area on the floodplain. Nanako looked completely empty from worry. Naoto felt a pang of sympathy for the poor little girl. Her big bro was missing; her dad was spending all of his time looking for said bro. She was on her own again.

“Hello, you two,” Naoto said, sitting down next to little Nanako. “I hope I’m not interrupting…?”

Nanako shook her head.

“I was trying to comfort Nana-chan,” Teddie said.

Naoto wasn’t good at these things, but the sight before them was too sad not to try.

“It’s alright, Nanako-chan,” they said. “Your father is one of the best detectives I’ve ever met. If anyone can find your big bro, he can, I’m sure.”

Nanako nodded. Her spirits seemed slightly lifted. Teddie patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

“Actually,” Naoto said, “I’m trying to help find your brother myself.”

“Really?”

Nanako looked up at Naoto with an expression of pure gratitude. It made Naoto’s heart melt.

“Of course. He’s my friend, and this is my duty. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Okay!”

Naoto took out a notebook and pen from their pocket. It made the whole thing seem more official. Nanako couldn’t keep her eyes off the book, so it was clearly helping.

“Has your brother ever talked to you about his parents?”

Nanako thought very, very hard.

“Um… not really. He says they work a lot, and travel because of it.”

Naoto noted that down.
“What about friends from before he came to Inaba? Has he ever mentioned them?”

“No.” That answer came a lot quicker. “I asked once, and he said that his friends before he came here weren’t really his friends. He didn’t tell me what he meant, but he looked really sad when I asked.”

Naoto noted that down too, a little more urgently. Their suspicions were correct – Yu had let his guard down around his “lil sis”. What Nanako had just told them, though, was more than a little worrying. How could Yu have had no real friends, only to make so many in Inaba? What did he consider to be “real”?

No. Block it. Compartmentalise it. This could be dealt with once Yu was safe.

“Did big bro do something bad?” Nanako asked. “It’s just, if a detective asks this stuff on TV, that person usually did something bad…”

“No, Sensei didn’t do anything bad!” Teddie patted Nanako’s head. “But if we know a bit more about him, we can maybe track him down a bit bear-ter!”

“Okay! Do you want me to tell you anything else?”

“No,” Naoto said, putting their notebook away, “what you’ve already told me will doubtless be a vital clue. Thank you for your help.”

Rise looked through the texts on her phone. Everyone was slowly coming to the same conclusion. Yu Narukami didn’t talk about his parents, and was fairly convinced he hadn’t had any real friends before he’d moved to Inaba. His past was the answer, but it was also a total mystery. Unfortunately, it didn’t feel like it’d be enough, and it was getting to be fairly late in the day. No one she’d talked to had had any idea of what she meant. How could they? Would anybody in Inaba know anything about Yu’s history that he hadn’t actually told them about?

She sighed, and closed her phone. People were making their way out of the shopping district, including her friends. There were still a few people here and there, including Ryotaro Dojima, who was apparently taking a smoke break from searching for Yu.

Wait.

Dojima! Of course! It was so obvious, Rise couldn’t believe no one had thought of it earlier. If anyone would know anything relevant, he would. But how to get the answer?

She walked up to Dojima cautiously. He noticed her, and nodded a greeting. There were heavy bags under his eyes.

“Hi, Dojima-san,” she said. “Are you looking for Senpai?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s not going well. That van Satonaka mentioned is nowhere to be found, and no one saw anything. I didn’t think this was the kind of trouble Yu was gonna give me, truth be told…”

Wait, what?

“Huh? Trouble?”

Dojima took another drag.
“You know – all that shit he got involved with in middle school. My sister warned me about it, but…”

“What, um… ‘shit’?”

Dojima looked at her suspiciously.

“Did he never tell you? Huh.” He took another drag. “He used to be a real hellraiser, y’know. Worse than Tatsumi was. He skipped school, got into fights, terrorised everyone he met. My sister told me he might’ve even gotten drunk a few times.”

Rise’s jaw dropped.

“In middle school?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either. First year of high school, though, he finally picked on someone too big for him to handle. Ended up in hospital with broken bones. Nothing serious, but it scared the hell out of him and he went straight. Ditched the whole delinquent thing and actually started taking things seriously.”

This was obviously the answer Rise had been looking for. But what an answer it was! He’d never mentioned anything like this, never given any indication that he hadn’t always been the straight-A goody-two-shoes that he’d been for as long as anyone in Inaba had known him. She understood now. He was ashamed of it, wasn’t he?

“I had no idea,” Rise said. “Wow.”

“Mm.” Dojima put his cigarette out on a nearby bin. “I thought he’d be way more trouble than he actually has been. But I’ve been here too long – I better head back to the station. Don’t stay out too late, all right?”

“Okay!”

Dojima walked off. Rise stared after him, unable to believe that it had been that easy. Then, she pulled out her phone and punched in Yosuke’s number.

“Senpai?”

“Hey, Rise-chan! You find anything?”

“Yeah, I did. I think it’ll be what I need. It turns out, Senpai… I’ll tell you all tomorrow. We need to meet at Junes after school and save him!”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The Investigation Team dive into the TV, and find a strange abandoned factory. Also, Shadow Yu is kind of a dick, as it turns out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I guess this explains why Izanagi looks like that,” Kanji said the next afternoon in the TV. “But seriously, what the hell? Senpai was a freakin’ delinquent kid?”

“I don’t get it either,” Yosuke said. “I guess he must be ashamed of how he used to act, and that’s why he didn’t tell us about it.”

“That does seem like the most likely solution to this conundrum,” Naoto said.

No one in the group could quite believe what Rise had just told them. Yu Narukami was the most upstanding citizen any of them had ever met! Perfect grades, volunteer work, part-time jobs by the dozen, and a dedication to catching a murderer – and he was a former hardcore delinquent? It just didn’t add up.

“It also kind of explains why he was so good with a golf club,” Chie added.

Rise nodded. She closed her eyes, and summoned Kanzeon.

“Delinquent… delinquent… yep! Found him!”

Rise lead the group through the fog to where Yu could be found. The path ended at a huge, run-down factory. The windows were all boarded up, the lights weren’t working, and litter was strewn across the path.

“An abandoned factory, huh?” Teddie looked around. “Iiiinteresting…”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Yosuke said, “I think I know this place!”

Everyone turned to stare at him.

“Well, back when I lived in Tokyo, my route to middle school took me past this old abandoned factory,” he explained. “No one was ever allowed near it ‘cause it was dangerous. My parents told me that it’d been taken over by some kind of gang. This place looks exactly like that factory!”

“Then, was Yu-kun a member of that gang?” Yukiko asked. “To think you lived so close to each other…”

“It’s a small world, isn’t it?” Naoto said. “At any rate, I feel we should elect a new leader before entering.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right.” Chie scratched her head. “I don’t really think anyone here could replace
“Yu-kun…”

“What about Yosuke?” Teddie suggested. “He made that promise to catch the killer to me, just like Sensei did!”

Everyone looked sceptically at Yosuke.

“Well,” Yukiko said, “he has had his Persona the longest out of everyone here.”

Chie didn’t look best please.

“I guess…”

“If you guys really wanna put me in charge, I’ll do it,” Yosuke said. “It’s for partner, after all.”

Everyone nodded in silent agreement. Yosuke eyed the abandoned factory up uneasily. He remembered the time he’d gone past the factory on the way to middle school and seen a group of shady-looking teenagers hanging around outside it. They’d given him the stink-eye and he’d hurried past. Maybe they had been the “not real friends” Yu had told Nanako about.

He took a deep breath, and spun one of his knives in his hand.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s just get this over with. C’mon.”

--

Floor One

“Y’know,” Chie said, wrinkling her nose, “this isn’t exactly what I thought the inside of Yu-kun’s mind would look like…”

She had a point. Graffiti and ripped posters covered the walls. Bits and pieces of old rubbish had been swept up against the walls – empty bottles and cans, pieces of broken furniture, dirty magazines, that sort of thing. The lights overhead flickered weakly. Naoto winced – it was going to give them a migraine at this rate.

“I expected cats,” Teddie said. “And I kind of thought it’d be neater. But this is worse than Yosuke’s room!”

“Yeah, that’s half your fault, Ted,” Yosuke pointed out. “Anyway, we should – ”

Yosuke was cut off by the distant sound of Ryotaro Dojima’s voice.

“I’m Detective Dojima, his guardian. Well, how should I say this… I hope you get along with him.”

“Dojima-san?” Kanji said, surprised. “Wait, who the hell’s he talkin’ to…?”

Yukiko nudged Chie.

“Hey, do you remember the first day of school this year? We went halfway home with Yu-kun, and…”

“Oh, yeah!” Chie nodded. “We ran into Dojima-san at the scene of Ms Yamano’s discovery. He told us to go home, but before that… Yeah, he definitely told us to be friends with Yu. I remember that!”
“Interesting,” Naoto said. “Now, shall we?”

“Careful, guys,” Rise said, “the Shadows here are pretty strong! And we don’t have Senpai’s Wild Card with us this time, so if you get surprised, there could be trouble. Stay on your guard!”

“Gotcha.” Yosuke drew himself up. “Okay, gang – let’s move!”

The group quickly learnt that Rise hadn’t been wrong about the Shadows. That was always how it was, though – they got used to the Shadows in one person’s heart, and then the next lot rose to the challenge and nearly tore them to shreds, until they got used to the new Shadows. It didn’t help that the factory itself was a labyrinthine mess. The poor lighting left the Shadows ample places to hide, and everything looked so similar to everything else that keeping track of their position became difficult.

Then again, after a few months they’d gotten used to this sort of thing. Dungeons never went easy on their explorers. They soon managed to find the stairs up.

“One down,” Chie said, “how many more to go?”

Rise didn’t answer.

“Crap.”

--

**Floor Two**

“Partner?”

Yosuke froze.

“What a weird word… ‘partner’… Like we’re equals, or something. Ha. Bullshit. We could never be the same. Either way, ‘partner’… I like the sound of it.”

“…We could never be the same?” Yosuke felt his insecurities gnaw at his gut. “What’s that meant to mean…?”

“Well, the obvious meaning is that he thinks he’s better than you,” Naoto said. Everyone turned to glare at them. “What? I’m not wrong.”

“Tact, Naoto-kun! Sheesh…”

“They’re probably right, though,” Yosuke said sadly. “He was always the stronger one, the one with better grades, the more popular one… Honestly? If it hadn’t been for the case, I don’t think he’d have put up with me for this long. But somehow, when we hung out together, he actually ended up liking me…”

“Don’t put yourself down like that, Yosuke-kun,” Yukiko said. “I mean, yes you can be horrible sometimes – actually, a lot of the time – but you have good qualities too, and Yu-kun obviously cares about you.”

Yosuke nodded, but those insecurities still clawed at him. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling, and he quickly buried himself into ripping through every Shadow he met. The others did the same, and it wasn’t long before –
“Guys! I think he’s behind this door.”

“You mean, his Shadow is,” Kanji corrected.

“Whatever! Ready?”

Yosuke hesitated, then pushed the door open. They stepped into an open area, with conveyor belts on either side of them. Standing in the middle of the room was Shadow Yu, fully decked-out as the biggest bancho that Inaba had ever seen. He’d traded his club for a microphone. His golden eyes danced when he saw his friends enter.

“Well, would you look at that?” He laughed. “Looks like I’ve got some competition, huh? Oh, but viewers, I think we all know how THIS is gonna go!”

“Sensei…”

“That’s right. We all know the score. But this isn’t the right place for it. You need to beat the tournament to fight the champion, after all! Don’t touch that dial, people, or you’ll regret it!”

The garish sign from before flickered into life above Yu’s head. A phantom crowd cheered and shouted Yu’s name.

“Yu-kun…” Chie stepped forwards. “If you think you’re better than us, you can just say it to our faces, you know!”

The crowd abruptly went silent. The garish sign disappeared. A look of shock appeared on the Shadow’s face. It genuinely hadn’t been expecting that kind of a response.

“Chie-chan…” It shook its head. “You don’t get it… I’ve got a rep to uphold. There’s no point to any of this unless I can be number one. I have to be perfect.”

As it spoke, the room grew colder and colder.

“And I can’t have you bringing that down, even if you are my friends. So I can’t let you ever defeat me, and see the ‘truth’ that you’re so desperate for.”

The sign and crowd returned, brighter and louder than ever.

“Sorry for the interruption, kids! Well, I guess I’ll go wait for our challengers. Stay tuned!”

The Shadow turned and left, disappearing into the dark fog in the distance. His sign and crowd disappeared with him. Even the heat returned, though the uneasy feeling that had permeated the room as it had grown colder remained.

“I have to be perfect’?” Yukiko repeated.

“Anyone else got a bad feelin’ about that?” Kanji asked. “Or is it just me?”

“It definitely doesn’t sound right,” Rise said.

“Does it matter?” Yosuke turned to address the group. “Look, we’re going to find out what’s going on here eventually. All we can do is just hurry up and save him, right?”

--
“There’s no point… there’s just no damn point to any of this. No matter what I do, I’ll never be like them. I’d have to be perfect to meet those standards, and that’s impossible. So, if I can’t live up to those expectations… what’s the point?”

“Now I’m really worried,” Chie said as she kicked a Giygas into dust. “Whose expectations?”

“Sensei really does care about being bear-fect, huh? Kintouki-Douji!”

“Watch the ice!” Kanji swallowed some Medicine and scowled. “Ugh. Still think we should put flavour syrup in this stuff.”

Naoto ducked behind a wall to reload their pistol. Amaterasu followed them to wipe away the large, bleeding cuts on their stomach. They nodded their thanks to Yukiko as relief came, and shot the table that was trying to knock her down before it could get too close.

“Come, Susano-o! We’re not putting syrup in the Medicine because everyone likes different flavours, Kanji, for the last time. Also, I think partner would use it to try his cooking experiments out on us, and while – ow! – he’s a good cook…”

“…you’d probably end up with something really weird? Also, I think the stairs are just behind that door.”

“Oh, thank god!”

--

Floor Four

“Hey, Narukami-san… Look, I’m sorry, man, I just…”

“Shut the hell up.”

“That just doesn’t sound like Sensei,” Teddie said sadly. “He sounds so angry…”

“Anyone here ever actually see him get angry?” Kanji asked.

“I hate people like you. Snivelin’ fuckin’ cowards, saying shit and then taking it back ‘cause you’re scared of what people will think.”

“I think I saw him twitchy because he had Tanaka’s theme song in his head once,” Chie said, “but I don’t think that counts…”

“Who cares if people hate you…? It’s better than lying to yourself and everyone around you.”

“This isn’t exactly the same as that, though,” Yukiko said.

Naoto nodded.

“It really isn’t.”

--

Floor Five
“Either he’s on this floor, or his Shadow is.”

“So you made it this far, huh?”

…it’s his Shadow.”

Shadow Yu’s booming voice mocked them. The debris around them had cleared away somewhat, and the lights weren’t flickering nearly as badly. There was a huge door just in front of them.

“Time for the knockout round! If you can get past this opponent, you qualify for the final round!”

“Opponent? What oppo – WHOA!”

Yosuke had taken one step towards the door and accidentally set off a hidden conveyor belt, which took him to the right. He stumbled and fell flat on his back with a yelp. Yukiko immediately burst out laughing – then stopped when she realised that he was being taken away from them…

“H-hey!” Teddie waved his arms frantically and leapt onto the conveyor belt. “Yosukeeeeeeeee!”

The others stepped onto the conveyor belt themselves and followed Yosuke, who was scrambling to get up. The belt deposited them on the other end of a long corridor, far away from the big door that concealed their opponent. Shadow Yu was laughing like a supervillain.

“Seriously, partner?”

“Seriously. Anyway, you better get back to the challenge room quick, or I’m gonna disqualify you. Good luck, ‘friends’!”

Yosuke got up, rubbing his back. The others stumbled their way off the conveyor belt.

“Well, we’re not getting back that way,” Chie said. “Any ideas?”

“I think there’s a switch somewhere around here that’ll turn the belt off.”

“Then let’s go find it so we can stomp that opponent, stomp Yu-kun’s Shadow, and then stomp Yu-kun himself for not telling us what was going on!” Chie cracked her knuckles. “Come on!”

Before anyone could stop her, she threw open the door next to them and charged directly into a rather surprised giant robot. The others scrambled after her before it could turn her into dust. Chie – who spent most of the fight dizzy on the floor – immediately began asking why she couldn’t have run into one of the golden Shadows for once.

They brushed themselves off and looked down the corridor that Chie had charged into. In the distance, everything was obscured by a deeper fog than usual. Old, ripped posters were pasted onto the walls. They could see large metal doors at the sides of the corridors. Well, no time like the present. The team set off into the gloom, weapons ready in case of a stray Shadow.

Every time they opened a door, they would be jumped by another Shadow. On the plus side, there were also treasure chests at the back, filled with better goodies than usual. Yukiko joked that Yu was trying to treat them. None of them were entirely sure if that was even possible, but they chose to believe it.

Of course, the switch that Rise mentioned turned out to be in the last chest in the last room. Cheers went up when they found it, and Yosuke flipped it with a completely unnecessary dramatic flair.
“Freakin’ finally,” he said.

“Yep, the conveyor belt stopped! You can get to that central room now.”

They took a moment to down some Medicines and Soul Foods, and left the room. They found themselves at the other end of the now-static conveyor belt. It wasn’t far to the room where they’d began, either.

“Ready?”

They pushed the huge steel doors open. Shadow Yu stood at the back of the room, clapping sarcastically. In front of him hovered one of the huge knight Shadows – far bigger than any they’d ever seen before.

“Congratulations! Time for you to take a trip down memory lane. No time limit, no holds barred!”

Yosuke and Chie exchanged grimaces. They remembered their first fight against one of these knights far too well – not to mention their collective reactions to running into one of them as a perfectly normal enemy. Yu’s subconscious clearly had a very twisted sense of humour.

“Oh boy,” Rise said, “Power Charge, Revolution, and Blight…?”

As if on cue, the Knight laughed cruelly. Everyone could feel it preparing to strike. Shadow Yu gave them a thumbs-up and disappeared.

“Instant-kills and physical attacks aren’t going to work, either.”

“Shall I just sit this one out, then?” Naoto asked.

“Hell no! You have Megidola!” Kanji pointed out.

“Ah. Yes. Of course.”

Yosuke rolled his eyes and sliced through Susano-O’s card. A hurricane accompanied the Persona’s arrival – a hurricane pointed straight at the Shadow. It roared as it was blown backwards into the walls, but quickly recovered, and charged itself up some more.

“Stop wasting time arguing and kill it, guys!”

They didn’t need any more invitation than that. Truth be told, it didn’t quite take as long as they were fearing it would. Susano-o’s hurricanes were joined by Amaterasu’s infernos, Kintouki-Douji’s blizzards, Take-Mikazuchi’s storms, and Sukuna-Hikona’s almighty blasts. Chie quickly found herself unable to properly hurt the Shadow (“Why did I never get any better ice spells?!”), so she hung back and threw power-ups at her friends. The Shadow gave as good as it got, though, tearing through them with Blights and Tempest Slashes.

Eventually, though, it tried to use Power Charge and failed.

“Oh my god,” Yukiko said, trying in vain to stifle her giggles, “did it just…”

“It ran out of magic!” Teddie said. “When was the last time that happened?”

“…Shadows can do that?” Naoto said, eyes bugging out in surprise. “Huh.”

“Aaaaaaaand that’s why you don’t use two buff spells each time you attack, genius.” Yosuke pulled
his headphones down. “Who wants to kick its ass?”

A pink shimmer in the air behind them signalled Rise’s appearance. To the Investigation Team, pink had long been a colour that heralded destruction for whatever Shadows Rise had decided to help them out with. Usually, Yu would be leading them in with a stony gaze and a roll of his shoulders. Yosuke’s flailing made an effective substitute.

When the dust cleared, the Shadow was nothing but a pile of yen. Yosuke scooped it up and stuffed it in the group funds bag.

“Heck! I knew you could do it! Congrats, you just qualified for the final round! I’ll be waiting!”

Naoto raised a hand, out of breath.

“I’m exhausted,” they said.

“So am I,” Yukiko added. “To be honest, I think we all are…”

Yosuke assessed the group. Yep, everyone looked wiped. He felt terrible himself – his chest felt tight, which was never a good sign, and the rest of him felt like one huge bruise.

“Okay, we go up to the next floor so Rise-chan can take us back there tomorrow, then we leave and get some sleep. Partner’ll be okay for one more day.”

He hoped.

--

The moment they all stepped out into Junes, they felt their aches melt away. Sure, they still felt generally terrible, and Naoto was trying to get a bit of blood off their school shirt, but it could have been much worse. They wouldn’t truly feel better until the next morning. Quick recovery times was one of the perks of being a Persona-user. (Yu had once said he wasn’t sure if he’d have survived Mystery Food X without it.)

Kanji groaned and picked a bit of Shadow grit out of his hair.

“Hey, guys, look…”

Rise pointed in the direction of the instant meals. Little Nanako Dojima was standing there, looking dejectedly at some noodles. The group shared a series of worried glances, and walked over.

“Hey, Nana-chan…”

Nanako looked up. Her eyes were red.

“H-hi…” She looked at Naoto. “Weren’t you looking for big bro…?”

“O-of course!” Naoto smiled reassuringly. “I was just discussing it with the others. It’s always good to have a second perspective – or six of them, I suppose.”

“Okay…”

Nanako looked back at the noodles.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be home by now?” Kanji asked.
“I guess…”

“Hey, I know!” Chie patted Nanako on the shoulder. “Me and Teddie’ll take you home. That way you won’t be so lonely, okay?”

Nanako brightened up a little. She didn’t even bother to argue that she wasn’t feeling lonely. Chie took one of her hands, Teddie took the other, and the three of them walked off in the direction of the Dojima residence. The others watched them go.

“…We’re getting him back tomorrow,” Yukiko said.

Yosuke nodded.

“Damn straight.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! The next part should hopefully come quicker.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Everything goes to shit.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry about how long this took! Mental illness is wrecking me, but I’m doing a bit better now! Warning, this chapter involves some talk of shitty parenting and bullying.

After school the next day, the Investigation Team gathered at Junes, as was custom at this point. The fox was curled up under the table, whining softly. It was as worried as the rest of them.

“So, the weather looks like it’ll be good for a while,” Chie said. “Not that that really matters, though.”

“We’re not leaving him in there for any longer that we have to,” Naoto said. “He might be able to handle it, but Nanako-chan definitely can’t.”

“Besides,” Yosuke added, “whatever’s going on with him seems pretty rough…”

“Yeah, Senpai’s right,” Kanji said. “Like hell’re we gonna let him stew in it.”

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Floor Six

“I’m going to Inaba…? Okay. I understand. I’ll… I’ll be good. Yes, I promise. This time, I’ll be good…”

Yu’s voice echoed distantly through the halls of the abandoned factory. This floor was different to the ones below it. For a start, the lights were now all working properly. The floor was tidier, with less debris around. There were, however, a lot more posters and graffiti. The graffiti was hard to read, especially since it was all in English. Most of it, however, seemed to indicate that Shadow Yu wanted them gone and quickly.

“Who’s he talking to?” Chie asked, looking around nervously.

“His parents, I would imagine,” Naoto replied. “The parents who he never speaks about…”

“’I’ll be good’, huh?” Kanji scratched his chin. “Guess they didn’t want him gettin’ in any more fights. I’ve had that talk with Ma way too many times.”

The silent agreement amongst the group, however, was that they really wished they could have heard whatever it was Yu’s parents had said. Their absence was conspicuous, and not just in this instance. Even Naoto the orphan spoke about their parents sometimes. So why didn’t Yu? They all wished
they’d seen this sooner.

“Do you guys think we could’ve avoided this?” Teddie asked as Kintouki-Douji froze a Shadow in place. “I mean… do you think we could have worked out what was wrong with Sensei earlier?”

“I dunno, Ted,” Yosuke said, knifing a table. “I have a feeling like we couldn’t have, though…”

“I think we might’ve been blinded by him,” Yukiko admitted as the last Shadow went down. “He never had a Shadow, and he was always the strongest out of all of us. And he always seemed so honest, too. I think we might’ve just assumed he was too good to have a problem like this.”

“Maybe putting him on a pedestal wasn’t a good idea.”

Floor Seven

“What’s the point?”

There were even more conveyor belts this time. Yosuke groaned aloud when he saw the first one. Yukiko, however, was extremely excited, and jumped onto it without a moment’s giggling hesitation. After they were conveyed straight into a pack of Kings, however, it was decided that they would plan their route through the area more carefully.

“Okay,” Yosuke said, “Rise-chan needs to keep track of where we are, and Yukiko-san isn’t allowed to pick which conveyor belt we go on.”

Yukiko giggled and didn’t protest.

“If I’m bad, everyone hates me, and I get hurt. If I’m good, everyone ignores me, because I’m not interesting anymore.”

The Investigation Team carefully made their way around the floor, getting lost again and again in the process. Rise’s map soon came into form, though the floor was still incredibly confusing. It didn’t help that they kept stepping on the wrong belts and going in completely the wrong direction. It also didn’t help that Shadows liked to appear at the ends of the belts.

Rise watched in growing dismay as they went further and further around the room. She wanted to scream at them to hurry up – *we need to rescue Senpai!* – but bit her tongue. There was no point in panicking, she told herself. The problem was that she remembered all too well what it was like to be trapped in the world of Shadows, alone with the worst part of yourself. Her issues had been bad, granted. (And barely dressed.) The others, she knew, had all of their own troubles that sucked to be trapped with. But whatever Yu was dealing with was nasty – so nasty that he couldn’t even tell his best friends about it.

“What do I have to do to make them notice me…?”

His Shadow was rude and cruel, and way too over-the-top to be believed. Rise really wouldn’t blame her Senpai if he tried to reject it. Well, she would have been annoyed with him for totally forgetting about the whole “if you deny your Shadow it tries to kill you and everyone else in the room” thing, but the principle stood.

“…do I have to be… perfect?”

“Okay, let’s take a moment.”
Yosuke sank against the wall of the stairs room. The stairs themselves were dark and dusty. Vague footprints could be seen in the dust – footprints that belonged to someone wearing a slight heel. Either the Shadow had actually gone up the stairs for some reason, or it was taunting them. Possibly both. Wait. Probably both.

“It just doesn’t make sense that he wouldn’t tell us,” Chie said. “I mean, he’s seen the worst of us, and he still likes us. Why would he think we wouldn’t do the same for him?”

“I’m not sure,” Naoto said, “but I suspect it has something to do with his Shadow’s insistence on being perfect.”

“Yeah, but he knows we know he ain’t perfect.” Kanji shifted on the floor. “I mean… much as he wants to pretend that shit on the school trip didn’t happen, it did.”

Naoto groaned.

“Don’t remind me.”

“Wait, what happened on the school trip?”

Everyone laughed, despite the situation.

“Yeah,” Yosuke said fondly, “that guy can be a real dick sometimes. You know on the first day of school this year, I flipped my bike and it hit me in the crotch. He walked right past me! And I know he saw me. I’m just lucky he pulled me out of the bin the next day…”

“Didn’t he try to record the Midnight Channel once?” Yukiko said. “I think he said it was ‘evidence’, but still, it was kind of weird.”

“He ate grass once,” Chie added with a look of utter despair.

“The worst part is that I’m not even surprised by that,” Naoto said.

Yukiko snickered.

“It wasn’t surprising at the time, either.”

“Sensei’s not perfect,” Teddie said. “He works bear-y hard, and tries to be friends with ebearyone, but he’s not perfect. I never thought about why he was working so hard all the time…”

“Well, if he’s tryin’ to be perfect, it ain’t working.” Kanji looked surprisingly thoughtful. “Course it ain’t working! No one’s perfect! Someone needs to tell him that he doesn’t have to hide who he was, cause there’s nobody in Inaba who would care!”

Naoto nodded.

“Well put, Kanji-kun.”

Kanji went bright red and looked at the floor, mumbling thanks.

“Kanji-kun’s right! We all know he’s not a bully or a delinquent any more. He’s done so much good in the time we’ve known him.”

Yosuke raised a hand.

“I can testify from personal experience that kids do stupid shit all the time.”
Chie punched Yosuke affectionately on the shoulder. He winced and rubbed the area.

“Yeah,” Teddie said. “If somebeary’s changed… if they really want to be better… why hold it against them?”

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**Floor Eight**

“Are you calling me a loser?”

“Yeah,” Yosuke said as he twirled through a Shadow with his knives, “that makes a lot more sense now.”

“What does?” Naoto asked.

Yukiko snorted. Amaterasu let out a puff of flame to match it, and roasted a nearby Shadow in the process. It wasn’t very becoming of the divine ancestor of the emperors of Japan, so of course, Yukiko tried to do it again.

“Wait. I shouldn’t have said that. That’s not me anymore.”

“On his first day, Morooka tried to make him look bad in front of everyone,” Chie explained as she kicked the last Shadow so hard it turned into a twinkle, “and Yu wasn’t exactly impressed, so he just straight-up asked if Morooka was calling him a loser. He earnt the respect of the entire class basically immediately.”

“…and Morooka hated him immediately, right?”

Chie shot a thumbs-up at Kanji.

“Knew it. Man, that guy was an asshole.”

“Kanji-kun!”

“I ain’t wrong!”

“That can’t be me anymore.”

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**Floor Nine**

“Why do you look up to me?!”

Yu’s echoing voice had become desperate. The factory was reflecting it. Those busted lights were now completely out, and had been replaced with makeshift lanterns scattered around the halls and rooms of the factory. The posters were less ripped and torn, but now they all looked amateur, and the debris at the sides was piled higher than ever. If they stopped and listened, the Investigation Team would have heard the sounds of cheering and excitement. Something was coming.

“I don’t get it… you’re all so great. None of you are perfect, but you’re all so amazing… You all want to do so much good, even if you don’t always do it in ways that people would approve of.”

The Shadows towered over the group. Yu’s absence from the group was more apparent than it had
ever been. There had been so many times that they’d been saved by his power to change his abilities in a heartbeat. Now there were many times that they sorely wished he was there to do that.

“I’m… I’m not like you. So why do you look up to me…?”

But they prevailed, because they had to. The desperation in Yu’s echoing voice gave them a new sense of purpose. They were going to save him, and they were going to save him that very day, no matter what happened.

It didn’t help that they were nearly there.

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Fight Hall

A set of huge steel doors stood in their way.

“This looks familiar,” Yosuke said.

“Mm-hm!” Teddie nodded. “I can smell Sensei! And his Shadow, too!”

“They’re behind this door – for real this time!”

Yosuke eyed the doors up wearily. He turned to the group, mustering up every ounce of leadership that he had in his wiry body. It wasn’t a lot, but he got all of it.

“Okay, we seriously need to talk for a minute.” He spun his knife in his hand anxiously. “There is a chance that Yu will deny his Shadow. If that happens, we have no idea what the hell we’re up against. Best case scenario is that it’s just Izanagi. Worst case scenario…”

“…we all die?” Yukiko said.

“Great pep talk, Yukiko-senpai…” Kanji said with a glare.

“Hey. Yukiko-san. C’mon.” Yosuke sighed. “Worst case scenario, that Shadow can use all of his Persona-swapping power, in which case it’s going to be the most difficult fight we have ever had. Obviously, I’m not gonna ask any of you if you wanna turn back, because there’s no way any of us ever would. But… we need to be prepared for the possibility that this thing is capable of killing all of us pretty much immediately.”

“Surely Senpai wouldn’t be that much of a fool?” Naoto asked. “Um, you know what I mean.”

Teddie looked sadly down at the ground.

“…I denied my Shadow, Nao-chan. I’d seen what happened when you do that so many times, but I still did it.”

“And we all know that Yu-kun isn’t always the best at thinking things through,” Chie added. “I hope he doesn’t do it, but he might.”

“I’ll probably be able to see what we’re up against pretty early on in the fight,” Rise said. “I can always read Senpai’s Personae, even when he’s not using them, so the same thing should apply to his Shadow. If I only see one set of powers, or if I see a lot, I’ll tell you.”

Yosuke took a deep breath.
“Okay. Everyone ready?”

They all nodded as one.

Yosuke turned back to the doors, and shoved them open. The group burst into the final room. It was an absolute mess at the edges, but all the debris was cleared away in the centre, creating a crude fighting ring. A weak spotlight brought their gaze to the throne of crates, and to the shadowy figure sitting in it. Near the throne, looking both relieved and terrified, was the real Yu Narukami.

“Partner! Oh, thank god!”

“Guys…” Yu nodded at his Shadow. “So, this is kind of embarrassing.”

“Oh, what, am I ruining your perfect image?”

Yu rolled his eyes.

“You’re me. There. Can I please just leave now? Nanako-chan is probably worried sick.”

The Shadow looked at Yu in disbelief, then burst out laughing. It was a deep belly laugh, crueller and louder than any laugh the real Yu had ever laughed. Yosuke felt all of the hairs on his neck stand up. Behind him, Chie tensed in anticipation.

“You really thought that would work!” The Shadow swung its legs out of the chair and stood up in a fluid motion. “I’m the great Yu Narukami! I can’t get anything wrong! Of course I don’t have a Shadow, I’m perfect in every way! And if I do have one, I can just tell it to go away and it’ll turn back into Izanagi with its tail tucked behind its legs! Pathetic!”

“S-Sensei, listen!”

Teddie ran forwards, squeaking as he went. Both Yus turned to him in surprise.

“Sensei… we get it. You did a lot of bad things, and you want to be bear-fect to make up for it. But you don’t have to be! We know the real you now, and – ”

“Shut. Up.”

The Shadow’s tone had turned venomous.

“You don’t know anything. None of you do. I’m not trying to be perfect to ‘make up’ for anything, I’m trying to be perfect because I don’t have a choice!” It tapped its club on the ground angrily. “Whenever I’m good, I’m ignored by everyone. When I’m bad, they all hate me. But you don’t think I’m good or bad. Everyone in Inaba thinks I’m fuckin’ perfect. So they all love me.”

“Well, that’s just silly,” Yu said. “Nobody thinks anyone is perfect.”

No matter how confidently he tried to say it, his voice was wavering badly. That carefree, emotionless façade was cracking and cracking fast. The Shadow’s presence betrayed it most of all. Its face was a picture of Yu’s real feelings, and right now, it was furious at him.

“Oh, but that’s not what you tell yourself. ‘If I have perfect grades, people will look up to me’. ‘If I save these people, they will look up to me’. ‘I have a power that no one else does, and they all look up to me because of it’.”
The Shadow stepped into Yu’s personal space and grabbed him by the shirt. The Investigation Team immediately stepped into offensive stances, in case everything was about to blow up.

“I try to be as perfect as possible because I know that if I’m not, everyone will leave me. I gave up on being the good kid when I was twelve, because it wasn’t working. I gave up on being the bad kid a year ago, because I realised that no one actually looked up to me, they were just scared shitless of me! I thought that I was gonna spend my entire life alone!”

The Shadow took a deep, shuddering breath and continued.

“And then this case happened, and suddenly, everything was turnin’ up Narukami. I’ve got friends who think the world of me, my grades are perfect, and my family actually care about me! If they knew the truth, they’d all leave me, because apparently people only care about me if I’m a god in human form!”

It dropped Yu to the floor. He landed in a heap, the front of his shirt stretched out.

“You wanna know what the truth is?” Shadow Yu turned to the team, who were all staring in horror. “The truth is, I’m pathetic. I helped everyone in Inaba face themselves, and all the time I was running from who I really am. I liked the fighting. I like having everyone think I’m hot shit. I’m desperate for attention, I don’t care what kind it is! I mean, with parents as shit as this, who wouldn’t?”

That was an unanticipated twist. Yu’s reaction to it was instantaneous. He sprang to his feet, fists clenched.

“Don’t.”

“…Parents…?” Chie asked.

“I said DON’T!”

The Shadow burst out laughing again.

“Oh, now we’re seeing the real Yu! They’ve moved me from place to place my entire life, but can’t even be bothered to see if I’m doing okay! They work and work and work, and they left me to raise myself!” There were tears in the Shadow’s eyes. “All this desperate effort to get people to notice and like me… I’m just trying to fill in the gap. I just want my family to give a shit about me, for once in my goddamn life.”

The real Yu’s lips curled back in a snarl. Now they could all see the delinquent that had been hiding under his mask. Quick as lightning, he drew back a clenched fist and launched it at his own Shadow. The Shadow caught the punch with its own hand, face blank.

“Now they know,” he said, “and no amount of trying to beat the crap out of me is going to change that. So are you going to keep running? Or are you going to accept how weak you are… me?”

“You – ”

Alarm bells went off in Rise’s head.

“Senpai! NO!”
“Uh, partner – don’t – stop!”

“You aren’t me anymore! You’re a pathetic bully, and I refuse to be you ever again!”

The Shadow sighed.

“…Hypocrite. You can’t ever get away from me, but you pretend you can ignore me, even though you’ve seen what happens. I guess that means you have a death wish. Well… if that’s the case…”

Yu’s eyes went wide. He staggered backwards, already feeling the weight of the Shadow’s growing rage. Shadow Yu’s resigned stare turned into a vicious, toothy grin.

“…allow me to assist.”

A surge of purple shadows blasted outwards from Shadow Yu, knocking everyone else back. The surge grew and grew, filling the room. Kanji leapt forwards to try to catch it with his shield, protecting the team.

And when it cleared…

“Oh, no. Senpai!”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The Investigation Team find them battling a Shadow they never, ever wanted to meet - with a power they never wanted to be on the opposing side of.

Chapter Notes

It's done............... this is ten pages in word............. RIP.................

It had occurred to the group a while back that, generally speaking, boss Shadows got larger the more of them they fought. Shadow Yosuke had been of a decent size, Shadow Yukiko had hung over them like a monster, and Shadow Mitsuo’s shell had absolutely dwarfed the group. The topic had only come up because Shadow Naoto had ended up being surprisingly small. (Naoto had ended that conversation with a well-placed glower.) It had looked like Shadow Naoto was a break in the pattern.

Yosuke stared up at Shadow Yu and wished that were true.

The Shadow’s throne had been transformed from crates to gold. It was comically out of place in the run-down factory. Shadow Yu sat atop it in the shape of a monster. Its face was uncovered but cracked like a mask, and it dressed as Izanagi did, complete with that ridiculous codpiece. The throne was being lifted up on a large platform made from a broken piece of wall. Eight shadowy figures held up the platform, staggering under the Shadow’s weight. (Rise noted with some dismay that the figures looked like the seven of them and Marie.) Chains tied the Shadow’s form to the throne. Despite being made of gold, the chains had somehow begun to rust.

“I am a Shadow, the true self! If I can’t be perfect, I’ll just wipe everything away! And since you’re here, I'll start with YOU!”

“Okay,” Rise said with urgency in her voice, “the bad news is that yeah, he can change his affinities. The good news is that he has a weakness right now, though that might change. I'll try to keep track, but right now I think it’s using wind!”

The Shadow on the throne glared at Rise, who was hiding at the back of the group. It raised its club, and a hurricane whipped up, barrelling right into Kanji. He tried to get out of the way, but couldn’t, and was knocked to the ground. His yell told them exactly how much it had hurt. Chie grimaced.

“Okay, so if it’s using wind…” Yosuke said, desperately trying to think. His headphones hung silent around his neck.

“Logically, electricity should work, shouldn’t it?” Naoto’s face then fell. “Kanji-kun!”

“Mmhmm...”
Teddie squinted suspiciously at the Shadow, but said nothing. Yukiko ran over to help Kanji, pulling him to his feet. Chie jumped in between them and the Shadow and summoned Suzuka Gongen, who brought a furious blow onto the Shadow. It tottered dramatically, but stayed upright. The Shadow scowled. It raised its club, and a menacing aura filled the room.

“…Power Charge? Really? I didn’t expect that…”

“Heyyyyy, wait a minute!” Teddie was bouncing from one foot to the other. “A big wind spell, and Power Charge? That’s exactly what Yosuke’s Shadow did! And it was weak to electricity, too!”

“Are you for real, Teddie? He’s copying Yosuke-senpai’s Shadow?”

Yosuke rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know whether to take that as a compliment or not.”

“Ahhh, who cares!” Kanji cracked his knuckles, and Take-Mikazuchi’s card appeared before him. “If it’s weak to electric, I can kick its ass no problem! Persona!”

A bolt of lightning came down from the heavens and struck the Shadow right in its weak point. It screamed in an eerie echo of Yu’s own voice, as if he hadn’t swapped Persona quickly enough and had been hit where it hurt. Suddenly, the little figure of Yosuke below the platform crumbled into shadowy dust. (Kanji found that vaguely cathartic.) The platform leant, but didn’t fall. Shadow Yu scowled, and a red haze sprung up around it.

“…Hey, Teddie. Weak to wind, ice and electric affinity…”

“Chie-chan’s Shadow was beary strange.”

That line of thought was interrupted by the Shadow slamming its club down onto the floor, knocking Yosuke back into the wall. He hit his head and sank to the floor. The last thought that ran through his head before he succumbed to dizziness was that this was not a situation he’d ever wanted to be in again. Shadow Yu cackled loudly. The sound echoed around the makeshift arena. A green sphere appeared around it.

“I remembrar that too!” Teddie nodded. “Um… Shadow Chie-chan could make a wall against wind, and use Mazio and Mabufu… this Shadow probearly has the better versions though.”

“Did it really?” Chie scratched her head. “I can’t do any electric attacks…”

“Well, we can’t use wind on it for a while,” Naoto said. “Someone wake Senpai up, I’ll deal with this.”

Sukuna-Hikona fluttered into view. Moments later, the area lit up with a blast of Megidola. The Shadow screamed at Naoto and swung its club down at them. They dodged out of the way, but stumbled, barely making it. Teddie ran over to Yosuke and started trying to wake him up and heal him. Yukiko summoned Ameterasu and blasted the Shadow with an inferno. It didn’t work.

“Awww…” Yukiko pouted.

“Urgh…” Yosuke shook his head, willing away the stars in his eyes. “Okay, uh, shit. Chie, Kanji-kun, you two take point on this one… think I’m gonna throw up…”

Chie and Kanji stepped to the front of the group, Yukiko and Naoto running to the back. The Shadow swung its club again, but Chie was ready. Suzuka Gongen caught the club in one hand,
stopping the Shadow in its tracks. She then pushed, sending the end of the club into the Shadow’s chest. Shadow Yu grunted and stumbled, the figures straining underneath it.

“Your Shadow resisted physical, Chie-chan…”

“Well you could have mentioned that five minutes ago, Teddie! Sheesh!”

Yosuke stumbled to his feet. His head felt much clearer now. As he was planning his next move, the green wall around the Shadow faded. He grinned. The decision had apparently been made for him. Before the Shadow had a chance to restore its shield, he sliced through Susano-O’s card and blasted Shadow Yu with a hurricane. The Shadow roared and stumbled. At its base, the shadowy Chie faded away. The whole structure nearly toppled forwards, but the figures at the bottom moved quickly, rebalancing it. That said, the Shadow was now sinking lower.

“This seems too easy,” Rise said.

“Well, we’ve gotten a lot stronger since we fought those Shadows,” Yukiko said. “I think it’s going to get harder as it goes on.”

“Oh, this is too easy, Rise-chan? Fine! I’ll make it harder!”

Kanji frowned.

“Uh, guys, why’re Yosuke-senpai, Chie-senpai and Ted runnin’ away from the Shadow?”

The Shadow raised its club, and everything was engulfed in flames. Chie screamed, having not gotten away fast enough to dodge it. Yosuke groaned at the familiar sight of everything being on fire. Despite being aflame, Teddie stood his ground.

“Rise-chan! This one is weak to ice, but be bearful! If he hits us with fear, he can kill us straight away!”

“Ouch, yeah, I’m just looking at it now. This is Yukiko-senpai’s Shadow, right…?”

Yukiko fanned herself with irritation, glaring at the Shadow, and apparently not noticing that her uniform was on fire. Not that the uniform would be damaged, knowing her. Kanji made an effort to squash some of the flames with his shield. The Shadow grinned wickedly at them, and put up a glittering white shield.

“Why do all of these things have the wall spells?” Naoto sighed. “Oh well. Ice, you said, Teddie?”

“Yeah… Ooh! I have ice. But we gotta wait for the wall to disappear.”

Ameterasu let out a burst of light, healing everyone’s burns. Chie winced and sat up, still not really ready to move. Sukona-Hikona summoned another Megidola, blasting the Shadow. It swung its club at them, knocking them backwards. Kanji growled and blasted it with lightning. The figures below the Shadow winced and swayed, but kept holding it up. Rise quickly jumped in to heal everyone a little more. Naoto nodded a breathless thanks.

There was nothing to do, it seemed, but to wait it out until the Shadow ran out of protection. Chie took a deep breath and felt power rush through Suzuka Gongen; Naoto did much the same. Yosuke and Kanji took a moment to strengthen all of the others the best they could. Yukiko moved to the back, knowing that she couldn’t really hurt the Shadow in its current form.

Shadow Yu chuckled cruelly and glared at Yukiko. A dark aura surrounded it, and Yukiko started to
tremble. Her heart began to pound out of control in her tightening chest. She backed away from the Shadow. Chie shot her a worried look, then sighed, and summoned all of Suzuka Gongen’s strength into one almighty blow. It wasn’t great, but it hit the Shadow a lot harder than her counter-attack had. It scowled darkly at her, but the scowl was interrupted by Susano-O slicing it in the face with a burst of wind. The Shadow grabbed at Susano-O, who twisted out of the way. Sukona-Hikona flew high above Shadow Yu and let loose with Megidola once more.

Naoto took a shuddering, tired breath. A nasty thought occurred to Rise. If the Shadow could imitate each of them, then this was going to take a very long time. Naoto wasn’t good at extended fights, and the others would start to get tired soon after. Yukiko and Teddie could only heal Chie and Kanji for so long, and everyone else was going to be using a lot of magic. Rise almost considered trying to reach out and call the fox, but decided to wait and see.

Teddie took advantage of the Shadow’s distraction to run over to Yukiko. He put a calming paw on her arm and smiled reassuringly. Yukiko took a deep breath and nodded, her mind clearing. The Shadow swatted Sukuna-Hikona away, saw that Yukiko had calmed down, and literally growled in frustration. It swung its club straight into her, hitting Teddie in the process, and sending them both flying. Teddie bounced back up onto his back paws just in time to see the white wall flicker and fade.

He didn’t waste a second. Teddie twirled around and summoned Kintouki-Douji. The air around him went deathly cold as a blast of ice hit the Shadow right in its cracked face. It toppled backwards. The shadowy figures below all fell to their knees, desperately trying to hold the dazed Shadow Yu up. Rise and Kanji both cheered as it went down.

“Oh, you all know what to do!” Yosuke shouted. Within moments the entire floor had been engulfed in a ball of pretty pink dust as the team hit the Shadow with everything they had. When the dust cleared, it groaned, and struggled back up. The shadowy Yukiko was trembling with the strain. It wouldn’t be long before she was out entirely and the Shadow moved onto its next imitation.

The Shadow glowered at them, yellow eyes gleaming, teeth bared in a snarl. It pointed its club at Teddie, who felt a wave of terror wash over him. He stumbled backwards, trembling.

“C’mon, Teddie!” Chie shouted. “You’re not gonna let this thing win, right?”

Teddie shook his head, and took a deep breath.

“I’m not gonna… I’m not gonna let Sensei down!”

“Ugh… You brats! I don’t need any of you! I’m perfect!”

The Shadow thrust its hand forwards. Everything around it burst into flames, the room lighting up like an arsonist’s dream. Chie screamed and leapt backwards as far as she could, barely making it out of the way of the flames. Susano-O started instinctively trying to blow the flames out. It didn’t really help. Chie cracked her knuckles. Suzuka Gongen copied her, and sent a strike of ice right at the shadowy Yukiko below the platform. Shadow Yu barely noticed it, but the false Yukiko could take no more. She crumbled into dust. The platform overbalanced, nearly dropping the Shadow onto the floor. The figures of Rise and Naoto moved forwards to take the weight.

Yosuke counted the order of the Shadows in his head, and sighed.

“Ted, you might wanna get outta the way…”

Shadow Yu grinned. Lightning rained down all around them. Yosuke twisted out of the way, but
Teddie didn’t react quickly enough, being thrown across the room. Ameterasu’s healing light reached him just before he hit the wall. He sank to the floor, seeing stars. The Shadow laughed, and an aura of power filled the room.

“Watch out! It’s got a higher critical rate! And a whole lot of lightning! And no weaknesses…”

Yosuke dashed to the back of the room to join Teddie, hopefully out of range of the Shadow’s wrath. Kanji – who had managed to totally ignore the lightning – glared at the Shadow.

“I ain’t interested in relivin’ this,” he said. “Screw you!”

Take-Mikazuchi rose into the air and decked the Shadow in its cracked face. The Shadow yelled in pain, swinging its club to hit Take-Mikazuchi. Before it could hit him, though, Sukuna-Hikona soared into the sky and rained Megidola down upon the Shadow. Yukiko ran over to Teddie, taking advantage of the distraction to pull him to his feet.

“You two should stay back here,” Yukiko said. “I’m not sure how much you can do…”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that one. Remember last time?”

“I’d rather not…”

“Umm…” Teddie’s pupils had shrunk comically. “Rise-chan! It does something bear-y weird! It can poison the boys, but make all the girls angry!”

“Wait, really?”

As if on cue, the Shadow swatted Sukuna-Hikona away, and murmured something in a voice that was barely audible. Kanji winced as he felt poison flood his bloodstream. Rise sucked in a breath as she watched the poison hit Yosuke and Teddie, too. The Shadow laughed again – it was getting seriously annoying – and power swelled around it. Rise weighed her options.

“Damn it! Hold on, guys!”

Kanzeon raised her arms, and the poison faded away. The boys all breathed sighs of relief. Naoto looked up at the Shadow in confusion, trying to work out which of the two ailments it would try to hit them with. They decided it would probably be rage, and stepped back a little to catch their breath, Sukuna-Hikona following closely behind. Kanji cracked his knuckles next to them, driving Take-Mikazuchi into the Shadow once more. Shadow Yu swatted at Kanji’s Persona with its club, driving him into the wall. Kanji yelped and staggered backwards. Phantom pain was never fun.

Yukiko and Chie stepped forwards into the front lines. Suzuka Gongen and Ameterasu flew forwards, flames bursting into life on the Shadow’s platform as Suzuka Gongen slammed her foot right into its face. The Shadow stumbled, but didn’t fall, and retaliated with a blast of lightning that hit Suzuka Gongen right in the stomach. Chie yelled in pain and dropped to the ground, breathing heavily. Her Persona flickered out of view. Kintouki-Douji flew up to her, restoring her strength the best he could. Shadow Yu’s lips curled back and it roared like a lion. The sound echoed off the walls. Kanzeon’s scanner fizzled for a moment before returning. Rise blinked static out of her eyes and surveyed the damage. Chie, Yukiko and Naoto did not look pleased at all. Ameterasu and Sukuna-Hikona had disappeared, their masters too enraged to focus on them.

“Oh no, snap out of it, you guys! Guys? Oh no.”
With a look of absolute fury, Chie charged up to the Shadow and kicked the false Kanji in the stomach. (The real Kanji winced in sympathy.) Naoto reloaded their gun and immediately started firing at the Shadow on the throne. Teddie looked up at the Shadow nervously, swallowed, and ran into the fray.

“Kintouki-Douji, Amrita!”

A pulse of light shot out from Kintouki-Douji, immediately soothing the three. Chie, who was in the middle of a kick, overbalanced and barely caught herself in time.

“What the – oh. Um, sorry, Kanji-kun…”

“S’alright, Senpai… what’re we gonna do now?”

“I dunno, but I’m heading back out before it can zap me!”

Teddie waddled back to the doors and rejoined Yosuke and Rise. Everyone, the Shadow included, just stared at him for a moment before returning to the fight. Shadow Yu shrugged once Teddie was out of range. Lightning crackled around him once more.

Before the Shadow could strike, though, Suzuka Gongen’s foot slammed right into its face, catching it off-guard and sending it stumbling backwards, right into an inferno that sprang up at its feet. The ceiling lit up, and Sukuna-Hikona dived at the Shadow. This, combined with the earlier damage, was enough to make the shadowy Kanji fade into nothingness. The Shadow’s platform overbalanced dramatically. The figures at the bottom rushed to hold it up.

Shadow Yu straightened up, swatting Sukuna-Hikona away with one hand.

“Don’t you get it? You can’t defeat me. I know everything about you!”

A neon pink aura shimmered around the Shadow, forming into a grid. Yosuke felt dread drop into his stomach. The others save Naoto and Rise were all thinking the same thing. They really hadn’t been able to take out Shadow Rise. Teddie had nearly been killed using that strange power to stop it.

Before anyone could come up with a way to stop the Shadow from scanning them, though, the pink aura flared and blew up in the Shadow’s face. Shadow Yu screamed, stumbling and tottering as the shadowy Rise vanished completely. The Shadow collapsed to the ground, dizzy and confused.

“Wait, what?” Naoto said.

“Oh!” Yukiko gasped. “Yu-kun can’t summon a scanning Persona like Rise-chan can!”

“…Which means his Shadow can’t pretend to be hers,” Yosuke completed. “Huh. If it’s gonna blow itself up, we might as well help it out!”

One oversized cloud of dust later, the Shadow started pulling itself back up furiously. The shadowy Teddie below it was shaking with the effort of staying upright. The false Marie and Naoto were also struggling, though they seemed to have been unharmed by the all-out attack. Yosuke felt all of the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Rise took a deep breath, confirming what they all knew. The Shadow was now imitating Teddie.

“Ugh, this is gonna take forever…”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Naoto said. “Kanji-kun?”
“Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, I get you, Naoto-kun!”

The room around them went dark, clouds of smoke rising up from the ground around the Shadow. An almighty, eldritch roar echoed around the room. Then, the ground split open, bones rising up from it to encase the Shadow as it screamed. As the smoke cleared, the Shadow – now looking extremely worse for wear – glared at the team.

“You… you… this is POINTLESS! I’m better than you… much, much better!”

It raised its club into the air, and shadow energy started to gather around the end.

“Oh no, not this again,” Yukiko said.

“Don’t use ice!” Rise cried. “Seriously, DON’T! But the good news is that we have some time before that attack hits.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Kanji said. “Let’s waste this thing!”

Nobody particularly wanted to argue with Kanji on that front. Naoto looked exhausted, but the others were still doing surprisingly well. Rise wondered for a moment if the Shadow was going easy on them for some reason. Was Yu unwilling to really hurt his best friends? That didn’t exactly sound like a Shadow’s usual behaviour, but somehow, Rise felt like it could be true.

Yukiko stepped back behind the rest of the group, remembering all too well what Shadow Teddie had used in their last battle. Everyone’s Personae gathered above them. Then, on some unspoken agreement, they charged. They didn’t intend to give it the opportunity to use the Nihil Hand. The shadowy Teddie was already buckling under the strain, thanks to Shadow Yu’s attempt to imitate Shadow Rise.

Lightning flashed from Take-Mikazuchi’s bolt, striking the Shadow’s club like a lightning rod. The flash was accompanied by flames bursting into life around the Shadow. (Yukiko wondered, for a moment, if she could just set those shadowy shapes on fire and end this quicker. Unfortunately, they seemed to mostly be ignoring the flames. Somehow. It didn’t make sense. Then again, nothing about this world made sense.) Gales and bursts of light battered Shadow Yu, nearly blowing it over. It soon became apparent, however, that the Shadow was going to survive this onslaught, even if barely.

“Okay,” Yosuke said, “everyone get back, this isn’t gonna work! We’ve just gotta hold on and hope for the best!”

The Shadow’s club came swinging down as the group stepped into defensive positions. Naoto’s heart raced, but the blow seemed to glide right through them. They looked up at Yosuke, confused.

“Yeah, if you prepare yourself it doesn’t hurt at all. No idea why. Anyway…”

Their Personae flew back into action, their attacks colliding with the Shadow as it reeled from its failed blow. To their surprise, the shadowy Teddie disappeared immediately. It had simply given up. The Shadow nearly toppled over completely, but the false Naoto and Marie darted forwards, desperately holding the platform up. Shadow Yu’s breathing had gotten harsh and shaky.

“You… I don’t understand… just DIE!”

Shadow Yu stretched its free hand out, and a pulse of light came from it.

“No more elemental resistances. Watch out! And Yukiko-senpai, remember, fire doesn’t work on this one…”
Naoto stood up straight, tired but still fighting. Sukuna-Hikona glanced at them, then back at the Shadow, before speeding towards Shadow Yu, bringing an almighty attack with it. The blow struck the Shadow in the face, making it stumble. As the light faded, though, Rise noticed something. The Shadow’s face had become even more cracked than before. It was amazing that it hadn’t fallen apart completely. Something was wrong.

That cracked face glared at Naoto. Pain flashed through their body, and they fell to their knees, barely conscious through the pain. Yukiko waved her hand, and strength flowed back into them. Kanji growled and threw his shield at the Shadow, which swatted it out of the way – just in time for Suzuka Gongen to come flying from the other side and kick the Shadow square in its cracked face. The Shadow swung its club around to hit Suzuka Gongen, but Kintouki-Douji caught the blow, and drove the club back into the Shadow itself.

Yosuke cracked his knuckles, and waved at Susano-O. Susano-O pressed its hands together and concentrated (a rare sight for both the Persona and his master). Everyone’s feet immediately felt lighter. Chie dodged out of the way of a blast of fire that the Shadow had launched at her for kicking it. She laughed.

“Thanks, Yosuke! Now let’s finish this before we all run out of fight!”

Kintouki-Douji drove his missile right into the Shadow. The blow knocked the Shadow right into Suzuka Gongen’s blade. To everyone’s surprise, this was somehow enough to make the figure of Naoto disappear. The tiny Marie shifted to the centre of the platform, staggering under the colossal weight. Shadow Yu stared at the group in disbelief.

“Just give up…” it said. “Why are you trying to save me…? You know what I am! Why do you still care about me?!”

The club in its hands started to crackle with a strange, dark energy. Rise felt sick just looking at it. She peered a little closer with Kanzeon’s powers, and immediately felt her heart drop into her stomach. It felt as if every lie Yu had ever told, every moment he’d spent trying to be “perfect”, was coating the club. That kind of despair, that kind of fakery – in a place like this –!

“EVERYONE, GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

The Shadow brought its myriad lies down at the group. Everything went dark, for a moment. Then, a scream cut through the fog-filled air. For a moment, the team thought it was Shadow Yu. But while the voice was similar to the Shadow’s, it was too human, too real, to be –

Oh no.

The darkness cleared. Yosuke couldn’t hold back a yell of horror and surprise. The real Yu Narukami had jumped in between the club and his friends, and was now desperately holding back the blow by himself. He shook under the weight of both the club and his Shadow’s presence. Sweat was coating his face. It honestly looked as if he was about to be cut in half.

“No – no – don’t you dare, you fuckin’ monster, they’re my friends –!”

“Senpai?!” Kanji’s voice was hoarse. “How the hell?!”

“Wha – how is he even conscious?!” Chie yelled. “Oh my god, Yu, get out of there!”

“No!” Yu shook his head. “I – I can’t – I can’t let you guys get killed! It’s my job to protect everyone!”
“Senpai, you blithering fool,” Naoto said, “hasn’t it occurred to you that we might also want to protect you?”

Yu’s legs gave out under the strain. Yosuke ran at him and pushed him out of the way right before the club smashed him into the ground. Yu was breathing so weakly that Yosuke feared for a moment he might have been too late. But the leader of the Investigation Team sat up, shaking but trying to stand. Yosuke grabbed his shoulders, looking right at him.

“Partner,” he said, “you don’t have to be perfect. No one can ever be perfect. What matters is that you do better than the worst you can be! So long as you’re trying to look after people, trying to do the right thing – that’s what really counts!”

Yu shook his head.

“You don’t understand. None of you understand…”

“No one understands,” Shadow Yu said. “No one will ever understand…”

“But we do,” Rise said. “All of us have tried so hard to be someone we’re not, because we thought that’s what people wanted us to be. But we don’t have to be those things. We just have to be ourselves. Everyone’s flawed, and everyone’s scared of those flaws.”

“Sensei… you never did anything but accept us for who we really are. No matter how bad we thought we were, you kept insisting that we were actually good! Sensei, can’t you see that we think the same way about you?”

“Let’s do a count here.” Chie started counting on her fingers. “You do weird crap and never explain it, you ate grass once, I’m pretty sure Teddie said you pushed him over to see if he could fight back, you keep getting involved in everyone else’s business… We’ve never thought you were perfect, you dummy! We only ever thought that you were good! Because nobody is perfect! So when are you going to get that through your head and let us help you like you’ve helped all of us?!”

Yu stared at his friends. They were covered in blood and sweat. Most of them were singed. They were a collection of weirdos and freaks, too strange to fit in even in Inaba. They were all looking at him, nodding and smiling, agreeing with what Chie had said. Above all of them loomed Shadow Yu, barely held up by the Shadow of a strange girl. Yu’s throat was tight; he couldn’t speak. But slowly, he nodded too.

The false Marie collapsed and disappeared. Shadow Yu’s platform crashed to the floor, shaking the factory on every level. It stared at Yu, confused and angry. The Investigation Team got to their feet, resolve hardening.

“I think that counts as down,” Rise said. “Ready?”

One cloud of pink dust later, and Shadow Yu was falling apart, its great form separating into a cloud of darkness that quickly dissipated and vanished. The bancho of the Abandoned Factory remained, standing there, looking at Yu quietly. His face was as blank as ever. Yu got to his feet, shaking.

“I…” He swallowed. “I just… I did a lot of bad shit. I realised too late that it wasn’t gonna make people like me, it just made me a bullying jerk. So I tried to be the good guy, but no one trusted me. My parents hadn’t seen that I was lonely and reached out. They just saw me as a no-good failure.

“And then I ended up here… where no one knows me. You all thought I was awesome. I didn’t want to lose that. I just wanted you all to like me. So I kept trying so, so hard, trying to be better. But, honestly? I kinda miss being the tough guy. I don’t miss hurting people, but being strong, being a
leader, being ‘cool’… I just thought that if I started acting like that again, even if I didn’t hurt anyone, you’d figure out who I used to be and you’d never want to see me again.”

He laughed, but it was hollow.

“All this time getting people to embrace who they really are, and I’ve been trying to be someone I’m not. I just want people to look up to me and like me, that’s all. And if you ever found out the truth about who I’ve been, you wouldn’t do that. But now you know, and… you still tried to save me.”

“Course we did,” Kanji said, “you’re our friend. You saved all of us.”

“Mhm!” Yukiko giggled. “You’re our leader. No, you’re our bancho!”

To everyone’s surprise, Yu burst out laughing. It was rare that he laughed any louder than a chuckle, and he always tried to smother it when he did. The laugh was loud and arrogant, but somehow, it was the most genuine laugh he’d ever laughed. Shadow Yu smiled, its face whole once more.

“Bancho… ha! Yeah, you’re not wrong, Yukiko-san.” He looked up at his Shadow. “Yeah. She’s not. I can’t keep running away from myself any more. Who I’ve been is still who I am… I just need to accept that, and keep trying to be better.”

He stepped forwards and embraced the Shadow.

“You’re me… and… we’re not alone anymore.”

Blue light shone from Shadow Yu, his form disappearing into the light. The light faded, and Izanagi appeared, hovering in the air above his master. Izanagi nodded, and vanished back into the sea of Yu’s soul. Yu felt every one of his Personae reawaken.

He blinked.

“…trust fall.”

“Wha – PARTNER!”

Yu fell over backwards just in time for Yosuke to catch him. He smiled blearily up at his best friend. Exhaustion was written across his face.

“Seriously?”

Yukiko burst out laughing. Everyone else joined in with her as Yosuke helped Yu get back to his feet.

“Okay, we’re getting out of here. Seriously. You need to get some rest, and so does Dojima-san.”

“Yeah, he’s been really worried about you. So has Nanako-chan!”

“Yip!”

The fox burst into the room, several minutes after its presence would actually have been useful. It ran up to Yu and curled around his leg, yipping with relief.

“So has Kitsu-chan,” Teddie said. “Everyone did! So let’s get you home, Sensei!”
Their cover story was an unlikely one, but enough weird things happened around Yu Narukami that it was believed. They’d just found him stumbling blankly around the electronics section at Junes. When they’d tried to see if he was okay, he’d snapped out of whatever stupor he was in. He was unaware of anything that had happened to him.

Dojima had been the first person they’d called. Naoto still had the older detective’s number. The relief on his face when he saw his nephew alive and (mostly) well was a beautiful sight. Yu stumbled into his uncle’s arms, immediately more secure. Adachi – who had tagged along – smiled broadly to see his sort-of friend safe and sound. Even better, he took the team’s story at face value.

Two long weeks passed, the days getting colder as they went, and Yu remained at home the entire time. He had a flood of visitors, though. At least one person from the team went to visit him every single day, while his other friends from school popped by every so often. The team found themselves being repeatedly stopped in the street by strangers who apparently knew Yu – a middle schooler with glasses, a young woman with a kid trailing behind her, an elderly widow, and many others. If Yu Narukami had ever worried about popularity, he certainly didn’t have to now.

On one freezing Monday, the team had met up on the path to school. Yosuke had sworn off his bike for the rest of the winter, not daring to ride that deathtrap in, so they were all on foot.

“I just wish I could ride my scooter in,” he lamented.

“That probably wouldn’t be much safer,” Yukiko said. “Actually, I think it might be even more dangerous…”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said a familiar voice behind them, “you’ve never actually ridden on that bike, have you, Yukiko-san?”

The group turned around so fast that they nearly all slipped on the ground and fell. Yu had caught up to them. He still didn’t look entirely well, but he certainly didn’t look like he’d nearly been killed by a golf club of lies two weeks before. More surprisingly, he was wearing the same jewellery that his Shadow had been. The rings were a little dented, but still wearable, and they glinted in the morning sun.

“Senpai!”

Rise squealed and ran forwards to grab his arm. Yu laughed, more openly than he ever had done before. The others ran up to him, chattering their relief to see him back at school.

“You’re wearin’ that stuff, then?” Kanji asked.

“Is it too much?” Yu’s face fell.

“What? No, it looks great, actually,” Chie said. “I think we’re all just kind of surprised…”

“Well…” Yu pulled his arm away from Rise and nervously fingered his earrings. “I couldn’t make myself get rid of them, even though I was trying to change my image. I finally worked out why. All I ever wanted was to be liked, and I thought that I had to change completely for that. Well, I had to change a bit, obviously – but not all the way. The delinquent bancho, the lonely kid, the Persona-user, the perpetual transfer student… they’re all me. So if I want to wear rough-looking jewellery, why not? Doesn’t change who I am.”

As Yu spoke, he felt his friends’ pride in him for figuring it out. He’d always felt proud of them, every time they’d come a little closer to figuring themselves out. Now he was on the receiving end. It felt good. The Fool within him laughed and grew stronger, knowing that he would never be alone.
“Senpai, I have to ask,” Naoto said as the group started walking to school again, “do you remember much of what happened the morning you disappeared?”

Yu’s brow furrowed.

“I… not really. I set off early to try to dodge that van that Chie-chan had saw, and I decided to text partner to let him know about it… and then… I was in that factory with my Shadow. I think I remember hearing footsteps, but aside from that…”

“Gee,” Rise said, “I was really hoping that we’d get the killer this time.”

“Unfortunately, they’re not like a fictional criminal, who’ll stick to their pattern even if it gets them caught.” Naoto sighed. “They’re a little craftier than that. Oh well; at least the police are going to be looking into this kidnapping, right?”

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There was a knock on Dojima’s office door. The detective scowled, putting down his mug of coffee next to the report on Yu’s disappearance.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Adachi stepped in. The younger detective seemed twitchy. He was keeping a straight face, but it was clear that there was something he desperately wanted to say. Something important.

“Uh, well, Dojima-san… I had a thought about your nephew’s disappearance. It’s probably nothing, though.”

“Spit it out, Adachi.”

“Well…” Adachi took a deep breath. “Your neighbours said they didn’t see any suspicious vehicles, but what if the culprit was driving a vehicle that wasn’t suspicious? You know… a vehicle that no one would be surprised to see?”

Dojima took a swig of coffee and thought it over.

“Satonaka said she saw a weird van…”

“Yeah, but that was in the middle of the night. She said she couldn’t really make out any details of it, right?”

“A van that’s suspicious at night but not if you can see it clearly…” Dojima spluttered on his coffee. “You’ve gotta be… not a delivery van?”

Somewhere deep in Tohru Adachi’s heart, a dark voice laughed and laughed, knowing that it had finally managed to pin the suspicion on the one it had been trying to frame from the start.

Taro Nametame had no idea what was coming.

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