
Kei and Satoshi

Chapter 1 — The Invitation

The room was too quiet for a place where the fate of nations was being decided.

Four chairs formed a circle beneath the vaulted ceiling, each positioned at an equal distance from the table in the centre of the room.

Two men no older than 20 walked into the room, Kei and Satoshi. They each grabbed a chair from the round table and placed them in separate corners of the same wall.

A sign of retaliation and rebellion. They didn't make eye contact for even a second, neither of them wanted to be the first to look at the other.

The room had no decorations. No flags. No symbols of any Kingdom. Whoever had designed this room did not believe in authority through appearance.

At the far end of the chamber stood two men. Both also wearing suits. They appeared to be in their mid-late 20s. They didn't sit nor did they move. They simply watched the actions of Kei and Satoshi with amusement giving off an eerie sensation.

One leaned against the wall with a lazy posture that contradicted the sharpness of his eyes, he looked excited to watch the events that were about to unfold. The other stood straight, hands in his pocket, with an unwavering gaze shifting between Kei and Satoshi. They said nothing, yet the silence bent subtly around them, as if the room itself acknowledged their presence.

Kei knew who they were the moment he saw them.

So did Satoshi.

Neither said their names.
They didn't need to.

"You understand why you're here."

The voice came from the man who had been piercing them with his gaze from his spot on the opposite wall. He spoke calmly, without reverence or threat, as if explaining the weather.

“The first and Second Kingdoms are no longer in a position to refuse us.”

Kei clenched his jaw.

Satoshi didn’t react.

“The Third Kingdom has no interest in open war,” the man continued. “It is inefficient. Unpredictable. Wasteful. Instead, we will proceed with something simpler.”

“A series of games, gambles.”

The word echoed faintly.

Kei felt some irritation rise in his chest. Games. As if lives, borders, and power could be reduced to rules and conditions. But that wasn’t just what Kei felt. A sense of excitement ran through his body like electricity, he would be gambling his own life and the lives of millions of people on games, there was nothing more exciting in his mind.

But behind that excitement was fear. He understood too well the power of the two men opposing him. He knew that him and Satoshi as they were now couldn’t hope to stand against those two.

“Each of you,” the man said, gesturing toward Kei and Satoshi, “will face opponents selected from our Kingdom. Individuals chosen not for strength or power, but for intelligence.”

Kei’s heart, which had previously dropped, felt lighter again. He wouldn’t have to go up against those two. A faint grin grew on his face as the sense of excitement overwhelmed the fear once again.

As for Satoshi, his eyes narrowed slightly but his expression remained unchanged.

“Win,” the man said, “and you earn the right to challenge us for control over the three Kingdoms.”

“And if we refuse?” Satoshi asked.

Before the man could respond, the other man, the one who appeared more carefree finally spoke his first words.

“Then the Third Kingdom advances and we’ll slaughter every single one of you.”

The man said that sentence with an uncanny grin on his face. No malice, no bluffs. Just fact.

Kei understood immediately. They were being treated as pawns, not as rulers, not as heirs, but as tools. Weapons measured for effectiveness.

Satoshi thought of something else.

In the end, if he manages to win these gambles, he’ll have to go up against the two men that stood in front of him. He knew he would have to grow a lot in order to defeat them.

Kei understood that too.

“There are conditions,” the more serious man added. “If neither of you proves yourselves, if both of you lose before getting to face us, the games end. So does the balance of power.”

“And if both of us succeed?” Kei asked.

The man paused.

“Then the two of you will have a final gamble against one another to decide who gets to face us.”

Silence followed.

Kei felt it then, not fear, not anger, but a faint, unsettling pressure. He glanced sideways.

Satoshi was already looking at him. Satoshi looked away first.

Their eyes met for less than a second.

There was no recognition in Satoshi's expression. No warmth. No hostility. Just distance. Calculated, deliberate distance, the kind built over time, not in a moment. But what was behind Satoshi's blank expression?

Kei felt a strange, irrational thought surface.

He hasn't forgiven me.

He didn't know why he thought that, but he did. Something was ingrained within Kei's inner psyche, doubt.

"The rules of the first game will be delivered shortly," the man said. "You will not cooperate. You will not interfere with each other's matches. Each of you will play separately against separate opponents matched specifically against your weaknesses. You will only meet each other again if you both survive all the matches to face off against each other."

Kei exhaled slowly.

"So we're fighting strangers," Satoshi said. "For the sake of people who already have us cornered."

"Yes."

"And you expect us to play honestly?"

The man smiled faintly.

“We expect you to play to win.”

The two men at the back of the room shifted their weight slightly.

Kei felt it then, the unmistakable sensation of being watched not as a person, but as a variable.

Satoshi stood.

“I’ll participate,” he said.

Kei turned sharply. “Satoshi—”

“There’s no alternative,” Satoshi interrupted. His voice was calm, detached, as if this decision had already been made long before today. “And no reason to hesitate.”

Kei searched his face for something, resentment, regret, anything.

There was nothing.

“Good,” the man said. “Then we begin tomorrow. You will each have your first gamble then.”

As they were escorted out through separate doors, Kei felt an old, familiar unease return.

They were being pushed toward the same battlefield again.

And whatever existed between him and Satoshi, whatever had been broken, severed, or buried, had not disappeared.

It was waiting.

Chapter 2 — Thoughts (Satoshi)

When the meeting concluded, Kei and I were each directed to exit through separate doors.

I didn't look back as the door closed behind me.

The corridor was narrow, illuminated by evenly spaced lights that gave off no warmth. The walls were smooth, and polished. Every step I took created a loud echo throughout the room. Whoever built this place didn't expect hesitation.

That was fine.

Hesitation was inefficient.

I stopped when I reached the end of the corridor. A screen flickered to life in front of me, displaying a single line of text.

FIRST GAME: BLIND AUCTION

Below it, was an assigned location and time.

'Please be in the second ballroom at 10AM tomorrow.'

I exhaled quietly and leaned against the wall. The faint hum of the building filled the silence.

The players would be random. That much had been made clear.

The opponents I'll face in the next gamble will be people with no particularly special traits.

Variables with no shared history, no shared incentives. They would be easy to take care of.

Those two warned me of one of the players before I left the room. A person with the surname Akuma. I wasn't sure whether they were male or female but my mind instantly assumed they were a male. That was definitely a flaw I had to fix.

It looks like he'll be the main opponent of my next challenge, the one who is meant to oppose me in intelligence. But in the end, for me, he would be easy to take care of.

No matter how much they try to make him appear intelligent, in the end, he's just a random person that I'll need to defeat.

Random people were easy.

Predictable.

What wasn't predictable was Kei.

I dismissed the thought immediately.

Kei was irrelevant to the game. We weren't cooperating. We weren't competing. Whatever existed between us had no bearing on the rules.

That was what mattered.

Still, the image lingered in my mind, the brief moment in the chamber when Kei had turned toward me, eyes searching for something I had no intention of offering.

I hadn't planned that reaction. It irritated me.

I straightened my posture and eliminated the thoughts from my mind.

Shortly after, the screen moved back into the ground and the rest of the hallway opened up to me revealing a room at the end of it.

But I didn't move, I stood frozen for a second. Frozen in thought.

My mind drifted despite myself, not to memories, but to patterns. Old habits resurfacing. The instinct to account for a variable that no longer existed.

If Kei were here, he would—

No.

I closed my eyes briefly, then opened them.

Kei wasn't here.

And if he was… it didn't matter.

I began slowly walking towards the bedroom at the end of the hall.

This game wasn't about proving anything. It wasn't about rivalry, or recognition, or settling anything left unfinished.

It was about survival.

I smiled faintly.

That, at least, was simple for someone like me, a survivor.

Chapter 3 - Thoughts (Kei)

I waited until I was alone before letting my shoulders drop.

The room I'd been escorted into was large and cold. A table stood at the center, perfectly centered, with a chair facing a wall-sized screen and a bed in the edge of the room. No windows. No distractions.

It felt like a test chamber.

I sat, clasping my hands together, and stared at the blank screen.

Gambles.

The word still annoyed me.

Not because it was inaccurate, but because it was insufficient.

Gambles implied fairness. Structure. The illusion that intelligence alone determined outcomes. I knew better. I'd learned that lesson early.

The screen activated without warning.

FIRST GAME: The Impossible Infiltration

I leaned forward, reading carefully.

I didn't get a rule overview, all I got was the name of the gamble, the location, the time and a request.

I was told I could bring along a bag with up to 5kg worth of anything I deem necessary to bring along.

I was also told that my opponent is Ishida Chihiro, I instantly recognized that name. Ishida was a world renowned young scientist from the Third Kingdom. A true prodigy.

It was also apparent that Ishida was given a great advantage, he was told the rules of

the game already, meaning, he could bring along some items that would help him win the game.

I exhaled slowly.

“Ishida, huh? A prodigy even greater than myself.” I muttered.

My fingers tightened slightly then I leaned back and closed his eyes.

For a brief moment, I imagined what Satoshi would do if he had this game.

Not what he would think, how he would respond.

That calm. That immediate acceptance. The way he always seemed to arrive at conclusions before I finished considering the question.

I opened my eyes.

Stop.

There was no reason to think about him. Not now. Not here.

All I had to do was to outsmart the system.

Still, the memory of our brief exchange in the chamber refused to fade. The way Satoshi had agreed without hesitation. The way he hadn’t looked back.

I felt a familiar pressure settle in my chest.

I told myself it was frustration, at the situation, at the manipulators behind it, at the absurdity of being forced into this.

But deep down, I knew it wasn’t.

I forced my focus back to the present. If I let my mind drift then I wouldn’t be able to win this gamble.

If this was a test, then I would treat it like one.

After all, I’ve always been good at those.

The timer was counting down the final seconds and finally the screen went blank again.

I felt an eerie feeling about this. This isn't just about winning games. There was more to this. Something those two want to see, something they want to achieve.

And whatever it was, it had something to do with the fact that Satoshi was here too.

I clenched my fists and leaned forward.

This time, I won't misread the situation. I will win through my own strength, I can't keep relying on him. One day, I will stand as his equal.

Even if I didn't yet know how achievable that goal really was.

Chapter 4 - The Blind Auction (Satoshi)

I woke up the next day with a blank expression. For a second, I thought all that happened was a dream. But as I looked around my room, I saw the blank and empty room that I had seen yesterday.

It was real. All that happened yesterday was real. I couldn't be sure but at that moment of realization, I believe a faint grin appeared on my face. I'd finally get the chance to prove my worth.

I went to the castle's second ballroom at 10AM as I was instructed for the first game. The ballroom was completely empty, no chairs, no tables, nothing. There was a giant chandelier in the centre of the roof that took up over half the roof. There were also 4 white marble pillars in each corner that spanned to the high ceiling of the room.

And on the far right wall, there was a large screen and an interesting looking man standing in front of it. Behind him were about 10 men in suits standing to the sides of the screen, they quickly drifted into the background. They were so still that they appeared to be statues.

The man in the center of those men, standing in front of the large screen is Enforcer Tatsumi.

Enforcers are a group of specialized people in the Third Kingdom that serve the purpose of overseeing gambles and ensuring that the loser pays the price, even if that price is their life.

In front of Tatsumi was an emptied tall vault with a few tablets stacked upon one another.

As I was observing the area, people began entering the room at a pretty steady rate. That kept happening until there were 8 people gathered in the ballroom including me.

Tatsumi began walking back and forth for a bit scanning all of our faces and expressions. He appeared amused seeing the fear in some eyes and the confidence in others.

He introduced himself as Enforcer Tatsumi. He explained that he was appointed as the overseer of this game and that he will ensure that the game goes smoothly.

He then explained the game and its rules, the game I'll be playing today is The Blind Auction.

Game Title: The Blind Auction

The Objective:

Be the last player remaining in the ballroom.

Initial Setup:

- **Players:** 8
- **Starting Capital:** 50 Digital Coins per person.
- **The Virtual Vault:** An encrypted folder on each player's tablet.

The Phase Structure

Each round consists of two distinct time periods:

1. The Investment Phase (10 Minutes)

Players decide how many of their coins to move from their active wallet to their virtual vault on their fingerprint specific tablet.

- You must deposit at least one coin into your vault each round.
- You may only deposit coins into your virtual vault once per round.
- You may not remove any coins placed in your virtual vault till the gamemaster moves them back to the active wallet when the round ends.

2. The Auction Phase (20 Minutes)

Using their remaining coins (those in the active wallet), players can choose to bid on a vault through their tablet.

- A player doesn't know how many coins are in anyone else's virtual vault.
- You may place only **one bid per vault** per round.
- The highest bidder "wins" the contents of that vault. If two players bid the same amount then the one that bids first, takes it.

3. **The Transfer Protocol:** At any time during the Auction Phase, a player can initiate a **"Gift."** They enter an amount and a recipient's ID. Both must tap "Accept" for the coins to transfer.

The Payout Mechanics

This is how the digital coins are redistributed at the end of the round:

- The owner of a vault receives **all coins bid on it**, regardless of whether the bids were winning or losing. (If three people bid 10 coins each for your vault, you gain 30 coins).
- **The Winner's Reward:** The highest bidder receives the total amount of coins that were **inside** the vault they won.
- **The "Solitary" Bonus:** If a vault receives **zero bids**, the coins inside are multiplied by **2 times** and returned to the owner.

Elimination Rules

At the end of each round, a leaderboard displays the total coin counts of all players.

1. **Anonymity:** All names on the leaderboard remain hidden. A player only knows where they are placed on the leaderboard and where the last place is on the leaderboard.
2. **The Drop:** The player(s) at the bottom of the leaderboard are immediately eliminated. Their coins are awarded to the player that was in the place before last.
3. **The Total Wipeout:** If all players have an equal number of coins, **everyone** is in last place and all 8 players are eliminated simultaneously.

4. Physical Violence is strictly prohibited and any act of violence will lead to an elimination.
5. Players must place at least 1 coin in their vault each round.
6. Players aren't allowed to leave the ballroom till the gamble is declared over.

Referee Tatsumi then announced that each of us will be given a nickname to make things simpler. As soon as I heard that, I realized that I was in a very disadvantageous position.

Under normal circumstances, I expected them to give us each person's name. But since they're using nicknames, I won't know which of the 7 Akuma is, but he most definitely knows who I am. Luckily, my preparations were successful, they will at least allow me to even the playing field.

Tatsumi then pointed at us one by one and assigned us a nickname. As he was announcing them, I analyzed the situation and everyone looked to be around my age, about 21 years old.

The first one he pointed to was assigned the name 'Glasses', he looked like a nerd who probably studies in a good university, maybe the reason he's here is to get enough money to cover his student loans but there's no way to be sure. There's always the possibility that he could be Akuma disguising himself as a nerd.

Next, he pointed to a very chubby man who looks like he hasn't worked out a day in his life, he was assigned the fitting name of 'Fatso'. A cold read of him would suggest that he's a slob who is gluttonous. This will mean his playstyle will likely be a mix of safety and greed. But since he doesn't look too smart, he'll probably be safe in the wrong moments and greedy in the wrong moments.

Next was a girl who couldn't be taller than 4 '11 or 150cm so she was assigned the name 'Dwarf'. She appeared to be pretty shy, probably bullied for most of her life. She probably won't make any bonds with the other players which could potentially turn advantageous for her in the right situation.

Then he pointed to me and assigned me the name "Wise", that nickname was the worst outcome for me. There was a small chance that Akuma also didn't know which one I was but my nickname allows Akuma to confirm that I'm Satoshi even if he somehow didn't know previously. (This is because Satoshi means wise in Japanese.)

Next he pointed to a good looking guy and he was given the name 'Slim'. He doesn't look like he was a jock in high school but he doesn't look unpopular either. Probably a pretty calculating and averagely popular guy. A jack of all trades that's friends with everyone and also friends with no one.

Next he pointed to a guy who looked pretty ordinary except for the fact that he was wearing a jacket which is pretty abnormal since it's the middle of summer now so he was given the nickname 'Jacket'. He looks like a relatively normal person, he was probably the one that sat in the corner of classrooms and never interacted with anyone but he still seems to be adept socially.

The last two pointed to were women, one was nicknamed 'Mystic', she wore a long robe with two light scarves around the robe. She looks to be the kind that believes in spirits and seances which is probably why she was nicknamed Mystic. I get a sense of uneasiness from her, she feels suspicious, but she will probably be easily manipulated, I can take care of her.

The other was nicknamed 'Blonde' because she was obviously blonde. Even though I disliked stereotypes and I would've preferred her to be somewhat sharp, she appears to be a dumb blonde that fit the stereotype. Disappointing, but I shouldn't mark her off early on, this could be an act.

After giving everyone a nickname, Tatsumi handed us each a tablet from the vault then disposed of the vault. We each locked in our fingerprints to each of our tablets so that only the person holding the tablet could use their tablet.

Tatsumi then announced the start of the first round shortly after and the deposit option on our tablets lit up brighter than the rest of the tablet.

I clicked on the deposit option to see what would happen and a slider appeared allowing me to choose a number between 1-50. Before deciding on my number, I looked around and tried to figure out which one Akuma was but I had no luck. Maybe if I had their first name then I could narrow down if he was male or female but I had nothing, for now, I'll refer to him as a male unless I find out he's a female.

I really need to figure out which one Akuma is as soon as possible and get him out of the game because I won't be able to take advantage of my preparations if he's constantly watching me.

The clock began ticking down. The main danger was having the least coins but there was another big danger, an unexpected one. The Total Wipeout.

Most would think that the chances of a total wipeout happening were near zero but everyone will be tempted to simply deposit one coin and wait it out for the first round, if everyone did that then we would all lose.

I need to break the equilibrium. Using my main contingency now would be wasteful. Akuma's here, and he'll definitely stop me, it will only work once, I have to save it for a more valuable time. Not knowing who he was complicated things but it didn't paralyze me. Plans exist to be discarded.

I glanced at the tablets. The move here was obvious, a move that will allow me to gain the advantage while also ensuring that the Total Wipeout option doesn't happen.

But I didn't begin using my tablet, I wanted to wait, I wanted to see what the others would do, I also had another goal by waiting.

When there was a minute left, I deposited a single coin, then bid one coin on every vault.

As the time was ticking down and everyone had submitted their bids, everyone was standing in an awkward silence. Blonde was the first to break that silence, she said she had an announcement to the room. She suggested we all work together and then split the reward money in the end.

That allowed me to conclude two things. First, it seemed that the players other than

me and Akuma were incentivized by a large amount of money. Second, Blonde was likely not putting on an act, she was just an idiot. She doesn't understand anything about people. Humans are greedy, regardless of whether the amount is one hundred thousand, one million or even a billion. In the end, a person would betray his comrades just to get a larger split of the money, even if he doesn't need it.

Mystic agreed readily which slowly led the other players to agree. It was only a matter of time before this makeshift alliance was destroyed but I had to pretend to agree so that I wasn't ostracized.

After the auction period ended, the leaderboard updated on the big screen display on the wall. First place had 100 coins, five people had 51 coins, one person had 43 coins and one person had 2 coins. The person at the bottom was revealed to be Mystic by Tatsumi, it seems she put all her coins in the vault and since everyone else has 51 coins, it looks like I took first place and took her coins.

I then went to check my tablet to confirm that I'm in first place but I'm not. I'm in the place before last, I have 43 points. How did this happen? If I have 43 coins then that means that I didn't win any vault. It had to be Akuma. He bid one coin on every vault before me.

Well, it seems like my plan's a success, but that wasn't a good thing. The upside is I now know who Akuma is, even though everyone tried hiding their entry, only one person used their tablet for an extended period of time, the person that bid one coin on every vault, in other words, Akuma.

But the big disadvantage is obvious, I'm in the place before last. I'm at huge risk of elimination. I could've activated my plan as soon as the round started then observed the others after making the bids but I didn't. I did that because I wanted to test my opponent.

I knew that those two wouldn't send the most intelligent opponents at the beginning of the series of gambles so I decided to put myself in a disadvantaged position to see if I can get myself out of it.

This was all for long term growth, even if I win this gamble, I'll inevitably lose against those two if I don't grow.

This guy seems to be quite cunning nonetheless. And my reward for being in the place before last was a mere 2 coins because Mystic only had 2 coins. Something was off though, why does Akuma have 100 coins? He should have 99 coins right about now, I see, he must've —

My thinking was interrupted by a sudden unexpected movement. There were about 10 men in suits who had been standing completely still this whole time behind Tatsumi, but then suddenly, one of them moved. As I watched him move towards Mystic, I assumed he'd escort her out of the ballroom but I couldn't be farther from the truth.

When he got a few feet away, he quickly and effectively unholstered a gun tucked in his pants that was covered by the suit blazer. Without a moment of hesitation, he shot Mystic in the middle of her forehead then another one of the men in suits moved and they carried her out of the room.

The sound of the gunshot echoed loudly through the empty ballroom. Screams came from many corners of the room. Glasses fell to his knees. Blonde was just crying in her place. Fatso was in pure shock and Dwarf was clearly taken aback. Jacket and Slim appeared to have nearly no reaction.

I also initially didn't react but I then remembered the importance of fitting in. I wouldn't want to be an outsider so I pretended to be sad as well.

While pretending to be sad, I formed a theory about Mystic's death but it wasn't relevant to the gamble.

Everyone was horrified at this sight but I don't feel a thing. After separating from Kei, I hoped I had some emotion left that I was masking but when I didn't feel a hint of fear or shock at the death of someone right before my eyes, I accepted the truth, I have become detached from humanity. If there was one emotion I was feeling, it was hatred, hatred towards myself.

I needed to win this but I was already in an awful position. I had to stop thinking about my overwhelming hatred for myself and to him, I shifted my thought to what's important, I had to come up with a strategy to get myself out of this position.

This is exhilarating, winning this game on equal footing would've been boring, it's only when you're being pushed to the edge and are forced to claw back up to survive that you feel the most excitement.

Luckily, this death has provided me with an opportunity that I didn't have previously. An opportunity to turn the tables around.

I used the chaos of Mystic's death to slip away to the pole in the corner of the room making it seem like I was sad about her death and needed some space. But in reality, this was to use my secret weapon, let's go back in time for a second.

Yesterday, after the quick overview of the rules, I came up with a plan to give me an advantage in the next game. I was given the name of the game, The Blind Auction. This clearly implies that the game will contain an asymmetry of information. So if I managed to cure my blindness in such a game, I would be an unstoppable force.

Then yesterday, I pretended to be a cleaning crew employee and planted a mini 4k camera onto the chandelier located in the middle room. With this camera, I will become a god-like existence in this gamble and look down on all of the other players.

But I couldn't keep the display screen. I predicted that they would confiscate all devices before the gamble started and I was correct, before we entered the ballroom, they conducted a thorough search on each of us and removed all electronic devices. This is why I planted the display tablet within a crack in the pole that's in the corner of the room. The corner I was now next to.

I could now know how much everyone places in their vault in the next round and how much they would bid. Even though everyone now wants to avoid last place, after seeing Mystic get shot, they know that they need to end the game in first place or they'd die.

They're still going to be cautious because the immediate threat of going to last place and losing is death. They're all frightened. But they also know they need to get to first and that someone was too far ahead of the rest of us. They need to take risks whether they like it or not.

There would've usually been one issue though, Akuma. He would've definitely noticed me looking at the display tablet and would get it removed after I use it for one round but Mystic's death allowed me an opportunity to disguise my plan.

I went to the pole in the corner, grabbed the display tablet from the crack in the pole, and waited for everyone to be looking away then I quickly placed it on top of my auction tablet.

After that, I sat on the ground appearing afraid and sad about Mystic's death. I put my face in my knees and the plan was complete.

I can now look into the display tablet for many rounds without being suspected, and when I am stopped, it will be too late, I will be too far ahead. This game will be my victory.

There was a fear of being disqualified, of course, but in reality, I didn't break any rules and if this game is truly fair, I won't be penalized for my actions.

First round leaderboard summary (for readers):
Akuma: 100 coins
Others: 51 coins.
Satoshi: 45 coins (gained 2 from Mystic who was in last place)

I stayed in my corner and as I was observing everyone's tablet, I could see that Akuma had 100 coins in his active wallet. My one issue, the one thing that could've defeated me was the lack of information on Akuma's identity, but now that I know who he is, there are no more variables out of my control, I have become the god of this auction.

I've also learned something valuable from Akuma, the idea that one can bet on themselves. I noticed it when the leaderboard was revealed at the end of the round, if

Akuma really bet on everyone's vault except his own, he would've had 99 coins and I would've had 46.

For some reason, that idea never crossed my mind. It's very simple and not very effective but I should've still thought of it, I've found another flaw I need to fix.

My thoughts were interrupted by a cleaning crew that came in to clean the remains of Mystic's body and nearly everyone looked shocked. I can imagine the thoughts circulating through their minds. She was a person, a living being interacting with us and talking to us, but now she's dead and no one even knew her name.

Before the round began, Glasses was about to run out of the ballroom but then the shy Dwarf screamed at him and told him to stay. She reminded him it was against the rules to leave, he would be killed.

The normally shy Dwarf then requested everyone's attention to say something. She said, "it is unlikely we will be able to get out of this. This means, all of us will die except one, that's the harsh reality. So let's at least learn each other's names, that way, we can at least die as humans, not pawns."

Some people wanted to speak up but everyone was hesitant and in the end no one responded to her plea. The reality had sunk into everyone's mind, it was either them or nobody. Everyone was an enemy, they had to survive.

A silence fell over the room once more, but this time, it wasn't an awkward silence, it was a silence that was brewed by fear.

Referee Tatsumi was the one that interrupted that silence "Did you all seriously believe that you could have gotten a 50 Million Yen prize without risk? How naive can you be? All of you are horrible human beings that deserve this.

Mystic was a pseudopsychic that's sole purpose was grabbing money. She was paid 1 Million Yen by a husband who requested that she give his wife a depressing psychic reading. His unstable wife then killed herself shortly after that psychic reading and he got to keep her massive wealth.

All of you have stories like this. Jacket's greed led to the death of 3 people. Glasses led his mother to a coma. Fatso led his father to death by overexertion. Wise led to the death of many due to his inaction. Dwarf left her closest friend to die because she never spoke out. Blonde and Slim both led to the ruin of their families due to their indifference to anyone but themselves.

Yes, one of you will obtain the massive sum of 50 Million Yen, but the rest of you will all die."

Everyone was shaking uncontrollably without exception. I should've been shaking the most, I was certain that what I had done was much more awful than the rest of them. After all, my inaction led to the death of hundreds of thousands, not just one or two people.

But I only shaked for a few seconds, I then quickly suppressed my emotions, survival is what matters now, nothing else.

After the cleaning crew got done with cleaning the remains of Mystic, the next round began. During the investment phase, I was able to see how much everyone placed in their vault. Fatso transferred 33 coins to his, Glasses transferred 8, Dwarf transferred 1, Slim transferred 1, Blonde transferred 15 and Jacket transferred 1. After watching all of that, I transferred 1 to mine and in the auction phase, I instantly bid 1 on it.

After that, the auction phase began. Jacket instantly bid 49 coins on his own vault. A safe move, no one could outbid him on his vault, this way, he guarantees not to lose any coins and he'd gain any coins bid on his vault. He then bid 1 coin on everyone else's vaults.

Yes, Jacket is Akuma.

Fatso was braver than I expected. And by brave, I mean stupid. He seriously put 33 in his vault. It seems like the fear really got to him. It was obvious that he's one to make wrong decisions from the start, this bid has definitely sealed his fate.

I watched as Fatso bid 7 coins on Jacket's vault and 11 coins on Glasses's vault. A very random split with likely no meaning behind it. Slim didn't make any bids. Blonde bid 5 on Fatso's vault, seems like she has a basic sense of reading body language. Glasses didn't make any bids, it seems he placed 8 coins in his vault because that way he'd still have 43 coins and would be above me. And finally, Dwarf also didn't place any bids.

As I was calculating the numbers to see how much I would bid on each of them, I received a gift request from Jacket, he was trying to send me 1 coin. Attached to the gift was a message, I accepted the gift to see the message.

It said, 'Yo, Satoshi ~ Akuma Ryo'. I quickly switched to my display tablet and saw Jacket staring directly at the camera in the chandelier and waving. This allowed me to confirm that Jacket was definitely Akuma but this was bad, really bad.

How did he figure it out so quickly? How did he notice the camera? And more importantly, why hasn't he told the guards to take it down yet? Did he notice it from the start? Did he fake confirming his bids? Did he not actually bid 1 on each person? Did he not actually bid 49 on his own?

My mind was racing with possibilities, it couldn't differentiate the truth from the lies. Did I really see him clicking confirm or not? I don't know anymore. Who is this guy? Who is Akuma Ryo?

I couldn't allow myself to lose rationality. I'll play this right.

The question is, why doesn't Akuma tell the Enforcer about the camera? There can only be one answer, he knows that I'm intelligent, he knows that I'll think that he never clicked confirm on his bids, but he could've also factored in the fact that I would think that into his plan.

Put simply, this could be a single bluff, a double bluff, a triple bluff and so on. I'll never find the end of the circle. I'll trust my instincts, I'm fairly certain I saw him confirming, I decided that Akuma messed up, he noticed the camera too late and he tried saving himself by leading me to believe that he never actually pressed confirm, so I made my bids. I bid 2 coins on Blonde's vault and 6 coins on Fatso's vault.

After the auction phase ended, the leaderboards were revealed. First place had 101 coins, second had 86 coins, third had 57 coins, fourth had 51, fifth had 51, sixth had 34 and last had 20. The last place was revealed to be Fatso and the men in suits began approaching. He cried, begged for mercy. But as the men in suits got closer, fear overcame him, he ran out of the room like a wounded animal then bang, a shot echoed through the hallway into the room.

It seems like there were men stationed outside the room as well to stop any runners, as everyone was in shock, processing the death. Tatsumi exclaimed to the room with a grin on his face "Good thing he ran, that allows us to proceed to the next round without a cleanup"

Everyone was starstruck hearing Tatsumi's words, how can someone be so casual about the death of a human, none of them could understand.

I slowly lifted my head and looked around the room with my real eyes and there I saw Akuma staring directly at me with a wicked expression.

Second round leaderboard summary (for readers)
Akuma (Jacket): 101 coins
Satoshi (Wise): 86 coins
Glasses: 57 coins
Blonde: 54 coins (Got 20 coins from Fatso)
Dwarf: 51 coins
Slim: 51 coins

While the body was being cleaned, Akuma requested to speak to Tatsumi. A minute later, Tatsumi came over to me and confiscated the display tablet that I had returned to the crack in the pole. He also had someone remove the camera from the chandelier, but as expected, I wasn't disqualified, after all, I didn't break any rules.

It seems like I was right though, Akuma didn't notice my camera at the start. I made the right call. But the time he took to notice the camera was still uncannily fast.

But now, the third round was about to begin and I had no more advantages. None of my plans which I had created beforehand would be effective in this situation.

Everyone looked at me with suspicion when they saw the camera and tablet being confiscated but no one had the ability to process everything that's happening and so, no one spoke. This taught me just how powerful fear was. If I can manage to instill fear in my future opponents, it will paralyze them and that will allow me to outmaneuver them.

No wait, that's wrong. Fear only works against low level opponents. Looking at Akuma, he was just as unphased as me. I'm glad I caught that early, if I didn't, I might've tried instilling fear into a future opponent and he would've acted paralyzed by it which would've lulled me into a false sense of victory.

I focused my mind back on the Blind Auction, I need to catch up through pure strategy and adaptability now.

The silence of the ballroom was punctured by a dull, wet thud.

I didn't need to look back to know what it was. The sound of a human body hitting the floor is distinct, it lacks the rigidity of an object, it is the sound of meat and bone losing the will to remain upright. I turned my head slightly. Dwarf laid rigid on the marble floor, her eyes rolled back, her small frame looking more like a discarded doll than a player in a game of life and death.

She had fainted.

Most people would call this a tragedy. They would call it the weight of the situation or unbearable grief. But as I watched her, I didn't feel pity. I only felt a cold, familiar sense of disappointment in human design.

The human brain is often praised as the pinnacle of evolution, but in reality, it is equipped with a pathetic safety feature: the Cognitive Circuit Breaker. When the input of reality, the sight of a bullet entering a forehead, the smell of copper in the air, the crushing weight of impending loss, exceeds the brain's processing capacity, the system

simply pulls the plug. It's a biological mercy. An instinctual flight into unconsciousness to protect the self from a truth it cannot digest.

But there is a darker side to this failure.

For most, when the brain approaches this breaking point, it doesn't shut down. Instead, it sheds its weight. It discards the heaviest, most useless part of the human psyche: Morality.

In such situations, people hurt, torture and kill others without hesitation.

In a stable society, morality is a luxury, a badge the virtuous wear to feel superior to one another. But here, under the white-hot lights of the ballroom, morality is nothing more than a cognitive anchor.

When the ship starts to sink, the evil creatures are simply the ones who were fast enough to cut the rope. They steal, they betray, and they kill not because they are monsters, but because they have optimized their minds for survival.

Dwarf, however, was different.

She was one of those exceedingly nice people. To her, morality wasn't a badge, it was a fundamental part of her operating system. She couldn't discard it. She couldn't turn off the horror of the deaths she's watched or the greed in the eyes of the other players. And because she couldn't shed that weight, her internal pressure rose until the hardware itself failed.

Physiology followed psychology. The debt of her goodness became too expensive to pay, so her body went bankrupt.

I looked away from her motionless form. In this world, being good isn't a virtue, it's a fatal system error.

Kei would have watched her fall and calculated the exact breaking point that led to her neural collapse. Akuma probably watched her fall and saw only an opportunity to take her coins.

And me? I just feel a hollow sort of envy. To be able to shut down, to be able to simply stop perceiving the world when it becomes too much... That's a luxury a fraud

like me can't afford. I'm forced to stay awake. I'm forced to watch the gears turn until the very end.

The third round was beginning. The good were falling, and the monsters were shedding their skins. It was time to see which one I truly was.

Chapter 5 - The Blind Auction Part 2 (Satoshi)

The referee stood over the girl we knew as Dwarf and applied the necessary stimulus for her to regain her consciousness. She had now woken up from a dream back to the nightmare that was this ballroom.

He then announced the start of the third round with the same flat tone he had used to announce every other death sentence tonight.

I watched Akuma move toward her. He didn't rush. He walked with the measured pace of a man who knew exactly how much time he had to play his part. He knelt beside her and began to speak. His voice was a low murmur that seemed to wash away the terror of the previous minutes. From where I stood, I could see his eyes. They were completely vacant. He was performing a surgery of the soul, removing her fear so that he could replace it with his own influence.

It seems he realized it as well, in this ballroom, Dwarf was the easiest character to manipulate and he took advantage of her weakened mental state to brainwash her and make her his own.

After talking to her for a few minutes, Dwarf's eyes calmed down. It seemed Akuma had successfully calmed her into a state of obedience. He then turned to the rest of us and told us all to stop what we were doing. He beckoned everyone to come over and the remaining players moved towards him like moths to a flame.

He began his announcement with a display of false vulnerability. He told everyone that he had been bidding exactly one coin on every vault since the game began. He broke down the logic of the leaderboard, showing them how his consistent one-coin bid had allowed him to rise without drawing blood. He even showed his tablet to prove that he was the player with 101 coins.

The players stared at him with a mix of awe and suspicion. They were beginning to realize that they were participating in a match that functioned on a level far beyond their comprehension.

The silence that followed was broken by the sound of meat and bone hitting stone. Slim had slammed his fist into the wall with a desperation that vibrated through the room. He let out an anguished scream that sounded like a man drowning. He had realized the gravity of the situation. Akuma's speech was not a peace offering. It was a declaration of total control.

By telling everyone that he would bid one coin on their vaults, Akuma had effectively placed a lock on their tablets. If they placed more than one coin in their own vault, they were simply gifting it to him. He had created a psychological stalemate. He had forced Slim and Dwarf to a state where they wouldn't be able to get out of last place. Slim turned to the weeping girl and told her that it was over. He told her they were both dead because they were trapped at the bottom of the well with no way to climb out.

The girl began to sob, a high and thin sound that grated against my nerves. The depositing period ended in a blur of gray light and the bidding period began immediately after. Akuma made a show of his tablet, clicking the screen with enough force for everyone to see that he was fulfilling his promise of the one-coin bid. This was the moment I had been waiting for. I allowed the timer to reach its final seconds before I stepped into the center of the room.

I looked at Akuma and I told him that his performance was almost perfect. I raised my voice so that the players would hear every word of my accusation. I told him that I knew what he was really doing, that the announcement was a distraction to make everyone think his vault was a one-coin safety zone.

The fact that he had been placing one coin on his own vault every round ended up serving a second purpose; it showed the players the futility of bidding on Akuma's vault. I claimed that he had actually hidden his entire fortune in his own vault to trigger the solitary bonus and double his money.

I watched the players' eyes widen. I told them that I bid one coin on Akuma's vault as soon as the bidding round started. I told him that his greed had blinded him and that all of his coins now belonged to me. The mask of the devil shattered in an instant.

Akuma looked like a man who had just seen his own executioner. His face went pale and his shoulders slumped. I offered him a way out. I told him that I would spare him enough coins to stay alive if he prostrated before me and begged for mercy.

He did not hesitate. His pride vanished as he dropped to the marble floor. He pressed his forehead against the ground at my feet. The sight of it was intoxicating. I felt the weight of my victory as Tatsumi told us to settle down for the leaderboard announcement. But then, a low sound began to crawl out of his throat. It was a laugh.

He stood up slowly and his eyes were glowing with a terrifying intensity. He told me that I was an idiot and that I had walked into his trap. He pointed to the large screen on the wall as it flickered to life. The leaderboard appeared in stark white numbers.

The first place player had eighty five coins. The second place player had eighty three coins. Every other player in the room was tied at exactly fifty eight.

Akuma began to celebrate his genius with a jagged and manic energy. He believed he was the one in second place. He believed he had used me as a buffer to keep himself in the bounty position while the others died.

I waited for his laughter to peak before I turned my tablet toward him. I showed him the number on my screen. I had eighty three coins. I was the second place player. The silence that followed was more absolute than anything I had ever experienced. The joy in his face died and was replaced by a raw, naked state of despair.

He went through a cycle of frantic denial, his hands shaking as he tried to find a flaw in the math, but there was none. He eventually accepted the reality of his own destruction. The four players were escorted toward the back of the ballroom by the guards. I heard the girl's screams fade as the doors closed behind them. Their entire coin pool was transferred into my account. I now held three hundred and fifteen coins. Akuma held eighty five.

The game was over. There was no way for him to bridge a gap of that size in a single round. He walked toward the exit with the look of a ghost. He stopped at the door and asked me the only question that mattered to him. He asked me why he had lost.

I told him the truth. I told him that he had misjudged the person standing across from him. I told him that if he had actually respected my mind, he would have known that I would see through a strategy of that level. His only mistake was the arrogance of thinking he was the smartest person in the room. He heard my words and a satisfied expression settled on his face.

"I thought as much" He said, and then he stepped out into the hallway. A moment later, two gunshots rang out and the sound of a body hitting the floor echoed back into the ballroom.

Tatsumi announced my victory and I was led away from the smell of blood and marble. I had won, but as I walked through the halls, I realized that the only reason I survived was because I was willing to become exactly what I hated.

Chapter 6 - The Blind Auction Part 2 (Tatsumi)

A few days ago, those two told me that I would be the one overseeing an interesting gamble, I doubted it. The interest I previously found in overseeing gambles had been lost after witnessing the gamble between those two.

It was a spectacular game, the intelligence that was displayed could never be replicated. I believed I would never oversee a gamble that interesting ever again.

After being given the strengths and weaknesses of the main players, I decided on the gamble, I would host The Blind Auction.

After everyone gathered in the ballroom, I gave them their nicknames and announced the start of the first round. The game looked like it would be just as boring as any other and after the first round ended, my suspicion was confirmed.

After seeing the results, the strategies that were used were very apparent. Akuma and Satoshi had both decided to bid one coin on every player's vault, Akuma was a bit more cunning and also placed a one coin bet on his own vault but still, it was all so boring.

Even though the strategy was not something an average person would come up with, it was nothing impressive. They both did the same thing but Akuma was faster. Akuma had the upper hand and it looked like the game would go on in a pretty normal fashion.

Then after we executed Mystic, most of the room was shaken. What confused me was how shaken Satoshi was. From my analysis of his character, he didn't seem to be the kind to be this deeply affected by the death of someone he only recently met. I wanted to believe he was acting but it appeared too convincing.

After the next round had ended, and the results were sent to me, things were shocking. Satoshi had managed to win all of the important vault by a narrow margin. He somehow managed to find out everyone's bid and go one over it. I immediately

began to look around and I saw a tiny camera placed upon the chandelier in the middle of the room.

This was an interesting turn off events and I couldn't interfere. The game rules don't say anything about having a camera so I let it be. Akuma was staring intently at me while I was scanning the room. It seems I made a mistake, I gave away too much by simply looking.

Akuma later came to me after the round and told me that there was a camera and requested for it to be taken down, I couldn't refuse. This game really was turning out to be interesting, Satoshi's idea to plant a camera in the room and the execution required to make it happen within 24 hours was definitely impressive. Akuma's ability to notice the camera simply by observing my behavior was even more impressive.

I wondered what would happen next. At this point, Akuma was still in the lead with 101 coins, Satoshi had 86, the other 4 players had 57, 54, 51 and 51. The situation seemed to be pretty even and I was looking forward to seeing what strategies Satoshi and Akuma would show me next.

Akuma then spoke up, he told everyone what had happened in the first two rounds, why the results ended up that way. It was certainly not a bad idea, by doing that, Akuma effectively created a stalemate where no one would place large amounts in their vaults and no one would bet.

A stalemate was useful for Akuma, he was in the lead and he could maintain that with a stalemate. Well, that would be true if the rule of the player before last getting the last player's points didn't exist.

In reality, that strategy was awful. I began to theorize what his real purpose would be and after seeing the results at the end of the round, I immediately understood what had happened, why the game ended that way, why Satoshi was able to win the game.

After Akuma made his announcement, the other player's actions were predictable. Everyone would place one coin in their vault and not make any bets. Akuma bet 1 coin on his own vault after placing one coin in it, 1 on the player with 57, 4 on the player with 54 and 7 on each of the players with 51.

He had predicted Satoshi betting one coin on every vault and had predicted that Satoshi would also place one coin in his own vault.

This would've put Akuma at 85 coins, all the other players at 58 coins and Satoshi at 83 if Akuma also bet one coin on Satoshi's vault, but instead, Akuma bet 3 coins on Satoshi's vault. This would put Satoshi at 85 and Akuma at 83 so he would get all the coins in the other player's vaults.

This was a truly masterful strategy, a strategy that involved a great deal of ability to think of and Akuma managed to do that in a few minutes.

It seemed like Akuma's win was assured, he would win with 315 coins against Satoshi's 85. But in the end, Satoshi was the one with 315 coins, Satoshi was the one who won.

I thought that was because Satoshi perfectly read Akuma's strategy and countered it. Part of it was true, Satoshi knew what Akuma was trying to pull and so he placed 3 coins into his own vault rather than 1. That way, Akuma would end up being the one with 85 coins instead.

But the reason wasn't because Satoshi had read Akuma's strategy. When I asked Satoshi about it as I was escorting him back to his room, he told me that for him, it was a strategy he had already come up with himself.

He had thought of that strategy as he was reading the rules to the gamble. He didn't use it because he determined that Akuma was too much of a threat and that he would see through this strategy. Akuma's mistake was underestimating his opponent, just as Satoshi said.

The reason Akuma felt that this strategy would work is likely due to Satoshi's shortcoming in the first round leading Akuma to believe that Satoshi wouldn't be capable enough to deduce the strategy within the narrow time frame.

I then asked him why he only placed 3 coins in his own vault. If Akuma had decided to be safe and bet more on Satoshi's vault then he would've lost. Satoshi then told me that if he did that, then it wouldn't be a gamble, his win would be certain. He wanted that thrill, wanted that uncertainty.

He had read Akuma's personality perfectly and knew that Akuma would try to win in the most impressive way possible but it backfired on him. In the end, Satoshi won in that impressive way.

As I was thinking about the way this gamble played out, Satoshi looked directly at me and spoke to me, he said "I can see that you yearn for the thrill of watching these games of life and death. I'll give you that, today was simply the entrance exam, if you keep watching over me, I'll show you exactly what you want to see, I'll show you the true thrills of a gamble that you've never seen before."

He was clearly trying to get me as his ally, and it might just work, but it was still too early to tell. His confidence was certainly impressive but Satoshi still had to grow a lot to be able to stand against those two, it seems like I won't be short of interesting gambles for some time now.

Chapter 7 - The Impossible Infiltration (Kei)

Over the 3 days I was given before the start of the gamble, I prepared adequately. Then on the morning of the fourth day, I was sitting on the chair staring at the door and waiting for a knock.

My mind drifted, I was overwhelmed with thoughts. Thoughts about the future, thoughts about my abilities and the most dominant thoughts were about Satoshi.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud thud on the door. When I opened the door, a tall and slender man with messy black hair wearing a tailored black suit with a fitted white shirt walked in.

He introduced himself as Referee Shidou, he told me that he'd accompany me to the boat that would take us to the location of this gamble, Fukusen Island.

I didn't care to hear any of his words, there was one thought overcoming my mind, one question I had to ask. But before I had the chance to ask it, he spoke again and answered the question that was on my mind.

He told me that Satoshi already had his first gamble and he had won an overwhelming victory.

As expected, I thought to myself. I couldn't fall behind now, I had to win my gamble as well, I can't lose this early.

I went along with Shidou and we sat in the back of a limousine in silence. After arriving at the dock, there was an average sized boat ready to take me to Fukusen Island.

I boarded the boat thinking I would meet Ishida there but it seems like he's on another boat, it looks like I'll have to wait till I arrive at the island for us to meet.

I got some sleep since I hadn't slept in 3 days and a few hours later, we arrived at the island.

It was a huge island off the coast of the Third Kingdom and in the middle of it was a gigantic facility.

This facility was a very well known facility throughout the Third Kingdom, it was the place where all of the Kingdom's electricity goes through before reaching the Kingdom. They also recently installed a wing where all of the internet providers of the Kingdom were told to route their internet through.

This facility allowed the internet to be amplified numerous times before reaching the consumer so the Kingdom's internet was now more organized and powerful.

Normally, no man would be able to get on this island without an army. The island has a great deal of security and any boat that goes within 1km of the island is instantly shot down unless one of those two allow it through.

The only reason we were able to get on this island is because those two allowed it. Once I got off, I was directed by Referee Shidou towards the facility.

As we got closer, we stopped a short distance away from it and a few minutes later, two people arrived. One was Ishida, the prodigy scientist; he was also accompanied by a man in a suit like Shidou's, another referee probably.

After they got to us, me and Ishida shook hands and the referee accompanying Ishida left the way he came from.

I put down my bag on the floor as it seemed like the explanation would drag for some time, I then said while yawning "These bags really start weighing on you over time". Ishida then also followed suit and placed his bag on the floor.

Then, Referee Shidou spoke up, he told us that he would be the referee for this game. He then began to explain the rules after giving us each a keycard with our name on it.

Game Title: The Impossible Infiltration

Referee: Shidou
Players: 2
Participants: Kei, Ishida Ishigami
Location: Fukusen Island

Background Information (Disclosed)

- The island houses a central facility through which the Third Kingdom's electricity and internet infrastructure is routed.
- The island is protected by armed security personnel and automated detection systems.
- The staff and security forces are not informed of the game.
- Any unauthorized activity may result in detainment or lethal force if deemed necessary.

Initial Setup

- Both players are granted conditional authorization to access the island.
- Each player receives:
    - A low-level electrical department key card registered under their name
    - Clearance equivalent to a junior technician

Each player was allowed to bring a bag with their chosen items up to 5kg.

Facility Disclosure

Before the game begins, Referee Shidou provides:

A holographic overview of the structure of the facility including the general layout, the restricted areas and the primary system control room of the new internet wing.

The Objective

To infiltrate the internet wing's primary system control room and reconfigure the live backbone routing under active load.

A technologically complicated task that can only be performed in the internet wing's control room that required advanced technical knowledge and precise execution to ensure minimal system disturbance. Any abnormal system behavior may trigger security escalation.

If a player is detained or neutralized by security then they are considered a loser and the other player is determined the winner by default.

Detection & Escalation

Security response follows progressive stages:

1. Suspicion
2. Active investigation
3. Detainment
4. Neutralization

Reaching **Stage 3 or higher** constitutes a loss.

Prohibited Actions

- Physical violence

- Intentional destruction of infrastructure
- Direct interference with the opponent
- Revealing the existence of the game to staff
- Leaving the island

Violation results in immediate loss.

After receiving that explanation of the rules, me and Ishida each picked up our bag and entered the facility by swiping our keycards.

We were greeted by a middle aged woman, maybe 30 years old. She introduced herself as Dr Kanzaki. She had a PHD in electrical engineering and she was a senior executive of the facility.

She welcomed us as her new employees and showed us around. The facility was huge and the tour took 2 hours, so halfway through, another employee took over the tour.

As a summary, the facility has 4 floors and a large underground area. As junior technicians, we only have access to a few rooms in the first two floors. Senior technicians have full access to the first two floors. Junior executives unlock access to the third floor as well, while senior executives have access to the whole building.

In the underground area were our rooms. Each technician had their own room in the underground area. The junior executives had their rooms and their offices on the third floor. Senior executives had their rooms and offices on the fourth floor.

The fourth floor also had the main server room for the electricity department but that wasn't important. More important was what lay on the third floor, the wing to the internet department. It seems our goal is to somehow get on the third floor and go

through the internet wing.

Then we need to navigate to the internet wing's server room and enter it, this part requires a senior executive keycard.

Then we need to complete the task in the internet room within limited time constraints. Each employee has to swipe their keycard through one of the identity scanners within 5 minutes at the start of every hour between 9AM - 5PM. If a technician doesn't complete their scan or if they complete it in any floor other than the first two floors then the alarms will go off and they will begin searching for them.

Also, the internet's primary server room was equipped with a system that checks for any abnormalities every 30 minutes. This means that if I arrive at the room at 9:30, then I'd only have 30 minutes to complete the task. If I arrived at 9:43 for example, then I'd only have 17 minutes.

Put simply, I have to somehow break through a top security facility, and if I manage to do that, I'll have to complete a complex process in the internet room within 30 minutes that I don't think I can do if I had 2 hours. But I still have to find some way to win, let the game begin.

Chapter 8 - The Impossible Infiltration (Referee Shidou)

After explaining the rules and guiding those two to the facility, I returned to the boat. There, we had created a room with full access to the security cameras of the building. The only areas we didn't have cameras in were the main server rooms to prevent breaches of information through the cameras.

When those two instructed me to referee the gamble between Kei and Ishida, they were the one to give me the gamble's rules. It seems like there's an ulterior motive of placing the gamble in this facility.

They obviously wanted to test Kei and see if he can get to the next level but the primary reason behind choosing this location is to test the security systems of the facility after installing the new internet wing.

It was now 4:45PM and I decided to start with observing Ishida. He was surrounded by quite a few technicians and they were talking. It seems like Ishida is more famous than expected, most of these technicians know who he is, which would probably provide him with an advantage here.

He told them that he came to work in the facility for a few months because he was intrigued by the advanced technology of this facility.

Ishida then swiped his keycard on the identity scanner when the clock hit 5PM then retreated back to his room.

Kei didn't do anything noteworthy in this period, he sat around till the clock hit 5PM then also swiped his keycard on the identity scanner and went to his assigned room. Looks like the real work will start on the next day.

The day began like normal, everyone scanned their identity at 9AM and started their day. When noon came around, it was lunch time and everyone gathered in the cafeteria on the second floor.

It was a large room with a wide selection of delicious foods in a buffet and many

tables and chairs scattered throughout the room. Everyone ate their food there, including the executives. This was definitely the best time to get into contact with executives to somehow get a keycard in the future.

Dr Kanzaki had grabbed some food and was sitting on a table with a few colleagues. It looks like both Ishida and Kei had the same idea because they both grabbed some food and water then approached Dr Kanzaki's table. They both thanked her for the brief introduction and sat at the table with her and some colleagues.

Ishida was quiet for the most part, observing the surroundings and not paying much mind to conversation. Kei took the complete opposite approach.

On Dr Kanzaki's table were 3 others who appeared to sit there everyday. One was a male technician that didn't participate in conversations much and two were female junior executives that held most of the conversation with Dr Kanzaki. One of the two smoked, smoking was completely disallowed in the facility except during lunch and only inside the cafeteria. There was appropriate ventilation that got the smoke out.

Kei was chatting a lot and was making everyone laugh quite a bit. He masterfully created a funny yet mysterious aura around him. He was slightly more cold when talking to the other people on the table but more warm when talking to Dr Kanzaki. A very subtle and only slightly noticeable change. Kei really appeared to be a master of social interactions, very difficult to dislike.

Lunch lasts till 1 then everyone swipes their keycards again and they return to work. A simple yet effective system.

Day after day, this consistent schedule kept repeating. It seemed like Kei was loved by everyone, he had managed to basically befriend everyone in a span of days and now, he earned a consistent spot at a table with Dr Kanzaki every lunch.

Ishida was a bit different, he had a few people who were close with him, all nerds basically who were interested in his abilities, a useful group of people but he wasn't well connected with most people.

On the sixth day, something interesting finally happened. During lunch break, after Ishida got his food from the cafeteria, he accidentally bumped into Dr Kanzaki and spilled water over her lab coat. It appeared to be a random coincidence but later, it turns out to be much more than that.

Ishida then followed Dr Kanzaki to her table to dry her lab coat and after patting it down with some tissues, he took the opportunity to sit at the table for the day. Later on, when the junior executive clicked her lighter to light her cigarette, Dr Kanzaki's lab coat burst into flames.

It was clear to me what had happened. Ishida waited till the day when the cigarette smoker was sitting in the seat next to Dr Kanzaki's usual seat.

He had brought some gasoline with him in his bag which he was permitted to bring. He added some gasoline to his water when he got it from the cafeteria and spilled some onto Kanzaki's lab coat.

He then waited patiently till the girl used her lighter near Dr Kanzaki's lab coat which caused it to burst into flames.

During the chaos, Ishida was able to attach a small device which he had created during the few days of preparation after he heard the rules since he got the rules when he was in the Kingdom.

This device copied the information of a keycard but it required direct contact for a few seconds.

Another unexpected thing happened when Dr Kanzaki's lab coat was on fire, Kei had taken his shirt off and tightly placed it around Dr Kanzaki's lab coat to eradicate the fire.

A bit of the lab coat had been burned into her left forearm and she had a few light burns all over her left hand.

There was no more time left, Ishida had to quickly retrieve his device before the chaos

went away. He quickly took it and then silently slipped away. Ishida was probably hoping the device copied the full keycard but he would only be able to check after 5PM when he goes back into his room and connects the device to his laptop.

Regarding Kei, he told everyone to back away confidently. He then accompanied Dr Kanzaki alone to the second floor bathroom so she could wash her left hand and so he could remove the lab coat piece.

After reaching the women's bathroom on the second floor, there was a bit of hesitation but Kei entered the bathroom with Dr Kanzaki in the end to help her in dealing with the burns. The bathroom was empty as everyone was gathered in the lunch room.

Kei then took advantage of this opportunity, he was staring at Dr Kanzaki with eyes that clearly indicated love, he then told her she was somehow beautiful even when in pain.

Kei had been diligently working on seducing Dr Kanzaki over the past few days, after all, he was objectively handsome and he was very charming.

Dr Kanzaki got visibly flustered at the unexpected compliment then Kei leaned in and initiated contact.

They knew they couldn't do anything because others would check up soon but that was enough for now, Kei had managed to seduce Dr Kanzaki effectively over the past 6 days.

After treating her burn marks and removing the ingrained fabric, they left the bathroom and the others immediately began to check up on her.

Kei sneaked away and gave Dr Kanzaki a wink as he left, she couldn't help but get red and flustered even though everyone was around.

Kei and Ishida had both achieved something great on that day, Kei had managed to successfully seduce a senior executive. Ishida also achieved something great, he had

successfully copied her keycard information and he confirmed it later that night on his laptop.

He then transferred that data to his own keycard and now his keycard had the security clearance of a senior executive.

After they both slept for the day, the seventh day began and it all seemed normal. During lunch, Kei sat in his usual spot on Dr Kanzaki's table and made conversation in his usual way. Ishida sat with his own group.

Dr Kanzaki managed to be more composed today and was able to maintain normal conversation with Kei around but there were still clear signs of getting clumsy and flustered when talking to or looking at Kei.

The other members of the group looked at each other, it seemed they noticed that something might've happened between Dr Kanzaki and Kei in the bathroom yesterday but none of them dared to speak up.

Things continued normally until 5PM that day, that's when Ishida made his move. After swiping his keycard at 5PM, he snuck away from the crowd and made his way to the laundry room behind the cafeteria on the second floor.

He grabbed a senior executive outfit and lab coat from the laundry room because he would definitely be caught by the people watching the security cameras if a technician was seen on the third floor.

He then headed up to the third floor and faced no issues with his keycard. He quickly found the internet wing, walked through the hallway and made his way to the internet's main system room.

His keycard opened the room without a hitch and he entered precisely at 5:30PM. People would've surely noticed his absence by now but it didn't matter, all he needed was 20 minutes.

In 20 minutes, he will have completed the task before the system's abnormality check

and he will have won.

But between the times of 5-5:30PM, Kei wasn't idle either. After lunch, he had whispered something into Dr Kanzaki's ear and at 5PM, Dr Kanzaki went down and met Kei near the farthest away stairway on the second floor. Kei had snuck away there to avoid being seen.

She then brought him along to the fourth floor so they could go to her room. It seemed like this was pretty common in this facility, it was normal to expect in an isolated facility with no external human interaction.

But usually, technicians would sneak off to each other's room, it wasn't normal for there to be a relationship between a technician and an executive.

As Dr Kanzaki and Kei walked together towards her room, Kei told her that he couldn't wait any longer and initiated action in the hallway, they were near the electricity's main server room and Dr Kanzaki opened that door with her keycard so they could continue there without being seen.

I couldn't see what happened in there but it was about 5:15PM when they got in. At about 5:30PM, Kei exited the room with her keycard in his hand.

It seemed he likely sedated her and took the keycard but then he shouldn't have taken 15 minutes in there if that's all he did. He must've been unable to resist the temptation.

It was too late for him, it would take him at least 10 minutes to reach the internet's main server room now, meanwhile, Ishida's already there. There's no way he can complete the task before Ishida.

He was going to lose, Kei was going to lose because he got too tempted by Dr Kanzaki, if he had sedated her and got out right away then he would've gotten to the internet room at 5:25PM and then he might've been able to get it done faster than Ishida.

At least that's what I thought would happen but then Kei took out his phone from his pocket and clicked a button on his phone. All of a sudden, the alarms had gone off in the internet's server room, security would get to the room in less than a minute, Ishida had no chance, he was caught.

Less than a minute later, security rushed into the room and detained Ishida quickly to interrogate him. I now realized what had happened, it was truly genius.

I doubted something over a week ago back in the Kingdom, I doubted those two's judgement in not giving Kei the rules beforehand when Ishida got them. It was nearly impossible to complete the task without certain equipment required.

You couldn't just reconfigure the backbone of the system without any equipment. Ishida obviously prepared that equipment beforehand but Kei couldn't have known that he'd need it so how exactly was Kei planning on winning this gamble?

Later, when we boarded the boat, Kei was clearly tired and he fell asleep the moment we got on. What had he spent his nights doing these past few days? I now know.

He had been building a custom device. He built a GPS tracker that releases an electromagnetic wave that turns off all electricity within a few meters when he clicks a button on his phone. He knew about the location of the gamble so he probably thought a device like this would come in handy in such a facility and he was right.

Then while I was explaining the rules, he subtly got Ishida to place his bag on the ground and he planted the GPS there while I was explaining.

When Ishida went to complete the task, Kei activated his device and disabled all the electricity surrounding Ishida. That led to the alarms being triggered by the very large interruption to the system which led to Ishida getting caught.

But then why did Kei go through all that trouble to grab Dr Kanzaki's keycard if he had this win method. Did he want to end things quicker? Or did he simply want to get intimate with her? I had no way of knowing.

After that, I explained to the security about the gamble which had taken place under those two's authority and they let Ishida go. I then grabbed Kei and Ishida and we left the facility back to the boat but before I could do that, Kei wanted to do something.

He returned to where Dr Kanzaki was sedated and waited for her to wake up. He then apologized to her and explained to her that it was part of a game and Dr Kanzaki unexpectedly burst into tears, she truly believed that she was in love.

That level of seduction was definitely dangerous, in one week, he got Dr Kanzaki dangerously attached to him. She slapped him across the face and he let her, he then apologized again and left the room and we followed suit.

As we were walking back, Ishida still didn't understand why he had lost and he was complaining that the game was rigged. I explained to Ishida how he had lost, then Kei spoke up.

He looked directly into Ishida's eyes and told him "My whole life, I chased perfection.

I studied until my limits pushed back. I learned everything my mind was capable of holding. Skills, systems, patterns, anything that could be mastered, I mastered.

And after meeting you, I can say this without hesitation: In mathematics, in memory, in raw intellectual firepower, I don't come close to you.

Yet I still defeated you.

I understood this long ago, after losing to someone far greater than me more times than I care to count. Perfection was never about being the best at something. Not even about being the best at everything.

Perfection is the ability to win, regardless of the situation you're placed in.

As long as you can outthink your opponent, no matter who they are, no matter how overwhelming the circumstances, victory remains possible. That is what it means to be truly perfect.

And that is why you lost, Ishida.

You trusted your knowledge. You relied on your strengths. You played the game you were best at but you failed to realize something simple.

There is more than one way to win.

You're still young, just like me, you have lots of room to grow. Make sure to watch me throughout this journey, I will show you what real perfection is."

Ishida was in awe of Kei after hearing this. All his previous anger and irritation had disappeared and had turned into pure admiration for Kei's abilities.

I thought to myself, even though Kei's abilities were still greatly lacking compared to those two, he was definitely going to grow as well on this journey. What was most terrifying about Kei though was his overwhelming charisma, he managed to seduce Dr Kanzaki that quickly and even managed to make Ishida in awe of him. One day, Ishida might end up being Kei's loyal ally because of the seeds he planted today.

Chapter 9 - The Next Stage (Kei)

With this gamble, I managed to plant some important seeds. Sure, Ishida might end up being a valuable ally but that wasn't important to me.

Even winning the gamble was secondary to me, I had already known I would win before the gamble even started.

I did manage to achieve my true objective though, an objective no one knew about except me. The seeds I have planted today will certainly be useful to me in the future.

After a long boat trip back to the Third Kingdom, we finally arrived. As soon as I walked into my room, I laid onto the bed and fell asleep. It had been a long time since I've gone to bed without an alarm, a few years probably. But I had been basically up all night for the past 10 days, my body was past its limit, I needed the rest.

I woke up to the sound of loud knocking on my door. I didn't know what the time was, I thought I probably slept for a few hours. I checked my phone and did a quick calculation. I had been asleep for the past 20 hours and there were a lot of missed calls and messages.

I got up to open the door and then I saw those two again. The two that wrapped me and Satoshi into these games. They were Abami and Kamishiro, the princes and now leaders of the Third Kingdom.

I never expected them to come to my door directly, I thought they'd just send one of their referees. My body immediately stiffened up but I didn't know why, it seemed like I had an automatic reaction of fear to them, strange.

Abami, the more laid back one then spoke to me "Get dressed and come to the meeting room, we've been waiting there for you for the last 30 minutes, it's not a great idea to make us wait."

There was no malice or threats in his voice, it sounded more like he was speaking

casually with a lifelong friend. Abami and Kamishiro, huh. What interesting guys, the stories I've heard of them and what they've done are truly insane. I really don't think I could even come close to beating them in a gamble if even half of the stories about them were true.

I really needed to grow and get stronger, not just to stand as Satoshi's rival, but also to defeat Abami and Kamishiro.

As these thoughts were circling through my head, they closed the door and headed back across the hallway.

It seems like I had already received many messages informing me of the meeting day and time but I didn't notice them because I was asleep.

I put toothpaste on my toothbrush then brushed my teeth while taking a quick shower. I then got out, dried myself, put on my suit and left to meet the others.

I arrived into the same monotonous meeting room we met in 10 days ago. The atmosphere was tense but different from the first time we met.

This time, Abami, Kamishiro and Satoshi were sitting on the chairs around the central table rather than being scattered to the different corners of the room.

I grabbed a seat, apologized for my lateness then sat down. Even though my gaze was scattered moving around through the room, it would keep returning to Satoshi's face.

I was hoping that I would make eye contact with him at least once.

Hoping that he would notice me. Recognize me.

But he didn't, he simply altered his clearly bored gaze between Abami and Kamishiro.

After a few seconds of silence that seemed like an eternity to me, Kamishiro finally spoke up. He said "Well done you two, you managed to make it past the first round, from now, your opponents will get much tougher very quickly, you need to prepare

yourselves for that."

After a slight pause, he continued "If you both defeat all of the opponents we pit against you then you two will have a gamble against each other. The loser will forfeit the right to challenge myself and Abami to a final gamble."

"The winner however, he'll get a chance to go against us for a final game that will be televised to all three Kingdoms, only the winner of that final gamble will be recognized by the people as the ruler of the three Kingdoms, and by extension, the ruler of the world."

Abami then interjected in a way that appeared as if they'd rehearsed this speech together 100 times. But something told me that these two didn't practice at all, they just synchronized really well with one another. He said while looking at Satoshi "Your next opponent will be with a man named Kuromine Rei, I know this will be difficult for you to believe but he possesses an ability that allows him to control a person by ordering them to complete a command if they look into his eyes. There is a limitation to his ability though, he can only control a person once, but be very wary, If you look into his eyes while his ability is active, then he can very well order you to kill yourself and you will be powerless to refuse."

Satoshi and I looked in complete disbelief when he said that. Satoshi then told him "You expect me to believe that someone possesses supernatural abilities, are you kidding me?". Abami then responded "It is your choice whether to believe or not but he will be the opponent of your next gamble and it will do you good to heed my warning."

Before Satoshi was able to interject again, Abami turned his gaze to me and said "As for you Kei, your opponent will be a man named Fukumei Haru. He has the ability of extraordinarily good luck, you cannot beat him in any way that isn't certain, if you allow for him to have even a 1% chance of victory, you will undoubtedly lose. Please don't comment on how unbelievable this is, I've just given you the information, it's your choice what to do with it."

After that, Kamishiro spoke and addressed both me and Satoshi "You are both free to

return to your homes for a week or two, we'll contact you again when the next gamble is ready, goodbye."

After saying that, they both took the main hallway to leave the room. In this room there were 3 hallways, two were the ones that me and Satoshi took to go to our separate rooms the first time we were here. The final one, was the main hallway that led to the rest of the Kingdom, that's the one Abami and Kamishiro just left through.

As me and Satoshi sat there around the table in disbelief, each separately debating whether or not to believe what Abami told us about our opponents, I couldn't help but talk to Satoshi.

Even though he had told me to never speak to him again previously, I couldn't stop myself any longer, I needed to ask him why.

I then looked at him directly and asked him "Satoshi, why? Please, I don't want anything else from you, you've already done so much for me. I just want to know why, why did you leave me. What did I do wrong?"

I sounded weak, pathetic. I knew that. I was always pathetic compared to him. But I needed to know what happened between us that day? Why did he make that decision?

Satoshi then looked at me with a completely blank expression and said "You disgust me, Kei." He then got up and left the room swiftly leaving me sitting there alone staring at his back as he walked away.

I thought I had become a man that isn't weighed down by emotion anymore, but everytime I see him, I can't help but experience these overwhelming emotions of self loathing as I wonder what I did wrong.

The reason I appeared to not have emotions wasn't because I was a psychopath or even your average sociopath. Satoshi had taught me this lesson long ago, he taught me that people assume that to be detached from emotion, you must be born with a broken brain. A missing piece. But they don't understand the power of human will. The reason I am this way isn't because I was born in the dark, I simply realized that

the light was an interference. I didn't lose my emotions, I surgically removed them to ensure they would never interfere with the result.

I am not a victim of my nature. I am a self-made sociopath. But now, for just this moment, it seems like I've returned to the same pathetic man I was before meeting Satoshi.

I didn't let myself stray too far. I quickly gathered myself and exited the room, I made my way out of the castle and left the Third Kingdom to return to my home in the First Kingdom.

I couldn't let myself be constantly held back by the past, I had no choice now, I had to ignore all the bonds that me and Satoshi once had, I had to keep pushing forward and make it to the top. I will then face him at our final gamble, and this time, I'll make sure not to hold anything back.

For now, as I sat in the back of the limousine, I decided that it wouldn't hurt to reminisce on my time with Satoshi one last time.

Chapter 10 - The Past (Kei)

I'm 19 now but it all started when I was 15. I transferred to a new school and I was going into my last year of high school.

Yes, I was 15 and I was going into my last year of high school. That was part of the reason for my superiority complex. I was 15 surrounded by people who were all 17 turning 18, all 2 years older than me, yet I was still the smartest in the room.

At least that's what I thought.

I was also very charismatic, I made quite a few friends in my new school. But before we keep going, we first need to define something important, what is a friend exactly?

I didn't know what a friend meant back then but now I do.

There are 3 main reasons behind friendships, a friendship could consist of one of them, or all three of them.

The first reason is when you get something from them. For example, two people could be friends because one of them protects the other from bullying while the other helps the first in tests. A mutually beneficial relationship, people would assume that this type of friendship is hollow and not real but many real friendships are based on need.

Another example of getting something from them is the thing people call connections. This is when you befriend many people in case you might need them later. The benefit doesn't always have to be immediate.

The second reason is a sense of superiority. For example, there is a very common friendship that combines the first two reasons. One person who is emotionally damaged befriends an emotionally stable person. The emotionally stable person gains a sense of superiority from helping his friend overcome his damage. Meanwhile, the emotionally damaged friendship benefits from the first reason as he gets emotional

support from his friend.

The third reason is probably the most pure, and it is fun. These are friendships where the reason behind the friendship is just the fun that both parties experience when together.

For me, I thought that I befriended so many people because it was fun to have friends. And I guess that might be partially true, all of my time was spent consuming knowledge and learning new things so time around people at school was fun for me.

But looking back at it, the main reason was probably the sense of superiority. I enjoyed being around people and looking down on them, I enjoyed being superior to everyone.

One of the people I met was Satoshi. At the start, he was just like all of the others, another ant that made me feel superior. But there was something different about him, he was alone.

He exhibited high levels of social ability and he'd been in the school for many years, but he was still alone most of the time. That fascinated me, he was like a damaged puppy that I wanted to save. Or more accurately, a puzzle I wanted to understand.

Gradually, I grew apart from all of the others I met and I spent most of my time with Satoshi. He was fun, really fun. I had never had this form of friendship, a friendship based on fun.

Even though the time we spent together was short, he filled an emptiness inside me that I didn't know I had. But even despite all of the fun, I still couldn't help but feel superior to him.

I was a genius, I got the best grades while being the youngest. I was a prince hiding my identity. I was a man of many talents, high IQ, charismatic, I had it all.

While Satoshi, Satoshi was different. He didn't perform well in school, he was respectful but still somewhat rough around the edges.

The old me could never consider someone like him as my equal while the current me understands that I'm the inferior one.

After our graduation neared, I turned 16 while he was 18. Around that point, we decided on a new idea, something fun that will test our intelligence. We began inventing gambles on a small scale to go up against each other and have fun.

The first few gambles we played, I suffered a crushing defeat in every single one. But I couldn't accept it, it never even crossed my mind for a moment that he might be superior. I blamed it on chance, I blamed it on him constantly finding loopholes.

I tried to find a reason, a way to justify my superiority, but I couldn't.

Then I decided that for the next gamble, I wouldn't be so linear. I'll show him just how superior I was to him. The gamble we played on that day was The Kaiser Games. And it was the gamble that was the reason behind the first major turning point in our friendship.

Chapter 11 - The Past (Satoshi)

I remember this day vividly, the first day of my last year in high school.

I was sitting in the back of the classroom, the seat to the left of the corner seat. The seat in the corner was empty, the student that sat there last year had left the school.

As I was contemplating whether or not to take that seat, a new student walked in and asked if he could sit there. I had no reason to refuse him and he then became my seatmate.

He looked young, younger than the rest of us, but I didn't imagine that he was 15 at the time. I just assumed he was a young looking 17 year old, everyone did.

After he introduced himself to me, I introduced myself as well and the first day began.

Throughout the day, Kei struck up many conversations with everyone in our class and even people from other classes. It was truly impressive to me when I saw that his ability to make friends might even surpass my own is what I thought.

Even though I was antisocial in that period of time, in the past, I was at Kei's level in terms of sociability. But now, I couldn't find fun in anyone, everything was boring for some reason, I just wanted to be alone.

And during class, no matter what question the teachers asked, he would raise his hand and answer. It was most impressive during our last math class.

There was a question that the teacher showed us as an example, a question she got stumped on while solving, then Kei went up and solved it for her.

I didn't know who he was but he was truly a genius. I couldn't even begin to imagine what his life was like because I was so different from him, I was just an antisocial fraud.

But we were neighbours in the class, and over time, we had more and more

conversations. He was fun. With him, I was truly able to enjoy myself.

Soon after, he stopped talking to most people except me. We were really close and we became really good friends.

Life finally felt bright, felt chaotic, felt exhilarating.

But that changed after we played The Kaiser Games.

After we played The Kaiser Games, I began to hate him until his existence became disgusting to me.

Chapter 12 - The Calm Before The Storm (Satoshi)

Tears were rolling down my face, The cold salt on my cheeks was a physical residue of a malfunction. I sat upright in the dim, grey light of the bedroom, the dampness of the pillow from my sweat and tears pressing against my neck.

This dampness was proof of an error, a rare failure of my internal architecture.

The fact that my mind was still conjuring pictures of my time with Kei when I was asleep was a malfunction I couldn't repair yet.

I reached out and touched the moisture on my skin, staring at my wet fingertips with a clinical, detached curiosity. Why was he appearing now?

Why, on the eve of a gamble that would likely determine the trajectory of my entire existence, was my subconscious dragging up the ghost of the only person who had ever managed to get close to me?

I stood and walked toward the mirror, my steps silent as I dragged my feet across the cold stone floor. The glass was clean and piercing. When I looked at it, I saw a face that remained disturbingly neutral despite the physiological evidence of the dream.

My eyes were clear, my jaw was set, and my breath was steady. Only the dried salt remains beneath my eyes betrayed the fact that, moments ago, I was human.

I examined my reflection with the detachment of an architect surveying a flawed blueprint. To the world, I was a strategist without a pulse, a sociopath. To myself, I was a horrible human, a flawed fraud. To my father, I was a defect, a biological error that he had spent his entire life trying to delete.

I splashed freezing water over my face, scrubbing at the skin until it became red and painful. I could not afford the luxury of a wandering mind.

The information Abami had provided was going to be very challenging to overcome if true. If my next opponent really does have a power that can overwrite human will then a traditional strategy would be pointless.

I obviously don't believe that he actually does have that ability, I had a theory in mind about his ability but it wasn't relevant at the moment.

I decided that I wouldn't lose myself in thoughts of strategy for a gamble I didn't yet know the rules to. I have already made all the preparations I could possibly make, now, I just had to wait till the day and time of the next gamble were determined.

I left my small room that lies on the outskirts of the castle's territory and walked into the heart of the capital.

The Second Kingdom's current state reminded me of Fatso's death, it knows that it's going to die and it's holding on to the last bits of hope that it might survive.

As I moved through the streets, I observed the faces of the people who I would one day rule over. They were masks of exhaustion, etched with the hunger and fatigue of a decade of unnecessary conflict.

The best word to describe them was despair.

The air here tasted of coal smoke and damp earth combined with a metallic tang. This was the legacy of my father, a man who had treated the throne like a private bank and the citizens like disposable currency to be spent on his own vanities.

He lay in the palace now, the withered remains of a king, waiting beside death's door in a room filled with gold that could no longer buy him a single day of breath.

He felt no remorse for the ruin he had brought upon his people, nor for the unnecessary war he had waged with the First Kingdom. That war had been a project of pure ego, a desperate attempt to prove a dominance he didn't possess.

It bled the Kingdom's treasury dry and left us in a state where we were only existing because the Third Kingdom found it more convenient to play games with us than to invade.

Instead of taking over through bloodshed, they had proposed these elaborate gambles to decide the future of the three Kingdoms through intelligence. I highly respected Abami and Kamishiro for that.

The concept of being a horrible king was something I could quantify through economic data and military failure, but the concept of being a horrible father was something more visceral.

When I was born, he quickly saw the real me, a failure. He labeled me defective and coldly discarded me. He sent me to the outskirts of the Kingdom to fend for myself.

He had spent twenty years trying to produce a replacement, a "normal" son who would carry his last name after his death, but the universe has its own sense of irony.

His body had failed him the same way he failed his Kingdom. He was unable to produce another child.

A few years ago, he summoned me to the castle and named me his successor. It wasn't out of love or remorse, it was born from the sheer, pathetic terror that his name would vanish from history if he didn't have an heir to hold the crown.

He provided me with the title and the basics of life, but he never provided me with a father. I was a tool he had pulled out of storage because all his other weapons had shattered in his hands.

As I reached the edge of the district, I felt a vibration in my pocket. I pulled out my phone and read the message. It was from a man that goes by the name Referee Inui. I was to meet him at the Third Kingdom docks tomorrow at noon.

The location suggested that I'd be going on a journey for this next gamble, excitement spread throughout my body like a surge of electricity.

I couldn't make any mistakes this time. I thought back to Abami's warning about the king's power of mind control. If this Kuromine could control minds through sight, then I needed to find a way to enter his field of vision without losing my will. I needed to build a blind spot in a world of absolute sight.

I looked up at the heavy, grey sky of the Second Kingdom and realized that the era of my father was finally reaching its expiration date. Things were finally moving, and for the first time since I woke up, the memory of the tears was completely overwritten by the familiar excitement of a gamble.

Chapter 13 - The Emperor's Vessel (Referee Inui)

I woke up at 6AM on the day of the gamble between Satoshi and Kuromine. I knew of Kuromine, he was a strategic revolutionist who claimed he had a mysterious ability which he tried to use to recreate the world, but he failed. It seems like Abami and Kamishiro offered him some form of freedom if he wins this gamble.

I also knew of Satoshi of course, he was the prince of the Second Kingdom. It seemed like Abami and Kamishiro found him interesting. I also heard that this is his second gamble and that he won his first gamble against a formidable opponent with ease but I doubted he'd be able to win against someone with an ability that overcomes human will.

Speaking of which, I put on the specially crafted contact lenses that Abami and Kamishiro have been preparing for the past 2 weeks. These anti-Sei contact lenses are specifically created to refract the light from the Sei that rewrites the mind and allows for control. Put simply, these lenses negate the ability of the Sei.

I sent out a message to the supporting referees reminding them to put on their anti-Sei contacts. The supporting referees are the men that will be joining me in ensuring this gamble goes smoothly.

Abami and Kamishiro gathered 101 men with very powerful physical abilities and with the ability to manage gambles without bias. These men are known as referees and I'm one of them. Our job is to preside over gambles and make sure that the loser pays his debt, even if that debt is his life.

There are also supporting referees, their job is to back us up and help us in managing large scale gambles like this one, but in the end, all decisions and outcomes are decided by me.

After washing up and putting on my suit, I headed to the dock and arrived there at 10:30AM. I had instructed the supporting referees to be there at 10AM so when I arrived, they were all there as expected.

As for Satoshi and Kuromine, I had instructed them to arrive at noon, but when I got there, I saw Satoshi standing there a few meters away from the supporting referees.

I asked a supporting referee about when Satoshi arrived and he told me that he's been there since before he arrived, which was 9:45AM.

That was pretty strange, did he perhaps get the time wrong?

I then approached Satoshi and introduced myself as Referee Inui then he introduced himself in turn. I thought his early arrival was a part of his strategy, maybe he wanted to ask me a question. So I stood there for a few seconds waiting for a question but it didn't seem like he wanted anything so I stepped away and moved back towards the supporting referees.

It seems like he might've really got the time wrong but I held my curiosity back from asking why he arrived so early as there was no need for that question.

We stood there waiting at the docks till Kuromine arrived. Me and the supporting referees were standing together while Satoshi was a few meters away sitting at the edge of the dock staring into the sea.

After waiting for some time, Kuromine arrived at 11:50PM. Upon his arrival, I called Satoshi over so I could introduce myself officially and introduce the gamble but Satoshi didn't get closer. It seems like he was trying to avoid eye contact with Kuromine at all costs, a wise choice.

I then addressed them both and said, My name is Referee Inui and I will be the one presiding the gamble between you. The game you will be playing today is The Emperor's Vessel.

Before I got to explaining the rules, Kuromine wanted to ask me a private question and I told him that would be alright. He approached me and said "I command you to grant me the victory in the gamble I will be playing with Satoshi." I simply responded to him saying, I won't be doing that. After that, he muttered "I see" then followed up with a question "Will my Sei also be ineffective on Satoshi?" I then told him that Satoshi can be affected by the Sei but he won't be allowed to use it on him till we get

on the ship, if he does use it before then, he will be disqualified. Kuromine thanked me for the information then stepped back and said, no further questions.

I then announced to them that I'll be explaining the rules.

Gamble Title: The Emperor's Vessel

Venue: The SS Vandal, a luxury cruise liner containing 1,000 neutral civilian passengers.

Players: Satoshi vs Kuromine

The Objective: The Tri-Part Cipher

To win the gamble, a player must input a three digit sequence into the command terminal located in the ship's bridge (The Throne Room). The terminal requires a retina scan from the player before inputting the code. Each player is allowed 2 attempts, if both attempts are incorrect then that player is deemed the loser and the other is deemed the victor. The first player to input the correct sequence in the correct order is the victor. There are no other ways to become the victor of this game unless the other player dies.

The Components of the Code

The code is divided into three digits, each digit given to a different entity.

1. **The First Digit:** Given exclusively to Kuromine prior to boarding.
2. **The Second Digit:** Given exclusively to Satoshi prior to boarding.
3. **The Third Digit:** This number is locked behind a physical verification system involving the passengers.

The Scavenger Protocol: The Ten Apostles

Among the 1,000 passengers, ten specific individuals have been tagged as Apostles.

- Each Apostle wears a gift wristband provided upon boarding that they have been forbidden from taking off.
- The players also wear specialized Master Wristbands.

- To unlock the third digit, a player must locate an Apostle and physically touch their Master Wristband against the Apostle's wristband.
- The Master Wristband tracks progress (e.g., 1/10, 2/10... 10/10).
- Only after successfully registering all ten Apostles will the Master Wristband's display activate. Upon pressing the central button, the final digit is revealed.

The Fundamental Conflict

For a player to win, they must obtain the other player's number as well as the Apostle's number. To obtain the other player's number, a player may use any method, this includes violence, it is also allowed to speak to any assistant referee whenever you wish and request a game between you and the other player to obtain the number.

Prohibited Actions

There are no prohibited actions between the players however any direct physical harm to a civilian is strictly forbidden. Attempting to tamper with the command terminal is also forbidden. Anyone who breaks these rules will be subject to immediate disqualification. The players will have until the cruise returns to the dock it has set from to win this game. The cruise is set to sail for 28 days so you effectively have 28 days for this gamble. If no player has won by that time then both players will be declared as losers.

The Selection Phase

Now, each player will be accompanied by some assisting referees on separate boats to be escorted to the dock where the cruise will be sailing from. You will then each be accompanied to enter the ship through separate entrances, the assisting referees will be scattered around the cruise at all times. I will always be nearby in case anything goes wrong but I'll be monitoring things from my own camera room for most of the time. The ride to the cruise will take 3 hours, while each of you are on your boats, you must select one of five predefined roles within the ship's ecosystem. Each role will provide certain advantages to help you achieve the victory, I would recommend you spend the entire 3 hours thinking and to choose wisely.

1. The Nurse

- **Privileges:** Granted unrestricted access to the Medical Bay and patient records. They possess high social trust, allowing them to initiate physical contact with passengers for medical check-ups without raising suspicion. All passengers are required to get a check up at the medical bay at least once.
- **Limitations:** They lack access to the ship's technical infrastructure, security wings, and the bridge. They are also subject to the authority of the Head Doctor (NPC).

2. The Technician

- **Privileges:** Equipped with a master keycard for maintenance tunnels, ventilation shafts, and engine rooms. They have the ability to temporarily manipulate ship systems, such as lighting or electronic door locks.
- **Limitations:** They are strictly prohibited from entering the luxury guest decks or the medical ward. Their presence in high-society areas is considered a breach of protocol, leading to immediate detention by security.

3. The Camera Watcher

- **Privileges:** The only role with authorized access to the Central Surveillance Room. They possess the ability to monitor the movements of all 1,000 passengers and identify the Apostles from a distance.
- **Limitations:** They are physically tethered to the surveillance hub. Leaving the station for extended periods is a violation of duty. They possess zero social authority and have no legitimate reason to interact with passengers.

4. The Security Guard

- **Privileges:** The only role authorized to carry a firearm. They have the authority to detain passengers for questioning and can move freely through most transit corridors.
- **Limitations:** They have no access to the CCTV network or technical blueprints. Their presence is highly conspicuous, making it difficult to approach Apostles discretely. They must respond to all public disturbances reported by the crew.

5. The Rich Guest

- **Privileges:** Possess the highest social standing and access to the VIP lounges where many Apostles are likely to congregate. The player that chooses the rich guest will be granted a significant amount of money that can be used to bribe passengers or purchase information from the crew.
- **Limitations:** They have zero operational authority. They are prohibited from entering any restricted area (Medical, Security or Technical). They are physically vulnerable as they carry no equipment or tools.

Operational Constraints

- **Standard Duty:** Both players must perform the basic functions of their chosen role. Failure to appear for scheduled shifts or blatant neglect of duties will result in a warning; three warnings result in disqualification.
- **Physical Integrity:** Direct physical assault intended to passengers is prohibited.

After I explained the rules, I made sure that the assisting referees accompanied each of the players to their respective boats then I left in my own speedboat with a few of the assisting referees.

Each of their boats will take 5 hours to reach the SS Vandal. Mine will take 3. I'll get there and enter through the south entrance that was prepared for me.

3 hours later, I arrived at the SS Vandal. I entered through the prepared entrance and went down a few flights of stairs to reach a camera room prepared for me and the other assisting referees who accompanied me. We will be in this room for the length of this gamble to monitor the game. This way, I'll be informed of exactly what happens in the gamble at all times while being in close proximity in case I'm needed.

Of course, no one was able to access this area, even the technician role that can unlock most doors. The only one who has access to enter and leave this place is me, so even Kuromine won't be able to get here using Sei, but I don't see a reason why he

would want to.

Kuromine was definitely a dangerous force, he could use his Sei to gain control of all the ship's security then use them and their guns as an army to stop us but I think even he knows that won't be possible. The power of the Third Kingdom that Abami and Kamishiro built brick by brick can't even be stopped by an army.

As I was setting things up to ensure everything worked properly, I received a call from an assisting referee who was assigned to Kuromine's boat. He then told me that Kuromine has confirmed that he would like the role of the rich guest.

I had expected Kuromine to pick this role, we heavily insinuated to the players that most of the Apostles were among the rich guests and with Kuromine's Sei ability, he will be able to take control of this game very quickly.

After taking his role selection into account, his method of entrance into the cruise was decided.

If Satoshi told us that he would like to choose the role of the rich guest as well, then his loss would probably be guaranteed because he'd then be entering through the same entrance as Kuromine. And if Kuromine manages to use his Sei on him then the game would be as good as over.

Things were now fully set up and their boats had 10 minutes left till they arrived, this is when I got a call from another assistant referee, one that was assigned to Satoshi's boat.

He then told me that Satoshi confirmed the Technician role. That came as a bit of a shock to me, the ability to create a blackout or enter through locked doors was definitely useful but I had expected Satoshi to choose something like the nurse because he'll be able to guarantee meeting every passenger before the end of the trip. Maybe the camera watcher so he can safely observe and determine who the Apostles are. Or maybe even the security guard so he could find Kuromine and shoot him before Kuromine has a chance to use his Sei.

But maybe Satoshi anticipated that he would be entering through the same entrance as Kuromine if they chose the same role and he wanted to choose a role that Kuromine was unlikely to choose but there's no way to be certain.

Now the game was prepared and the stage was set, they both arrived onto the cruise and the cruise left the dock. The gamble has now begun. Who will be the victor of this gamble? Who will become the Emperor? Only time would tell, for now, let the game begin.

Chapter 14 - The Emperor's Vessel Part 2 (Referee Inui)

When I created this game, the identity of the Apostles was a difficult choice to make. In the end I decided on having 6 of the Apostles be rich guests, 3 be normal guests and 1 be a technician.

I decided this split because out of all the roles, it was clear that being the rich guest provided the least benefit so I concentrated most of the Apostles as rich guests to equalize that role with the others. And it seems like Kuromine picked up on that.

It was now 5PM and there were no activities on the Yacht scheduled for today except a dinner at 7PM. Kuromine would get to dine along with the rich guests so he might be able to get an early lead.

Normally, finding all the Apostles and interacting with them would take about 2-3 weeks assuming there was no competition but because we have 2 people competing here, it might take them even longer to find the Apostles since they have to be wary of each other.

Kuromine has to be wary of Satoshi shooting him before he has a chance of using his Sei because he doesn't know what role Satoshi chose. Satoshi has to be wary of making eye contact with Kuromine or he'd be under his control.

But Kuromine had a great advantage in his game, the Sei, out of the 1000 guests, there are about 200 rich guests so if Kuromine uses his Sei on each of them and asks them if they have been given the Apostle wristband, they would have to say yes then he'd interact with them.

But even still, Kuromine can't use his Sei indefinitely, it takes a large toll on his body. From what I've heard, he has about 20 uses a day, maybe 30 if he pushed himself to his limit but then he wouldn't be able to use it for some time if he pushed himself too far.

During the wait till 7PM, Kuromine went to his room. On the way to his room, he crossed paths with a security guard and said something to him in a whisper.

A second later, the security guard gave his gun to Kuromine and Kuromine kept walking to his room. Kuromine had already started moving, he acquired a gun this early into the game without choosing the security guard role.

Kuromine didn't appear to be in a rush. After entering his room, he laid down in the bed without unpacking his bag. He then looked straight at the security camera I was using to watch him and said "My victory has already been decided."

He then got out of his bed, placed the gun in a drawer then left his room. He walked through the hallway until he arrived at the elevator then pressed the button that would take him to the third deck.

While the elevator was moving, I grabbed the overview of the SS Vandal that we had given to each of them when they were on their respective boats.

The SS Vandal is designed as a luxury liner spanning 10 decks.

Below is the structural breakdown of the vessel

Deck 10: The Apex

This is the Throne Room and the final destination of the gamble. It houses the Command Terminal where the three-digit code must be entered. Under normal circumstances, it is occupied by the Captain and high-level officers. For the duration of the gamble, it has been emptied.

Deck 9: The Gilded Tier (VIP Suites & Sun Deck)

The highest accessible point for passengers. This floor consists of private pools, high-end bars and the helipad. This is the natural habitat of the Rich Guest. The density of people here is low.

Deck 8: The Grand Promenade (Casino & Ballrooms)

A high-traffic social hub. This deck features the grand casino, massive ballrooms, and bars. It is a field of constant motion and loud noise.

Deck 7: Rich Guest Residences

This floor houses the 200 rich guests, each with a large and extravagant room.

Deck 6 and 5: Standard Guest Residences

These two floors house the majority of the 1,000 passengers. Long, identical corridors lined with hundreds of doors create a repetitive, claustrophobic environment.

Deck 4: The Plaza (Main Dining, Theater, Shopping and the Medical Bay)

The ship's city center. It is the largest deck by far, the Plaza is where all 1,000 guests converge for meals and entertainment. It contains the three-story theater, the shopping theatres, the restaurants and the Medical Bay.

Deck 3: The Nerve Center (Security, Surveillance and Management)

The operational heart of the ship. This floor contains the central surveillance room and the security briefing rooms in the back, a restricted area. In the front, there's the cruise management group, they are there 24/7 to take complaints and assist guests.

Deck 2: Crew Commons (Quarters & Mess Hall)

The living quarters for the 200 crew members. It is a stark contrast to the luxury of the upper decks, it has low ceilings, fluorescent lighting, and the constant hum of the ship's internals.

Deck 1: The Iron Gut (Engine Room & Maintenance)

The lowest level, sitting just above the hull. This is a massive, roaring cavern of turbines, heat, and grease. It is the primary domain of the Technician. The blueprints of the ship are most visible here; the pipes and wiring that feed the upper decks originate in the Iron Gut. It is the only floor that allows a player to travel between decks 1 through 7 without using public elevators or stairs, provided they can navigate the service ladders.

After reading through the description of the third deck quickly, I assumed that

Kuromine was heading to the security room but I was wrong.

Kuromine arrived at the Third Deck and walked directly to the management area. He approached the closest management worker who was alone then looked them in the eye and asked them "What room is the guest Satoshi staying in?"

She responded by saying, there are two people with the name Satoshi on this ship, one is in Deck 2 Room 104 and the other is in Deck 7 Room 15.

This staff member would probably never share personal guest information but the power of the Sei compelled her to.

Since Kuromine didn't know Satoshi's full name, he wasn't able to ask for his room specifically but Kuromine knew that Satoshi wasn't in Deck 7 because then he would be a rich guest and Kuromine would've seen him as they boarded the ship so he deduced that Satoshi was in Deck 2 Room 104.

Next, he approached another management employee and asked for Room 104's spare keycard.

Kuromine then took to the stairwell and descended down to the second deck. He then walked through the gloomy and narrow corridors until he arrived at Room 104.

Kuromine looked at his watch as he stood outside Satoshi's room, it was 6:30PM. He didn't enter, in case Satoshi chose the security guard role.

Kuromine waited outside for 30 minutes until it was 7PM, since no one entered or left the room up till that point, he assumed that Satoshi had already went up for dinner so he swiped the keycard and slowly entered the room preparing to use his Sei in case Satoshi was still in there.

But the room was empty, Kuromine quickly checked the bathroom and every corner of Satoshi's cramped room to ensure Satoshi wasn't there, then after making sure of that, he closed the door and sat on Satoshi's bed staring directly into the room's entrance.

It looks like he's planning on sitting here till Satoshi walks in then uses his Sei on him to obtain his number but what Kuromine doesn't know is that all his waiting is futile.

Let's look at what Satoshi's been doing the past hour and a half. As soon as he boarded the cruise, he made his way to the service ladders and descended to the first deck, the boiler rooms and maintenance deck.

It was structured like a labyrinth with many narrow intersecting hallways leading to different rooms, there were large primary boiler and maintenance rooms with a few technicians walking through them but there were also small storage rooms that were mostly filled with junk, it seemed like no one entered those.

He then entered each of these rooms, placed his technician keycard on the lock from the inside then attached it to a string.

He then left the room, pulled the string which led to the lock closing and the metallic doors then closing. He then pulled the string from under the door and reclaimed his keycard.

This allowed him to lock rooms that can't be opened from the outside without there being anyone inside.

He then went to the last of these rooms, and this time locked the door normally from the inside and unpacked there.

Now, it's 7PM. Kuromine is sitting in Satoshi's room waiting for his arrival which won't happen. Satoshi is now heading up to the restaurants to grab something to eat.

Satoshi sat at one of the lower end restaurants and had a steak dinner. Then he headed to the grocery store and bought as many food items as he could carry before heading back down to the storage room on the first deck.

Then, at 9PM, Kuromine realized that Satoshi would never be coming to the room so he headed out and began preparing his next plan.

He went back up to the third deck and used his Sei on another management employee asking him for all the information on Satoshi. This made his 4th Sei use today.

He got the information that Satoshi's a technician and he also got a picture of Satoshi that was in the database.

Then he made his way to the first deck but the security on the stairwell didn't allow him down, but instead of using his Sei on them, he gave them some money to let him pass, it seems like he wanted to conserve his Sei.

When he made it down to the first deck, he used his Sei on a technician to acquire his outfit and keycard. He guessed that since Satoshi wasn't in his room, the only place where he could sleep inconspicuously would be on the first deck.

He walked through the intersecting hallways and found a few doors that couldn't be opened even with the technician keycard so he had to switch plans.

He then used his Sei on every technician he met showing them a picture of Satoshi, he told them that if any of them see him, they should immediately contact him and keep following Satoshi secretly till he arrives.

This allowed him to restrict Satoshi's movements greatly. It was now 11PM, the cameras showed Satoshi sleeping in his storage room while Kuromine had just finished up using his Sei on all the technicians he could find.

He then took the elevator up to his room on the seventh deck and fell asleep on an empty stomach. Even though both parties haven't made any progress towards finding out the numbers today, Kuromine had managed to heavily restrict Satoshi's movements.

After seeing them both fall asleep, I decided to sleep as well and had the assisting referees continue to monitor the cameras. They were under orders to notify me if anything out of the ordinary happens and sure enough, something happened.

I thought the day was over and I'd be able to get some rest but at 2AM, Satoshi left the room he was sleeping in. An unexpected turn of events.

I watched the cameras while wondering where he was heading off to. He used the elevator and made his way to the fourth deck. Then he made his way to the medical bay.

There were medical staff 24/7 on the SS Vandal so he wouldn't be able to steal a bed if that's what he was aiming for, but that didn't seem to be the case.

He entered the medical bay and spoke to the first nurse he saw asking her to check his shoulder. He said he was feeling pain in his shoulder after a pipe dropped on it and he wanted to check to see if it was serious.

I looked to the assisting referees and they confirmed to me that he hadn't injured his shoulder, in other words, this was a lie.

She took him to a private examination room and we weren't able to see him anymore, we couldn't install cameras in those rooms for patient privacy.

A few minutes later, the nurse left the room for a minute then came back. A few minutes after that, they both left the room while laughing together, it seemed like they were having a pretty interesting conversation.

The nurse was twirling her hair and looking up at his eyes with widened and dilated eyes while she was talking to him.

Satoshi then thanked her for help and made his way back to the storage room on the first deck. It didn't seem like he took anything unless it was something that could fit in his pocket.

I wondered what the reason was behind Satoshi's visit to the nurse's office as I was watching him fall asleep again.

After he fell asleep again, I went to sleep again and delegated the camera watching back to the assisting referees. It doesn't seem like anything else happened through the night because the next time I woke up it was 7AM and I was preparing for the start of the next day.

At 8AM, it was breakfast time on the ship and Kuromine headed up to the restaurants. There, he interacted with many people and used his Sei a few times and by 9AM, he had already interacted with an Apostle from the standard guests.

Satoshi on the other hand was fast asleep in his storage room, it seems like he's stuck in a bad situation, if he gets out then Kuromine will be notified so he has no way to interact with Apostles, how will he turn this around I wonder?

The day kept moving forward with seemingly normal activities. At 3PM, Satoshi woke up and began by having some food in his room while Kuromine was in Deck 9 interacting with rich guests. Then suddenly, something surprising happened.

Satoshi left his room. He walked through the first deck's narrow maze-like hallways with his eyes closed and a shirt covering his face.

Upon his first time walking through this deck, he memorized its structure and now he was navigating without sight and with his face covered to avoid detection by the technicians.

But Kuromine had already predicted that Satoshi would try to disguise himself so he had instructed the technicians under his Sei to recognize Satoshi by his height, weight and build as well. So shortly after Satoshi arrived at the second deck, Kuromine was notified of Satoshi's presence by the technician, and the technician kept following Satoshi.

When Satoshi reached the second deck, he removed the shirt from his face and opened his eyes. He quickly looked around and noticed the technician following him. A few seconds later, I received a call.

Satoshi was calling me and I picked up. He told me that he would like to use his blackout privilege. This was a privilege granted to technicians with a one time use, he could cause a blackout in the cruise.

I obliged with his request and quickly activated the blackout. This allowed for Satoshi to escape from Kuromine's gaze but it was probably too early to use this ability. Now, he had no other way to escape from Kuromine's gaze.

The blackout will only last 10 minutes but I still instructed the assistant referees to put on their night vision goggles just in case, and while they were putting them on, they each confirmed to me that the goggles had been put on.

All of them but one, an assisting referee on the second deck hadn't sent the confirmation which was worrying so I delegated the camera watching to the remaining assisting referees and instructed them to inform me if any other strange things happen.

I then quickly headed out to the location of the assisting referee that hadn't confirmed and I saw him laying on the floor in the dark. I tried talking to him but it seemed like he was in a deep sleep and he wasn't waking up.

I carried him away from the public eye back to the monitoring room and stationed another assisting referee there. Shortly after, the lights came back on and Satoshi was now back in his living area in the small storage room of deck 1 while Kuromine was at deck 2 talking to the technician that spotted Satoshi but he wouldn't get anything from him because Satoshi was already back in his room.

I kept watching for the rest of the day while waiting for the assisting referee to wake up. Kuromine managed to interact with 3 Apostles today which is very impressive because this game was designed in a way where it would usually take 3 weeks for someone to interact with all of the Apostles and 2 weeks if the person had chosen a rich guest role but it seems like Kuromine is already almost a third of the way done on the second day, such was the devastating power of the king.

As for Satoshi, he had a random assortment of items scattered around his room which he must've acquired during the blackout, he had been building some sort of contraption the whole day but it seems like he wasn't done yet, it was now 11PM and Kuromine went to sleep but it looked like Satoshi was still up working on whatever he was building.

The assisting referee had also just woken up from his sleep. I quickly asked him what happened and he told me that he suddenly felt a needle poke from behind into his abdomen while he was putting on the night vision goggles.

When he looked back, he saw that it was Satoshi holding the needle but before he could react, he quickly fell asleep from the sedation.

I quickly guessed why Satoshi would sedate him, it was to acquire his anti-Sei contact lenses, we can't disqualify him for what he did as he didn't break a rule but we need to go to his location and reacquire the anti-Sei contact lenses.

I asked the assistant referee to check just in case but he said that the contacts were still in his eyes, so it seems like Satoshi wasn't actually after those contact lenses.

I then asked him to check all of his belongings but there was nothing missing, no equipment, no keycards, nothing.

I have no idea what Satoshi achieved by sedating the referee but it seems like only time will tell.

I asked the assisting referees to take over the camera watching and went to sleep. Of course, I told them to wake me if anything concerning happened.

I woke up the next day at 7AM and checked the cameras. Satoshi was up eating some chips in his room and it looked like he completed his invention. There was no way to describe how it looked but it probably looked most similar to a bomb, he was muttering to himself saying "I don't have much longer".

As for Kuromine, he had just woken up half an hour ago and it seems like he's heading out to interact with more people soon.

The days passed by quickly with nothing eventful happening, Kuromine was regularly interacting with people on the SS Vandal while Satoshi was rotting in his room alternating between sleep and waking up without ever being able to leave.

Kuromine had set up surveillance on the first deck through his Sei on the technicians; if Satoshi tried leaving, Kuromine would reach him quickly and use his Sei on him.

It was now the fifth day on the cruise at 10AM, Satoshi was awake in his room, according to the assistant referees, he's been awake since 1AM working on his invention while Kuromine was on the 9th deck with 9/10 Apostle data collected and he was currently talking to the guest with the 10th Apostle band.

Shortly after, Kuromine interacted with him and got the 10th piece of data, his own Master band was now activated, all he had to was click the button to reveal the number.

Satoshi also received the notification that Kuromine had acquired the Apostle's number so he quickly woke up and put on a headset that was placed in his room.

I thought Kuromine would instantly head back to his room to listen to the number in private but he went to the fourth deck and bought a new suit from the shopping center, he then returned to his room and put it on in the bathroom.

I was waiting for him to click the button and reveal the number but he left his room and locked the door.

I then went and looked at the monitoring screen that was watching Satoshi and he was screaming a scream of anguish. The scream of a defeated man, he had been stuck in a tiny room for a whole week with awful food.

He looked awful, his hair was disheveled, his facial hair was overgrown compared to his usually clean shaven face. He looked completely defeated.

Why? Well, on the first day, he bugged Kuromine's room while Kuromine was waiting for him in his room.

His plan was to let Kuromine get the Apostle's number then when he revealed it, he would be listening through the bugs and he'd know the number as well.

In that scenario, he could force Kuromine into a stalemate where Kuromine would have to agree to a gamble without using his Sei for the final number.

But instead, Kuromine had read him completely. Kuromine predicted the bugs and even thought that his clothes might be bugged so he changed his clothes to brand new ones and heard the number outside his room.

Kuromine headed to a bathroom at the corner of the fourth deck with no one inside it then clicked the button on his band. It then said out loud in an AI woman's voice "The Apostle's number is 7".

Kuromine now had the first digit, his own number, and the third digit, the Apostle's number. All he needed now was to acquire the second digit, Satoshi's digit.

This would be easy for Kuromine now, he could take more drastic measures now that he only needed one more digit.

He could use his Sei on all of the security officers and have them begin shooting through all the locked doors on the first deck. If that doesn't work then he could have them break down the doors.

But Satoshi didn't wait in his room like a lamb for slaughter, it seems like the resolve in his eyes returned, he left his room in a hurry as a final ditch effort.

It was now 2PM, Satoshi was racing through the decks and Kuromine was notified of Satoshi's whereabouts.

Satoshi tried to run but Kuromine had already made preparations, he had people on each deck prepared to see Satoshi and tell Kuromine where he was.

Satoshi ran through the cruise, trying to find some way to turn the situation around but at 4PM, he couldn't run anymore.

He was surrounded by people under Kuromine's Sei and then shortly after, Kuromine arrived and walked in between the men surrounding Satoshi.

He then looked at Satoshi without activating his Sei and said to him "It is your defeat, I could easily kill you right now and win the game but I would prefer not to do that. You know who I am, you know what I've done, you know that I've killed many people. Give me your number, if I try it in the control panel and it's wrong then I'll shoot you and win. If you give me the right number, you'll get to live, it's your choice."

Satoshi then responded "Please don't do this Kuromine, I need to win this game, it's not just for my sake, it's for the sake of my Kingdom. Please let me win this, I beg of you". Satoshi went onto his knees and bowed deeply to Kuromine.

Kuromine then responded to him saying "I don't care about your sentiments, if you don't give me the number in the next 10 seconds, I will kill you."

Satoshi was trembling, he had no choice. Kuromine was counting "10,9,8,7,6,5,4"

… “3”

“2”

Satoshi then interrupted him “Okay, okay, my number is 5.”

Kuromine then laughed out loud “This is my perfect victory, but just to be sure, let’s see if you were telling the truth, if not then I’ll kill you right here and now”

He then made a motion with his hand over his face and looked directly at Satoshi but Satoshi quickly shut his eyes and looked down, two of the security guards under Kuromine’s control picked him up and forcibly opened his eyes.

Kuromine then said “I, Kuromine Rei, command you to do everything I tell you to.”

At that moment, Satoshi got a call that interrupted the moment, Satoshi picked up the call and hung up a few seconds after that.

Satoshi then responded “Yes, your majesty.”

Kuromine then asked Satoshi “What is the number that Referee Inui gave you to activate the control panel?”

Satoshi then responded saying “It’s 5, I was given the number 5 to activate the control panel.”

Kuromine then laughed out loud “Haha, I guess you weren’t lying. I really wanted to kill you but I’ll keep my word. Come follow me to the control panel room. He then also addressed the two security guards and told them to follow him.”

It is now 5PM, and Kuromine is heading up to the control panel room. Once he arrived, he approached the control panel and stared at it for a few seconds with a face of victory.

He then moved his hand towards the keypad and tapped the 7 key. Next he tapped the 5 key and then finally he tapped the 7 key again. The number he had deduced was 757, 7 was his digit, 5 was Satoshi’s and the final one was the Apostle’s digit.

As he was about to press enter, something unexpected happened. Satoshi, who had previously been silently standing behind Kuromine, lunged at him with a taser in hand.

He managed to get a tase on Kuromine for a fraction of a second before one of the security guards stationed behind Kuromine lifted his leg and landed a devastating kick into Satoshi's abdomen that sent him flying into the wall behind him out of breath.

Kuromine looked shocked but he quickly regained his composure. As for me, I knew exactly what had happened, those two contacted me and informed me of the situation so I wasn't shocked.

Kuromine took out the gun from his pants and aimed it at Satoshi. "You shouldn't be allowed to do this, but it doesn't matter. It looks like you were lying about your number, and now that you know my number, I can't let you live. Goodbye, Satoshi."

Before Kuromine pulled the trigger, Satoshi spoke up and looked directly into Kuromine's eyes "You idiot, do you seriously think I've been sitting around idly for the past few days?"

Satoshi then unbuttoned his shirt and revealed the contraption that he's been working on the past few days, he then told Kuromine "Do you see this? This is a device I built that is directly linked to my heartbeat. If it stops then the remote trigger will activate and the bomb I've built at the bottom of the ship will go off. In short, if you kill me, this ship will sink and you'll die as well."

Kuromine then laughed in Satoshi's face "Do you seriously expect me to believe that you built a remote controlled bomb capable of sinking this massive ship in 5 days? Did you seriously think I would fall for such a stupid bluff?"

Satoshi then said to Kuromine in a cold tone "I'm not bluffing. I'll even bet my life on it. Let's call the Referee, we'll have him go down with us to the first deck and check if the bomb is real and if it is capable of sinking the ship. If it isn't, then I will be completely at your mercy, you'll be able to shoot me or do whatever you want."

"But, if the bomb proves to be real then you must agree to a game of five card draw with me. If I win, then you must promise to the Enforcer not to interfere with me and

allow me to input the correct code. If I lose, then I'll have to give you my real final number and you'll win."

Kuromine then responded saying "I really can't believe you, just accept your death with grace. I'll go down and entertain your feeble attempt of extending your life, but I want something in return, I don't want to just win anymore, I want to kill you under all circumstances so I'd like to make a change to your conditions. If the bomb proves to be real and effective then we'll have to play the 5 card draw but if you lose, I don't want your number, I want the right to shoot you. If you agree to that then I'll agree to the rest of your conditions."

Satoshi agreed and they then called me to make it official.

After that, we all went down to the first deck for me to inspect the bomb-like device which was on the floor of Satoshi's room. I already knew it wasn't real from the cameras but I had to make sure in real life to ensure fairness.

As soon as I entered the room along with Kuromine and Satoshi, I smelled it. The smell of propane.

Kuromine had his gun pointed to the back of Satoshi's head to kill him if he tried anything, even if it meant risking activating the bomb since he knew it was probably a fake.

I quickly jumped out and away from the room but Kuromine wasn't fast enough. Satoshi quickly used his keycard to lock the room from the inside, trapping himself and Kuromine inside.

Kuromine was about to shoot because I heard him turn off the safety but Satoshi quickly screamed at him "Don't you smell it yet?"

Kuromine then quickly realized the situation, he was in a room full of propane with Satoshi.

Satoshi then said "You know what this means don't you, if you shoot this gun then we'll both burn alive in here. The bomb was a bluff but even you can tell that this isn't, right?"

He then told him "Put down your gun, let's talk."

I heard Kuromine turn the safety back on then tuck the gun away but it doesn't seem like he placed it on the floor, he probably returned it into his pants."

But this was an awful situation for Kuromine and it went just as I expected, because a few minutes later, Satoshi unlocked the room and walked out of it while Kuromine was on the ground.

Why this happened was simple. Kuromine and Satoshi were in a room where firearms didn't work and oxygen was running out quickly. This left one final option, physical violence, a fight, in simple terms.

Satoshi and Kuromine had a fist fight but Satoshi was a trained expert martial artist, even though he wasn't at the level of us referees, he could probably give an assistant referee a run for their money, he was that powerful.

I then looked at him and said, "You really are crazy, aren't you? You took the risk of being burned alive to win this."

He then looked at me and said "Of course I didn't, there was no propane. It was ethyl mercaptan."

I looked at him in a form of awe.

Even though he was still a long way away, he really reminds me of those two. It seems like us referees won't be bored for some time now.

Satoshi then handcuffed Kuromine to the railing in the room, took his keycard and left the first deck.

I wondered why he took his keycard but it wasn't within my right to get involved, I said out loud that the bomb was fake to ensure that I completed my role then I returned to the monitoring room.

There, I watched Satoshi head to the control panel but instead of going up to the 10th deck immediately, he stopped at the seventh deck. He then entered Kuromine's room using his keycard and the sound of the water in the shower turned on.

30 minutes later, he left the bathroom in a perfectly fitted suit with a clean shave and freshly washed hair. It seems like he took the keycard just to get some style in the end before winning.

He then headed up to the tenth deck, approached the control panel and entered the code 717. Then finally, he pressed enter.

The code was correct, he made a successful entry, and the gamble of the emperor's vessel ended with Satoshi's victory.

Chapter 15 - The Emperor's Vessel Part 3 (Referee Inui)

It was now 6PM, after Satoshi entered the code, I was preparing to organize a team to approach the area where Kuromine was knocked out but he was no longer there.

I checked the security cameras and found that Kuromine was on the fourth deck, he was surrounded by an army of 15 armed security. It seems like he had a technician under his control help him escape the handcuffs that Satoshi had put on him.

There were also 10 armed security guards nearby each holding on to a hostage from the passengers with a gun to their head. And it seemed like he also had 5 more under his control that were scattered around the cruise.

The situation was clear, Kuromine was fighting back. He lost the gamble but he was still trying to get out of this situation alive and escape. Even though us referees have overwhelming strength, there was a limit to how many we could bring onto the cruise.

We have a total of 15 assistant referees as well as me, each of us had to take on at least 2 of the armed guards if we wanted to win.

I began organizing the units, first I created a unit composed of 5 assistant referees and instructed them to immediately head out to Satoshi's location, protecting the victor of the gamble was a top priority and Kuromine already had a team out looking for him.

The remaining 10 of them and I would head to the fourth deck to confront Kuromine.

After we split off, we arrived at the fourth deck and I initiated a blackout. We targeted the armed guards holding on to hostages, they had weapons but we didn't need them, we would take them down the right way, with our physical strength.

We took them down one by one, shots were fired but they couldn't see us while we had night vision goggles and after getting done with the ones holding the hostages, we took care of the ones protecting Kuromine as well then I had the lights turned back on.

There we saw Kuromine standing in the middle of a circle of guards all on the floor but he wasn't alone. He had two 5 year old girls in his grasp with a gun to the back of the head of the first girl.

Even though they were held hostage, they didn't move a single bit and they didn't even show fear. They probably thought this was still part of the show.

He then said "I ordered the guards not to shoot the hostages and to shoot you instead but drastic times call for drastic measures. If anything happens, if the lights go out, if someone shoots, if one of you moves even a muscle then I'll shoot one of them."

He then continued "Referee Inui, please contact the nearest dock and tell them we'll be stopping there, if you don't then you know what'll happen."

It was a difficult situation to deal with, as I was thinking of what to do, a person I never thought I'd see at this stage appeared in front of me. It was Satoshi with the 5 assistant referees around him.

He then called out to Kuromine "Don't you think this is a bit too crude, let's end this the right way, if you let these girls go then I'll take you on one last time."

Kuromine then responded "I'm not stupid enough to fall for that, the referees will always collect, that's what they do. I'll be sent back to that cell for the rest of my life, I can't let that happen, this is going to be my way out of here."

He then added "But more important than that, more important than anything to me in this very moment is killing you. You were a fool for coming here. ***Rise***."

As he said that, about half of the guards that were meant to be knocked out on the ground, got up and aimed their guns at Satoshi. Less than a second later, a loud synchronized bang echoed through the fourth deck as 13 guns were fired at the same time.

It looked like Satoshi was about to die but it was the referee's duty, their purpose, to protect the sacrality of a gamble. They couldn't let the victor be killed because they were overwhelmed by violence.

Four of the five assistant referees who were near Satoshi had instantly surrounded him the moment the guards got up and the 13 shots had been fired into them.

But even with the 4 of them being shot at multiple times, one of them even to the face, they were still standing, partially because of the bulletproof vests they had underneath but mainly because they would stand there till their last breath to protect Satoshi, such was the loyalty of the Enforcers and assistant Enforcers of the Third Kingdom.

But the referee and the other assistant referees weren't just idle, they instantly split and ran towards the guards the moment they started getting up, after the first shot was fired, all the guards were simultaneously neutralized.

Once the threat was confirmed to be neutralized, the 5 assistant referees were commanded by Referee Inui to head to the infirmary at once.

Satoshi then looked at Kuromine while taunting him "Even your final plan failed miserably. Tell me Kuromine, have you ever succeeded once at doing something."

Kuromine was clearly filled with rage but before he could interject, Satoshi kept going as he was slowly approaching him "I mean seriously, you were apparently blessed with a supernatural power that grants you complete control over people and you're still a failure."

"How do you think I beat you? How do you think I managed to get past your Sei? Do you think it was luck? It wasn't, it wasn't chance. I created the path to my victory."

"Before we even met, I confirmed with Abami and Kamishiro that the referees couldn't be controlled by Sei through their anti-Sei contact lenses. Then, when we got to the docks, I had contact lenses of every color with me before we boarded the ship."

"I arrived early to confirm if the contact lenses had a color and since they didn't, I just had to replace my clear contact lenses with the ones that the assistant referee I drugged was wearing tricking you and even Referee Inui into thinking that I didn't have any way to counter Sei."

"Your defeat was set in stone the moment I was picked to be your opponent. You're a worthless idiot with nothing going for you."

"Oh yeah, and the propane, it wasn't even propane. It was ethyl mercapan, it gives propane its smell but it isn't flammable, you could've shot me back then and nothing would've happened, but you were too frightened."

"A coward, an idiot blessed with powers that you can't even utilize. That's all you are."

Kuromine's eyes were filled with rage, Satoshi was now a few steps away from Kuromine but it seems like he forgot an important detail, Kuromine still had a gun.

Kuromine quickly moved his hand with the gun from the back of the girl's head towards Satoshi then fired 3 times.

At the same time, Satoshi ran towards Kuromine, kicked the gun out of his hand then tackled him to the ground.

I quickly ran towards them after Satoshi took down Kuromine and placed Kuromine in handcuffs.

I asked Satoshi if he was fine, it seemed like he was in pain but there was no blood. The bullets never entered his body, he must've convinced one of the assisting referees to give him their bulletproof vest to protect him. Satoshi really did think of everything, what a monster.

But now, the game is officially over. Kuromine was apprehended and Satoshi was the victor.

Satoshi was headed to the infirmary to get himself checked out and as he was walking, I heard him mumbling to himself "That was close, I almost ran out of time."

He then walked a few more steps before suddenly fainting in the hallway. Maybe the pain and heightened pressure finally got to him. Plus he probably hasn't been sleeping well for the past few days.

I then carried him to the infirmary and they checked him out, he had a few broken ribs but there was no permanent damage.

There were still 23 days left till the end of the cruise but there would be a chance to get off on the 14th day so they only had to be there for 9 more days but oddly enough.

24 hours after the incident, Satoshi still hadn't woken up, I thought he might've been in a coma from his injuries but the doctors ran many tests and confirmed that there was nothing wrong with him, his brain waves indicated that he was just asleep. Maybe it was just the tiredness.

The days passed by until he finally woke up about 72 hours after he sustained those injuries. There were now 6 days left until the cruise ended and I encouraged Satoshi to enjoy them as much as he can.

During this time we had to deal with the body of one of the assistant referees that died protecting Satoshi.

After the 6 days were over, we got off the SS Vandal with a leisurely walking Satoshi, Kuromine in full body restraints and a coffin containing a dead assistant referee to return to his family.

Chapter 16 - The Calm Before The Storm (Kei)

It was another day of repeating the cycle waiting for details about the next gamble I'll be having.

Fukumei, huh? A man that possesses supernatural luck, even though I don't believe it, I have a theory regarding how his abilities actually work. It will be difficult to beat him unless I can find a method which eliminates all the possibilities except my victory. But first, I really need to understand how his luck works so I can determine the best strategy to overcome it.

I woke up with those same thoughts every morning but I had to remove them from my mind, it would just be a waste of brain power to think about this before hearing about the game.

I put those thoughts to the side and got out of my king sized bed. The room I was sleeping in looked like the room of a king from the ancient era.

That was the design of the castle that my father had wanted, a Victorian style castle.

It was really dystopian, while the grand castle lay in the center of our Kingdom as a sign of our strength, the houses in the outskirts have been destroyed by the war with the Second Kingdom.

While the king and his friends party through the nights with feasts and wine, children all over the Kingdom are sleeping with growling stomachs.

It was utterly dystopian and disgusting, I just need to wait for him to die so I can take over and change this situation around.

That old fool, starting a war with the Second Kingdom just to satisfy his ego, putting his whole Kingdom at risk which led to my situation, having to play games set by the Third Kingdom to make sure my people survive.

Granted, it was fun. Deciding the leader of the three Kingdoms through intelligence games was definitely interesting but it was also ludicrous.

After changing from my sleepwear and getting ready, I headed out to the main dining room where my father insisted we share breakfast together daily.

Everyday, I thought about having him killed in different ways, poisoning seemed to be the easiest but it wasn't necessary. He would soon die on his own. I needed to focus my energy now on being the one to beat Abami and Kamishiro so I can then take rule of the three Kingdoms and change the world.

I didn't pretend though, I didn't play the role of the normal son. But I also didn't show my disgust.

I simply showed up everyday, listened to him ramble on, ate my food in silence then left.

After heading back to my room from breakfast, 2 weeks after having last met with Abami and Kamishiro, I received a message from Referee Tatsumi.

It said "Meet me at boat 7412 on the 12th port of the Third Kingdom at noon tomorrow for the next gamble."

After reading that message, I started to get excited internally but I had nothing left to do but wait.

I stayed in my room for the rest of the day then fell asleep early, at 10PM, so I can wake up fresh the next day.

I woke up the next day at 6AM, prepared myself, had something to eat, then got escorted to the location and arrived at 11:45AM.

It seems like I was the last one to arrive because the referee and all of the assistant referees were there in their classic attire, black suits, standing near a man in casual clothing.

What was curious about the man was his white hair, even though he was young. I got out of the car and introduced myself to him.

"Hey, I'm Kei, it's a pleasure to meet you."

He then responded by saying "And I'm Fuku, glad to make your acquaintance."

He seemed quite nice but I couldn't forget about his menacing ability that involved controlling luck itself. I didn't know how well he could control luck and I didn't even know if it was true but I had to go under the assumption that it was real.

We boarded the ship then Referee Tatsumi told us that we'll be heading to an island for our next gamble, he then proceeded to explain the rules.

Gamble Title: The Black Island

Venue: A secluded, forested island.

Players: Kei vs. Fuku.

Participants: 100 NPC "Prisoners."

I. The Objective

The winner is the player who possesses the highest **Point Total** after 18 hours.

II. Initial Setup

- **Starting Capital:** Both players begin with **20 Points**.
- **NPC Objective:** Each NPC is a current prisoner of the Third Kingdom and each one of them seeks "Freedom." Freedom is granted if an NPC reaches **5 Points** and survives for **10 continuous minutes** without being hit by a Red Bullet.
- **Passive Generation:** Every hour, players receive **+10 Points**.

III. The Armory & Payouts

Each player is equipped with a high-accuracy AR Paintball Gun whereas NPCs are equipped with a low accuracy pistol paintball gun. Points are gained or lost through specific "Marksman Protocols":

Bullet Color	**Target**	**Payout to Shooter**	**Effect on Target**

Yellow	NPC	+1 Point	NPC is frozen for 1 minute. (Can only be used once per NPC)
Red	NPC	+5 Points	NPC is eliminated from the island.
Black	Opponent	+50 Points	Player gains 50 points, target loses 50 points.
Green	Player	+5 Points	(NPC Only Bullet Color) (Each NPC has 10 green bullets that can't be replenished) NPC takes 5 bullets from the player he shot. So NPC: +5 points, Player Shot: -5 points.

IV. The Exchange (The Market)

Players may access their tablets at any time to spend points on resources.

- **Red Paintball:** 3 Points each.
- **Black Paintball:** 25 Points each.
- **Information (Radar):** 30 Points (Reveals opponent's exact location for 60 seconds).
- **Signal Jammer:** 50 Points (Creates a "Ghost Signal" at a chosen location for 30 minutes).

V. Prohibited Actions

- **Direct Violence:** Physical combat without the use of provided paintball equipment is prohibited.
- **Property Damage:** Damaging the electronic tablets results in immediate disqualification.

- Taking off the wristband that shows a player's location or tampering with it in any way is strictly prohibited.
- It is not allowed for a player to shoot with a green paintball.
- Each player will be provided with food and water whenever they'd like on the island so it is not necessary to bring any with you. You are not allowed to bring any personal belongings with you onto the island, you will be thoroughly searched before leaving the boat to ensure that."

Chapter 17 - The Black Island (Kei)

After explaining the rules of the gamble to us, we both headed to our own rooms on the boat and went to sleep. After all, we really needed to conserve our energy since the gamble will span over 18 hours.

A few hours of smooth sailing later, we arrived at the island and me and Fuku were blindfolded, but before I was blindfolded, I made sure to take note of where we were on the island and by looking at the sun and knowing it was sunrise, I deduced that we were in the southwest corner of the island.

Next, I was guided into a car on the island and the car drove through the paths of the island. It was a long and bumpy ride but I kept track of the direction we were heading throughout the journey until we finally reached a halt.

Based on the distance and direction we travelled, I was likely on the North West corner of the island, the driver tried to steer in different directions to confuse me but I'm fairly certain I'm northwest right now.

That means that Fuku is likely in the southeast corner right now.

Before I headed out, the assistant referee that drove me to this area gave me my assault rifle and my paintball supply and told me how to use them.

He then told me that there are islands all over the camera and that I cannot use an NPC's gun or give an NPC my gun. He also told me that food and water will be provided upon my request within 30 minutes as long as it's reasonable (i.e I can't order food every 30 minutes). And he also told me that if I decided to buy bullets, they would take up to 30 minutes to arrive.

I didn't waste any time, I immediately began running towards the southeast. I didn't have much time and I needed to figure it out quickly.

About 20 minutes after continuously running through the island, a green paintball bullet suddenly flew past my face and landed on the tree in front of me. I had met my first NPC.

I quickly hid behind the tree and made sure that this wasn't an ambush by checking around but I couldn't find anyone. I determined that the NPC was alone and I peaked out to shoot him with a yellow bullet but he was gone.

It seems like he ran away because he knows the danger of fighting a player one on one. If he loses and gets hit by a red bullet then he can say goodbye to his freedom.

Even though I wasn't tired, I quickly had a sip of water from my backpack that was provided then I got back up and kept running.

After an hour of continuous running through the tough terrain, I was finally close to the southeast corner of the island and that's when I decided to buy a radar perk.

I spent the 30 points that I had and got Fuku's exact position. I was only a few minutes away.

I made my way to where he was and a few minutes later, I saw him sitting on a rock catching his breath with a tree to his back.

This was my opportunity, I loaded my gun with black bullets and aimed directly at his torso, that way, it would be very difficult to miss. Then, as soon as I shot the bullet, he suddenly knelt down and the bullet flew on top of him and splatted on the tree directly behind him.

It seems like that's his luck. So now I've managed to confirm that it exists, it's probably a trick rather than an actual power but it didn't matter. Next, I had to test its limits, understand how it works.

Fuku quickly moved behind the tree and I saw him picking up black bullets from his bag.

That alone was a good hint, the fact that he walked behind the tree means he can be hit, his luck isn't all powerful, it has limitations.

I slowly walked towards him and got closer and closer while hiding behind cover. As I was walking towards him he shouted to me "Oh so that's what you chose to do, attack early, I'll make sure you regret it."

I then shouted back at him "You can't do anything, that was just a fluke, I'm pretty confident in my marksmanship, as long as I can win here, I can have a huge points lead and use that to buy NPCs loyalty for 5 points."

"You're not that stupid, right Fuku? You noticed the transfer points option on the tablet next to the shop, did you seriously think we'd use that to give each other points?"

Fuku then responded "Of course I understood the purpose behind it, what matters now though is who manages to land more black bullets on the other."

I knew I had to get within a certain range to make sure that his luck doesn't take effect.

After getting really close, I got out of cover and shot at him once more. Even though I should've been in his blind spot, he just barely dodged it and it exploded on the tree once more. Some of the paint even splashed onto his clothes but that wasn't considered a hit.

He looked back and got closer, then he started shooting. The battle wasn't close at all.

He shot his first bullet and I dodged it then he shot his second bullet to my new location and it hit me, black paint exploded onto my clothes.

The fact that he missed the first one though means that his luck doesn't affect other people, it only affects himself.

I had to make a counter attack, I shot the first two bullets, the first missed by a decent amount but the second just barely grazed his neck. As I shot my last black bullet, he shot one of his own that missed.

He had 2 more black bullets, he shot me with them and managed to hit me with one. This is a devastating defeat.

I'm on 0 points right now while he has 130. It was a truly awful outcome.

Fuku then approached me "So what were you saying earlier? Weren't you meant to be confident in your marksmanship."

We were standing about 4 feet away from one another, it couldn't miss now. I shot him with my gun and the black bullet landed directly on his torso and splattered black paint over his clothes.

Fuku bent down a bit, even though it's just a paintball, from this range, it would hurt a bit.

I then laughed at him "No way you fell for that, one of the bullets I shot earlier was a yellow one, I kept an extra black one so I can get a guaranteed hit."

He then responded "You're pretty cocky right now but you do understand that you're losing, right? Or are you not smart enough to realize?"

He continued "You have 50 points right now unless you shot at NPC already but I haven't seen any so far, it seems like they started at far points from us or they were released late. I have 80 points, in this battle of attrition where we compete over buying NPCs, I am clearly winning."

I heard his gloating but didn't respond, everything he said was accurate from his perspective. I realized that we made a lot of noise during our battle and NPCs must be on their way to surround us. I couldn't stick around any longer so I quickly left without saying a word.

After leaving, I organized the thoughts in my head about what just happened. After thinking it through, I confirmed it. I confirmed that my strategy was a great success.

Chapter 18 - The Black Island (Tatsumi)

When those two first told me that I'll be the referee assigned to Kei's next gamble, I couldn't help but feel extremely lucky. I got to watch over Satoshi gambling earlier and now I get to see if Kei's also going to impress me, it was great.

They explained to me that it would be Kei vs Fukumei. They also told me that Fuku had an ability of sorts that allowed him to have extremely good luck, what I was watching right now in the gunfight between him and Kei proved that. As for why he was participating, they never told me, they just said that he would be doing whatever it takes to not lose.

And that's all that matters in the end because a battle where both players are betting everything is the only way to determine who is truly superior.

I watched as the gunfight between Kei and Fuku ended in a devastating defeat for Kei but that wasn't the end of it because as Kei was walking away, a wide smile flashed across his face.

He was definitely planning something, the loss he took just now was definitely calculated, I can think of a few possible reasons but only time will tell what his true goal behind that early rush on Fuku was.

What was most surprising though was Kei's stamina, he ran for over an hour in rough island terrain to get to Fuku and now he's running away again without appearing even slightly tired.

As for Fuku, he didn't move. He remained in his spot and because of that, he was slowly getting surrounded by about 20 NPCs.

By now, 2 hours have passed. Kei is currently alone in a cave in the Northwest, he took out an NPC on his way and so he now has 65 points. He's eating a protein bar that was supplied to him in his bag and he appears to be deep in thought.

As for Fuku, he now has 90 points but he's currently surrounded by 20 NPCs that are about to shoot any minute now, if they all theoretically landed a hit on him then he would lose 100 points and be left with nothing.

But that definitely won't happen, with Fuku's luck, most of the bullets will probably miss, even so, I wonder what Fuku's plan is, there's no way he didn't expect to be attacked.

Then suddenly, as if it was orchestrated, Fuku answered my question. He shouted loud enough for the NPCs around him to hear "I have a contract prepared for all of you, I will transfer you 5 points and will not shoot you for the next 10 minutes as long as you agree to follow my every command for the next 18 hours, you are not allowed to talk with the other player after taking this deal, and if you see him, you must shoot him on site."

It was pretty simple, Fuku was buying an army to fight for him using his points. As long as he had that, he could locate Kei and have them bombard him with bullets which would eventually force him down to 0 points.

Fuku then continued "If you decide not to take my deal then I will try my best to shoot as many of you with red bullets and eliminate you all."

Slowly, the NPCs hidden in the surrounding areas slowly came out until all 20 stood lined up in front of Fuku.

They each signed the contract that was on the tablet we had provided the players with one by one and Fuku transferred them each 5 points as they did so, but then he faced a problem.

Once he had acquired 18 allies, he ran out of points. He was thinking about shooting the last two NPCs with red bullets which would give him 10 points but then he realized something, he realized he had been deceived.

He mumbled to himself "I did find it weird that he just revealed his plan to me at that time because I had thought of it myself but now it's clear, he was trying to plant the thought of buying allies in my mind when that was never necessary."

The 2 NPCs looked at Fuku with a look of wariness and fear after hearing him say that but they had nothing to fear.

Fuku told them "Each of you shoot me once with a green bullet, since I have no points, I won't lose any but you'll each get 5 points. If you try to run away after doing

that, I'll shoot you with red bullets and you'll be eliminated. After doing that, you will both sign the contract and pledge your allegiance to me."

The two players readily agreed and after completing that action, Fuku had an army of 20 loyal NPCs. All of which have already met the conditions to clear the game but they must do exactly what Fuku says from now on or they'll lose their win condition as per the contract they signed.

More importantly, Fuku realized something important, even though he could use this strategy of letting himself get shot now, he wouldn't be able to use it in the future when he has points because then he'd lose points, but this strategy gave him an idea for a new one.

He will threaten any future NPCs he encounters with being shot by a red bullet unless they sign the contract. He doesn't have to give them any points in return because they'll be signing this contract in exchange for him letting them live and they'll still be allowed to go after Kei and shoot him to get the required points.

This game was shaping up to be interesting. Kei was technically winning at this point. Now that the third hour has started, Kei has 95 points while Fuku has 10. Kei has 95 because for the last hour, he has slowly been targeting NPCs but instead of trying to build an army, he's just been shooting them with red bullets and trying to maximize his points count.

But the scores really don't matter right now, what matters is that Fuku now has a loyal army of 20 while Kei has no one.

Not only that, Fuku has now discovered a strategy that will allow him to turn any NPC he finds into a mercenary that solely targets Satoshi using the method stated earlier. The allies he'll get from this method won't be as loyal as the first kind but the advantage of this method is that it doesn't require points.

I kept observing the game moving forward but there were no big actions taken for the next few hours.

It's now hour 9, Kei has 220 points while Fuku has 140.

Fuku now has an army of 50 NPCs that had all signed that they would obey Fuku's words and shoot Kei on site when they see him. He managed to get to 140 points by asking each of them to let him shoot them with a yellow bullet so he can get 50 free points.

20 of the 50 NPCs were loyal because they had already achieved victory while the remaining 30 still had to shoot Kei at least once then survive for 10 minutes to win so they were desperate and more aggressive but less loyal.

As for Kei, he has been slowly accumulating points by shooting NPCs with red bullets.

At the start of the 9th hour, Fuku made a move, he spent 30 points and bought a radar perk giving him Kei's exact location. He then split up his army, he told the 30 desperate NPCs to head to that location together and surround Kei and shoot him all at once, they were commanded to not stop shooting until they shot all of their bullets and they had to try their hardest to hit Kei with those bullets.

That way, he can make sure that Kei will be hit numerous times and will be brought down to 0 points. He told the 20 remaining NPCs to stay by his side.

The 30 NPCs ran forward towards the location, while Fuku and the remaining 20 walked there instead.

2 hours later, Fuku and the 20 NPCs arrived at the location to find the 30 NPCs waiting for his arrival. They told him that they searched all around the area but Kei wasn't here.

Fuku then said "It's possible that he was using a signal jammer but then he would have to keep maintaining it which would cost a lot of points."

Fuku then used the radar again but Kei was pretty far away from his previous location, this made Fuku even more convinced that Kei was using a signal jammer but in reality, he wasn't.

Kei was simply using his monstrous physical capabilities to run around the island at full speed to not be found. But even he showed heavy signs of physical tiredness at this point, he wouldn't be able to maintain it for very long.

Fuku then told his 20 loyal NPCs to let him kill them with red bullets, that way, he'd be able to get points and keep up this points war with Kei where they're both using a signal jammer and radar every 30 minutes. Since the signal jammer was significantly more expensive, Kei would likely run out first.

He had to buy a few red bullets to shoot them all but in the end, he now has 250 points while Kei has 260.

Current Situation:

7 hours left till the end of the gamble.

Kei has 260 points and 1 NPC ally that has already achieved victory.

Fuku has 250 points and 30 NPC allies that have not yet achieved victory.

Fuku then used another radar and ran towards the location with the NPCs, he had no time to waste.

On the way, 30 minutes later, he used another radar since the signal jammers expire after 30 minutes.

Surprisingly though, the signal was pretty close to the old one, this indicates that Kei never jammed the signal but he was getting more tired now.

Another 30 minutes passed and Fuku arrived at the location of the most recent signal. He used his radar again and the location that he got was 5 minutes away from his current location.

Fuku told his army to quiet down their loud breathing and slowly walk towards the radar signal, when they arrived, they saw Kei sitting on a rock alone.

At this point, Kei has 280 points while Fuku has 180. Before Fuku could give the order to fire, one of the NPCs eager to win shot all of his bullets and the other NPCs scrambled and followed.

This lack of coordination allowed Kei to only get hit a few times before escaping. He ran with all his might traversing rough obstacles but he fell a few times.

Even though he didn't seem very tired and he was outrunning all of the others, he was still stumbling a lot because island terrains are very tough to traverse.

Kei mumbled to himself while slightly out of breath and running "I can't see anything, I'm totally lost, why does this keep happening?"

But he kept running and while running, he activated a signal jammer then kept escaping.

Even though he was hit a few times, that was only relative to how much he would've been hit by a coordinated strike.

As for Fuku, he found the one that shot first and shot him as a lesson to the others to follow his commands.

Current Situation:

5 hours left till the end of the gamble

Kei has 75 points and 1 NPC ally that has already won

Fuku has 200 points, 14 NPC allies that have won and 15 that haven't

Kei can't keep moving quickly for much longer. He has no choice but to keep using signal jammers every 30 minutes but he only has enough points to use one more signal jammer, after that, Fuku's NPCs will find him and will keep bombarding him with bullets keeping him at 0 points indefinitely.

Fuku's allies that hit Kei earlier have already won so as long as they stick by Fuku's side for the rest of the game, they can keep the contract terms and win.

As for the other allies, they received information about Kei's last known whereabouts before he used a signal jammer and they were out searching for him.

Another hour passed and there are 4 hours left now, Fuku has 220 points, he's also been shooting any new NPCs he comes across as he doesn't need more allies.

The 15 NPCs that haven't won, that are following Fuku's command are about to close in on him as a unit and bombard him till he's down to 0 points.

The NPCs surrounded Kei and executed a coordinated ambush. He got shot by tens of paintballs simultaneously until all NPCs confirmed they shot their paintballs and retreated.

It was a massive victory for them, the sadness and tiredness on their faces were replaced with smiles. But now, Kei should have no hope. He's on 0 points while Fuku has 220.

The NPCs finally returned to Fuku when there was 3 hours left. Since they had all won, Fuku bought 30 red bullets from the shop for 90 points and was down to 120.

He then told them all to get in a line and let him shoot them. One by one, he shot one with a red bullet and gained 5 points until he had one person left in line waiting to be shot.

At this point, Fuku has 265 points while Kei has 10. But something no one could've predicted happened, the last NPC in line shot Fuku with 4 successive black bullets that all landed since he was at point blank range.

Even though Fuku instantly reacted and shot the NPC with a red bullet when he started shooting, the NPC didn't stop until all 4 black bullets were fired.

Let's go back in time to the 13th hour and see what happened. Fuku's NPCs were strictly prohibited from making deals with Kei and they had to shoot him on sight when they saw him. The other condition is they had to follow Fuku's commands.

During this time, Kei had one NPC which he gave 10 points to, giving him victory as long as that NPC followed all of Kei's commands. Kei then bought 4 black bullets from the shop and gave them to that NPC.

He then told the NPC to go up to one of the NPCs that was chasing him, and give him 5 points for victory.

Let's call Kei's NPC, NPC 1 and Fuku's NPC, NPC 2.

NPC1 gave NPC2 five points that were given to NPC1 by Kei. The deal was that NPC2 would have to follow all of NPC1's commands in exchange.

Since NPC1 had to follow Kei's command, NPC2 basically had to follow Kei's commands but in a roundabout way that wouldn't break the contract NPC2 has with Fuku.

Since NPC2 was desperate and didn't know if he would win, he accepted the deal. NPC1 then gave NPC2 the 4 black bullets and told him to shoot Fuku with them at point black range.

NPC2 then returned to Fuku after shooting Kei who already had 0 points. Since NPC2 had to follow Fuku's commands and NPC1's commands, he had to be careful.

Fuku never commanded NPC2 to not shoot him with black bullets so as long as he manages to shoot Fuku with the 4 black bullets, his win will be secure.

He stood at the back of the line and waited till Fuku got done with everyone and he then shot Fuku with the four black bullets. Even though he was shot with a red bullet, it didn't matter because NPC2 had already achieved the victory as long as he followed Fuku's and NPC1's commands.

NPC1 shot Fuku and now there's 2 hours and a half left. Fuku has 65 points while Kei has 210 points.

The game was officially decided, no matter what Fuku tried to do, he couldn't turn the situation around with that many points and as expected, the last 2 hours passed and the game ended with Kei's victory.

As for how he won, it was all due to his setup at the start of the game.

When the game started, Kei instantly went to Fuku and had a gunfight with him. It's now clear that there were 2 main reasons for that.

The first reason was planting the thought of buying NPCs in Fuku's mind. This wasn't just to waste Fuku's points, Kei had definitely anticipated that Fuku would see through it and begin threatening NPCs into being his allies but that's exactly what he wanted.

Kei manipulated Fuku perfectly into acting exactly as he wanted, he wanted Fuku to have NPC allies that weren't fully loyal to him so he could exploit them later and win.

The second reason behind Kei's attack at the start was to determine how Fuku's luck worked. By seeing that Fuku missed a few bullets, he was able to determine that Fuku's luck only affects himself and not others.

Also, when he shot Fuku with the surprise black bullet, if Fuku's luck simply affected himself and protected him then the gun would've jammed and the bullet wouldn't have been launched. Since the bullet managed to hit Fuku, it allowed Kei to deduce that Fuku's luck isn't all powerful and it could still be penetrated when hit with something completely unexpected.

This information is what allowed him to use his scheme to turn the tables around at the last minute by using Fuku's confidence in his luck against him.

And thus the game ended with an overwhelming victory for Kei.

I bundled them back up and brought them back to the boat so I could return them home, they both showed signs of tiredness and immediately headed to bed on the boat.

Chapter 19 - Recollection (Kei)

As I sat there laying on my bed in the room prepared for me by the Third Kingdom, I looked back upon the events of the black island.

I managed to outsmart Fuku through a multi-layered strategy but it still had a flaw. I relied too much on other people, that could've led me to a defeat.

Over the years, I've learned not to entrust others with crucial aspects of a plan unless I had complete control over them or if it was absolutely necessary.

Entrusting NPC1 with the black bullets to give them to NPC2 was fine because if he didn't manage to get it done then he wouldn't be free so he'd do whatever it takes to get it done.

But the issue was with NPC2. Even though he had to meet the conditions to be free, if Fuku had placed a rule that disallowed his NPCs from shooting him then NPC2 could've missed all the bullets on purpose claiming that he tried to hit Fuku, that way, he'd be able to meet both conditions and gain his freedom.

At the time, I wasn't able to figure anything else out so I deemed it necessary to entrust this part of my plan to NPC2 but if he failed then I would've lost.

I need to grow, I need to get better, because if I don't, then I'll never be able to catch up to Satoshi.

Why, though? Why was I thinking of him again? He made it clear many times that he hates me, that he's disgusted by me, yet I cling to the thought of him like a parasite.

All I think about is catching up to Satoshi, standing as his equal.

All while knowing deep down that I'll never be able to do it, that I'll always be a fake, a cheap imitation of Satoshi.

I don't know what to do anymore. I'm totally lost in darkness. No matter how strong I get, Satoshi will always be stronger. No matter how smart I get, Satoshi will always be smarter. No matter how capable I become, Satoshi will always be more capable. These thoughts consumed me everyday and I can't seem to understand why.

A few years ago, when I was still in school, I was very confident. Now I realize that it wasn't confidence at all, but ego.

I was always better than everyone at school even if I tried less, I was a natural genius. I could solve mental arithmetics faster than people who had learned specialized techniques. I could memorize books faster than others memorized pages.

And because of that, I constantly looked down on people. I saw myself as the player, the main character, while everyone else was a pawn for me to use in some way to achieve my goals.

Then Satoshi came into my life, he was just as inferior as the others but then I got to know him, and after the Kaiser Games, my superiority complex broke down and was replaced by an inferiority complex.

I don't think inferiority complex is the right phrase to use though, an inferiority complex implies that I believed myself to be inferior even though it was untrue but that's wrong.

I don't believe myself to be inferior, I am inferior.

I was about to begin reviewing the Kaiser Games in my mind, trying to find something new I can learn from it but I was interrupted by a notification on my phone.

It was the reminder I had set for the meeting with Abami, Kamishiro and Kei. It's going to be in an hour and so I don't have time to review the past to find if there's anything I missed. I have to get ready and head out now.

I took a shower, put on my suit and got ready to leave. I sat there on the chair staring at the door of my room thoughtlessly for 10 minutes until there was 5 minutes left till the meetup.

I then got up and headed out so I could arrive exactly on time.

After walking through the monotonous hallways of the Third Kingdom's castle, I arrived at the same room we met up in a month ago.

Looking back at it, I definitely grew a lot this month. Now, I need to go in and prepare myself for what's to come.

I opened the door of the room and it was exactly as I remembered it. There were no flags or symbols. There was only a wooden table in the center of the room under the vaulted ceiling.

The same four chairs were around the table, two on side and two on the other.

Last time, those two didn't sit, they stood on the wall opposite us and spoke to us from a position of superiority, but this time, it was different.

Abami and Kamishiro had each taken a seat on the opposite end of the table, I glanced back and forth between them then my gaze switched to Satoshi who was already seated on the chair to the right of the empty one.

My gaze lingered on him for a bit too long but then I was brought back to reality by the immense pressure emanating from those two.

It seems like Satoshi got here before me, looks like he finally fixed that bad habit of his.

I took my seat and after doing so, Abami stood up and began to speak. "Well done, both of you have defeated two stages of opponents and you're getting closer to the right to challenge us. But things won't be as easy from now."

His gaze switched between me and Satoshi briefly before he continued "You can consider the opponents you've matched up against so far to be the warm up, things will get much harder from here. For us to determine that you are worthy of leading the three Kingdoms, you must prove yourselves by defeating the coming waves of opponents."

After saying that, Abami sat back down and stopped talking, Satoshi was the one to speak next, he said "Did you call us here just to tell us that? We already knew all of this, is there anything else you want to address or can I leave now?"

'Why did Satoshi always have to be so rough? He really needed to have more class, his actions aren't befitting of a prince.' I thought to myself.

It was then Kamishiro who spoke next and responded to Satoshi "It isn't just that, we'd like to address your suspicions regarding the matches you've had so far and explain just how different your future matches will be."

He was shifting his gaze between us as he said that but then his gaze landed and stabilized on Satoshi, he continued "In your first game, you played the gamble called the Blind Auction. You went up against Akuma and defeated him spectacularly but you must've found it odd how easily we killed people, right?"

"We avoided having a war and held these gambles instead to avoid unnecessary death yet we killed those people without hesitation. Well, that isn't true. If you recall, the first person to die was Mystic, she deposited all 50 of her coins in the first round and Akuma took them. Well, Mystic was actually one of us, she was someone we planted into the game to lose in the first round."

"We knew that at least one of you or Akuma would think of the strategy of bidding on everyone so we knew she'd lose in the first round. Then we shot her with the bullet however it wasn't a real bullet, it was a fake bullet with a small bag of fake blood that bursts on impact and knocks back the target."

"Mystic was hit and acted like she was killed then the assistant referees went over to her and added more fake blood while picking her up to make things look more realistic. From then on, everyone that got shot didn't actually die but the shock factor kept them silent for long enough for the assistant referees to go over there and tranquilize them before picking them up."

"Akuma is still alive, so is everyone else from the Blind Auction."

He then turned his gaze towards me and continued "As for Fuku in the Black Island gamble, he obviously didn't have any form of good luck. He had an earpiece in, given by us, and we informed him before bullets hit him for example. We didn't want it to be hectic so we created rules for how his luck would work and you masterfully found them out and exploited them."

He then turned his gaze back to Satoshi once more "As for Kuromine, he didn't actually have a Sei. Everyone on the cruise was an actor told about the gamble and told to follow Kuromine's orders when they came. Kuromine was told that everyone

will follow his ability that he had to pretend he had beforehand of course, same as Fuku."

"We set a limit of 25 Sei uses per day to prevent total chaos and as for the referee, we informed him of the trick but we told him not to inform the assisting referees. We also gave each of them contact lenses and told them they were anti-Sei contact lenses. We also told Kuromine about them beforehand."

"As for you, Satoshi, if Kuromine ever used his Sei on you then you would've gotten a call from the referee telling you that you must follow Kuromine's command. And when Kuromine commanded you, the referee did call you to tell you to follow Kuromine's command since he didn't realize that you had taken the anti-Sei contact lenses but during the call, we informed him that you had the anti-Sei contact lenses so you didn't have to follow his commands."

"Obviously the contact lenses were actually just normal contact lenses but as per the narrative you were given, it wouldn't be fair to force you to do as Kuromine says when you had those contact lenses. So we stopped him just as you picked up the call and told him not to tell you to follow Kuromine's command as you shouldn't be affected by the Sei."

"As for the actions Kuromine took in the end, we needed the Sei to remain as realistic as possible to keep the narrative going so we had things keep going which unfortunately led to an assisting referee losing his life."

"And regarding the rumors you've probably heard about Kuromine beforehand, he was just another failed revolutionist and the world spread rumors about him having the ability to control minds but it was all false, obviously."

"The reason I tell you two this information is because you've probably suspected most of it already and so these tricks wouldn't work on you anymore. From now on, you will no longer face these situations where the opponent has an advantage. In the Blind Auction and Impossible Infiltration, your opponents got prior knowledge of the rules while you two didn't."

"In the Emperor's Vessel and the Black Island, the opponents were given the advantages of supernatural abilities that you two weren't given."

"You might think the gambles will be easier because of this but please prepare yourself for them to become significantly harder. Now you will be battling truly intelligent minds where only intelligence will determine the victor. If you lose, you cannot blame it on advantages that your opponent had that you didn't. It will be your fault completely, you will have simply been inferior in the battle of wits."

I quickly processed what he said and it mostly met my predictions regarding how Fuku did what he did. I'm guessing Satoshi also suspected Kuromine as well. Things were definitely going to be more difficult now, I had to be prepared.

That tense conversation was finally over, Abami and Kamishiro headed out first leaving me and Satoshi alone at the table in silence. I stared at Satoshi intently as he stared into the wall in front of him.

He hasn't gotten up yet, he was waiting for me to speak to him but words weren't coming out of my mouth. I didn't know what to say. And after a few minutes of sitting in silence, Satoshi got up from his chair.

This was my last chance to say something to him. I abruptly screamed out "Wait!" Satoshi then responded coldly "Is there something you want to say to me?"

There was only one question I had, the same question that's been circulating my mind since ***that day***, but I couldn't bring myself to say it.

He began walking towards the exit, I had to say it. "Why? Why Satoshi? We had a dream of joining together, taking over the three Kingdoms and uniting them? Why did you abandon our dream? Why did you abandon me?"

I thought he would ignore my question, that he would keep walking, but he stopped in his place.

A few seconds passed as he stood there in his place that felt like an eternity, then he turned around and looked directly into my eyes. "I'll answer your questions. Why did I abandon our dream you asked? You're as selfish as ever Kei. Your dream is not our dream. All this time, I've been following a pre-determined path, a destiny that you built out for me, this convinced me that your dream was my dream but it never was."

He continued "You also asked why I abandoned you? That's easy to answer, you were just no longer interesting to me. You are boring. Ever since the Kaiser Games, my interest in you began to fade slowly until ***that day*** came and I was so completely bored by you. Your weakness disgusted me, and I had to live with that everyday. Then I realized that I didn't have to live with that, I could just leave and follow my own path, that's why I abandoned you."

After saying that, he turned around and said "I believe I've answered all of your questions. In return for doing so, please don't talk to me again until we have to face each other. If you are able to defeat all of your opponents and face me in the end, then struggle as much as you can to defeat me. Goodbye."

There was no hesitation, no emotion in his voice, it was cold and detached. He simply walked off after saying those words and left me staring at his back. I haven't cried since I was a child, I realized very early on that it was inefficient. But for some reason, a few tears were rolling down my face as I watched Satoshi's back fade into the background.

I didn't get up, I stayed seated in my chair and wiped the tears off my face. I didn't have time to waste on something that isn't fruitful, I just got a big hint, I was right, the turning point of our friendship started after The Kaiser Games.

I need to reanalyze what happened at that time to determine the cause.

Chapter 20 - The Kaiser Games (Kei)

This was just after we graduated high school. We were on summer holiday and we had a few months to decide what to do next.

At this point, I was 16 and Satoshi was 18.

I got my middle and high school education in the Third Kingdom, and so did Satoshi. We only met in the last 2 years of highschool though because I transferred to his school for those last two years.

As for why we got our education in the Third Kingdom, it was to avoid our fathers. The first and Second Kingdoms were at war and we didn't want to be involved in that. We didn't know each other at the time but Satoshi and I coincidentally made the same decision, to study at the Third Kingdom as normal students until we were forced to return to our Kingdoms.

So when we met each other, me and Satoshi didn't know we were the princes of the opposing Kingdoms, we only got to know that on ***that day.***

Anyways, at this point during the summer holidays, me and Satoshi had already had a few gambles for fun which revolved around outsmarting each other but he beat me every time.

My arrogance couldn't accept defeat, so everytime I lost, I made an excuse. In the end, it all came down to me accusing Satoshi of playing unfairly, of always somehow finding a loophole in the rules and exploiting it.

I told him I could beat him if I really tried to use his methods but I didn't want to. So during the summer vacation, we decided to have a gamble where both of us would try our hardest to win, no matter what. That game ended up being The Kaiser Games.

This was my chance to prove to myself that I could definitely beat him if I wanted to. At that time, I didn't think I had to prove anything to myself though, I just knew that I could defeat him if I wanted to, I knew I was superior.

I was, of course, wrong.

At the time we also had two friends. I had a friend named Hajime who I met a few years ago in middle school who I spoke to occasionally. Satoshi had a friend named Makoto who he also met in middle school and spoke to occasionally.

Those two were Third Kingdom natives, so they also lived there. We met up occasionally but we mostly spoke on calls. We frequently talked for hours and enjoyed our time with each other, me and Satoshi were the main friends, and the other two were new additions.

Satoshi and Makoto occasionally spoke to each other without me and Hajime. Me and Hajime occasionally spoke to each other without Satoshi and Makoto. But it was rare for me to speak to Makoto alone or for Hajime to speak to Satoshi alone, it was that kind of complex friendship.

Me and Satoshi decided to teach Makoto and Hajime the basics of using one's intelligence to outsmart opponents so they could take part in our next gamble. Realistically to us, they would be NPCs for us to make the game more interesting.

After a while, I came up with a ruleset for the Kaiser Games and sent it to the others a few days before the gamble took place. The gamble took place in a normal mall with lots of normal uninvolved people walking around, we had to each come up with strategies and try our best to win this game but me and Satoshi both knew that one of us would end up winning and part of the battle was seeing who could use Makoto and Hajime better to achieve their victory.

Let's go over what happened in the gamble, but first, a rule explanation.

🎲 OVERVIEW

The Kaiser Games is a strategic 1v1v1v1 game set inside deity mall. The entire mall becomes the battleground. The players initially gather in an area on the first floor (lowest floor) and a designated Kaiser Ring is created on the first floor. The objective is to collect Kaiser Points (KP) and then fulfill one of three win conditions before the others.

🧭 GENERAL FLOW

The game begins with all 4 players inside the Kaiser Ring.

Players may begin moving to other floors when the game begins.

No violence is allowed on the first floor.

On all other floors, "violence" is represented by K-Time (a combat mechanic using KP).

You can't stay in an area where it is not possible for someone to make eye contact with you (e.g bathroom stall) for longer than 5 minutes and a maximum of once per hour. Any time spent in such areas doesn't accumulate KP.

🏃 MOVEMENT & KP GENERATION

2 KP is earned for every full minute spent on any floor other than the first floor.

Players must be physically present on a floor (no video calls, no stand-ins).

If a player stays in the food court (must be in the actual visible food court area, not everywhere on the floor or in hidden areas like the bathroom), they earn 3 KP for every minute spent.

A Player must engage in at least one K-Time every 20 minutes. Failure to do so results in a 15 KP deduction for the first 20 minutes, a 25KP deduction for the second 20 minutes and a 35KP deduction for every 20 minutes from then on.

KP can be transferred between players but no binding contracts are valid (basically, you can send a player 10KP and tell him to send it back later but he can choose not to).

KP cannot go into the negatives, you cannot spend more KP than you have and if you're fined for some reason that would lead you to go below 0 then you'll go to 0 and the rest of the fine is forgiven.

A player cannot stay on the same floor for longer than 15 minutes, if you are on the same floor for longer than 15 minutes, then you don't generate any KP for anything over 15 minutes until you switch floors. After switching floors, you cannot go back to your previous floor for 5 minutes.

Usage of elevators isn't allowed

📢 MILESTONE ANNOUNCEMENT RULE

Upon reaching 180 KP or more, a player must immediately and truthfully announce on the specified group chat:
👉 "I have reached 180 KP."

You cannot fake this announcement or make it preemptively.

If you receive multiple KP at once (e.g. from winning K-Time), you must announce the first moment you reach or exceed 180KP on the specified group chat.

🏆 WIN CONDITIONS

Once a player reaches 200 Kaiser Points, they unlock access to three different win routes (when a player achieves one of the win conditions, he must have at least 200 KP at the time or the win condition is invalid):

Economic Victory:
Spend an additional 100 KP (300 total) to instantly win the game.

Duel Victory:
Win 2 consecutive K-Times after reaching 200 KP.

Domination Victory:
Enter the Kaiser Ring and remain uninterrupted inside it for 4 straight minutes after reaching 200KP.

After a player wins through one of the win conditions and becomes kaiser, he must announce as soon as possible on the specified group chat to everyone that he has got kaiser and that the gamble is over. You cannot under any circumstances falsely announce that you've become kaiser when you haven't. You only win after you reach 200KP then complete one of the win conditions and win while still having at least 200 KP then announce that you are kaiser.

The moment a player is disqualified, all his KP disappears and he no longer generates KP, this is to prevent transfers from disqualified players. You also cannot transfer KP to a disqualified player.

⭕ THE KAISER RING

The Kaiser Ring is an approximately 5-meter radius circle on the first floor which the players will agree upon before the gamble.

Only players who have 200+ KP may enter the ring to attempt a win.

If another player enters the ring, the 4-minute timer resets.

The player who entered the Kaiser Ring first is the one who's timer will go towards becoming Kaiser.

You may not enter the ring more than 3 times per 10 minutes.

You may not stay inside the ring for longer than 2 minutes per entry, unless you are actively trying to win (i.e. at 200 KP or more).

These rules prevent endless stalling and griefing of winning attempts.

☎️ K-TIME (Kaiser Combat Mechanic)

K-Time is the combat phase that can only occur on upper floors.

Triggering K-Time:

If a player sees another player on any floor except the first, they may call them by phone.

The called player must answer immediately.

A K-Time bid begins.

You may not have K-time with the same player more than once within 5 minutes.

Once K-Time begins, your K-point generation stops till K-time finishes.

K-time has a time limit of 1 minute to present your bids, if no bid is presented then you will be assumed to have bid 1KP. Players will agree to say their bid at the same time, once that time comes, if a player doesn't announce his bid then it will count as if he bid 1KP. You cannot wait till the end of the minute to announce your bid, you must agree with the other K-time player to announce your bids at the same time near the start of the phone call. This is to prevent exploiting the K-time, waiting for your opponent to say his bid then just 1 up him.

No K-times are allowed in the first 5 minutes of the game.

You cannot offer K-times if you have 0 KP, if you are called upon for K-time while you're at 0 KP then you can bid 0KP.

You must be on the same floor as a player to challenge them to K-time

Bidding:

Both players secretly decide how many KP to spend. You must spend a minimum of 1KP and the maximum you can spend is the amount of KP you have.

They reveal simultaneously.

The higher bidder wins and the effects are applied.

K-Time Consequences:

Loser cannot generate KP for the next 10 minutes (Becomes 30 minutes if a player has a bounty placed on him)

Winner may choose one of these rewards:
1. Gain 10 KP
2. Steal 6 KP from the loser

If both players bid the same amount then instead of it being considered as a draw with no winners and no losers. Both players will be treated as losers of that K-time and will both suffer the loser's punishment.

You must engage in at least one K-Time every 20 minutes. Failure to do so results in a 10 KP deduction for the first 20 minutes, a 30KP deduction for the second 20 minutes and a 45KP deduction for every 20 minutes from then on.

Players may not fake visibility to force K-Time. It must be natural sight.

If you lose/draw K-time then you may not engage in K-time until your banned KP Generation period is done. When you lose, you must announce in the group chat that you have lost in K-time and so no one can engage you in K-time. You may not under any circumstances make this announcement falsely, preemptively or too late. It must be made as soon as you lose a K-time and at no other time.

Rule 1 – Point Generation by Location
K-Points are awarded based on your location at the start of each minute.

If the minute begins on a certain floor, you receive points for that floor even if you move to another floor during that minute.

Being on the stairs counts as being on the floor you were on when the minute began. You can't be on the stairs for longer than the intended time required to move between floors.

Exception: Entering the first floor at any time cancels K-Point generation for that minute, regardless of where you were when it began. No points are awarded during any minute in which you enter the first floor.

Rule 2 – Partial Minutes Do Not Count
K-Points are only awarded for full minutes completed in an eligible location. Partial minutes do not contribute to point totals. For example, if K-Time starts while you're at the 50th second of your minute, you'll miss out on the K-Points from that minute. Once K-Time ends, the timer restarts from the beginning of a new full minute.

🎯 BOUNTY SYSTEM

A player may spend 40 KP to place a bounty on another player. A player cannot have more than one bounty placed at a certain moment and a player cannot have more than one bounty placed on him at a certain moment as well. You may only place a maximum of 2 bounties in the whole game.

After a player sets a bounty on another player, he must announce in the specified group chat with all 4 players that a bounty has been set on this specific player. If the player with a bounty on him loses his first K-time from when the bounty was set, he will be banned from KP generation for 30 minutes instead of the standard 10 minutes. If he wins his first K-time from when his bounty was set, the bounty goes away.

False bounties or bounty stacking is not allowed.

🚫 PROHIBITIONS

Players cannot leave the mall for any reason during the game.

Players cannot use technology to mimic presence (video calls, dummy phones).

Players cannot camp in the Kaiser Ring endlessly. It is a strategic zone, not a hiding spot

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🤝 GAMEPLAY ETHICS

No physical violence is ever allowed.

If a player breaks any rule that has been mentioned throughout this entire rule list then they will be disqualified unless the rule specifies a different punishment.

These were the rules of the game I created. As for how we would keep track of these points, each of us would just keep track of their own KP generation.

Obviously someone could cheat and say they have more KP than they actually do but none of us would do that.

I sent the group this ruleset a few days before the gamble. Over those few days, we had a few group calls and I noticed something important. From the way Satoshi was speaking, it was clear to me that the three of them had decided to join together in a temporary alliance to stop me.

I had already thought of that possibility though, it was actually the most obvious one. I was seen as the smartest one in the group and so it was obvious that they'd decide to target the strongest player before facing each other, that only boosted my ego further.

There were 2 methods in my mind to counteract getting 3v1'd in the Kaiser Games. The first was to get all three of them disqualified but that would be difficult.

The second was to get myself a traitor and that would prove to be easy.

I chose Hajime to be my traitor, he would be the easier one to convince as he's been my friend for a long time.

I got into a call with him and told him that I knew Satoshi's plan step by step. I told him that I knew that Satoshi planned to 3v1 me, I told him that Satoshi is definitely going to keep having K-time with me and by using the cumulative K points from the three people to constantly win, I'd lose everytime and keep getting banned from KP generation.

When Hajime heard that, he was obviously shocked, he was shocked because I fully anticipated the plan that Satoshi had created to stop me.

After that I told him that I have a plan prepared to get the three of them disqualified in one go but I didn't want to use it because I didn't want to win with cheap tactics like disqualifying my opponents.

The reason he believed that is because I'd mentioned previously a lot of times that I don't like winning in methods that aren't impressive and noble, so that thought was already engraved into his mind. The other reason is that he wasn't intelligent, he wasn't dumb by any means, but he had no experience in outsmarting opponents and so he wasn't yet able to catch these small inconsistencies.

Now there was only one thing left to do, I showed him despair, showed him that I'm prepared to counter them fully and destroy them. I've pushed him down to the bottom of the well and now I must give him a line of hope.

The final thing I told him is that I would like him to join me and turn traitor against the other two, if he does that then he will have a chance of winning against me as the final two after we defeat the other two.

He gladly accepted and even thanked me for saving him. Those were the events of importance that took place before the gamble.

Then the day of the gamble approached and we met up at the mall, but not without weird occurrences.

We were first meant to meet up together somewhere else then head together to the mall but me and Hajime didn't meet up with them and told them to get to the mall together and we'd follow after.

The reason for that was because I needed to have one final talk with Hajime alone to make sure he's on my side.

I spoke to him on the way and ensured that me and him were allies. Then we arrived at the mall and found Satoshi and Makoto waiting there for us.

We first decided to sit down in a cafe for a bit before starting the gamble and we engaged in idle chatter.

Satoshi told me that my defeat was already assured. I didn't counter even though I wanted to because I didn't want him to catch on to the fact that I already knew his plan to 3v1 me and had already prepared a counter.

Looking back now, it was obvious he knew that I knew about his plan to 3v1 me. After all, he's the one who kept dropping hints for it, he wanted me to know. Me not responding only confirmed to him that his indirect manipulation worked and I was trying to hide the fact that I knew.

After more idle chatter, we went down to the first floor of the mall, decided on the location for the Kaiser Ring, then we officially started the game.

Immediately, Makoto and Satoshi ran to the stairs and began going up. I started walking the other direction to the other stairs and Hajime followed me.

As for why he was following me, it was part of Satoshi's plan for the 3v1. Satoshi thought I would be shocked by this series of events but I already knew it all because my traitor had informed me of their plan.

Satoshi and Makoto would quickly make their way to the top floor and go to the food court. They'd sit there the whole time and get KP with a 1.5x multiplier.

Hajime's job was to follow me the whole time and after the first 5 minutes were over, he'd get transferred points from Satoshi and Makoto. Then he'd engage in K-time with me and he'd be guaranteed to win since he has more KP.

That way, I'd be banned from KP generation for 10 minutes, then he'd get point transfers every 10 minutes and keep having K-times with me, forcing me to not generate KP and effectively removing me from the game.

But I had a plan, Hajime would never have K-time with me but he'd tell them that he did, this way, me and him would keep getting KP and he'd also keep getting KP transfers from them so he'd have the most points and I'd have the second most.

This was a great result for him and an okay one for me but a bad one for the other two. We'd eventually have K-time every 39 minutes to prevent the big fine that comes with no K-time every 40 minutes.

With this plan, I'd effectively remove Makoto and Satoshi from the game. Regarding Hajime, he would be easy to deal with. I had many plans to trick him out of his KP.

Worst case scenario, if none of them work then I could just lie to him about how many KP I'd be putting up for the next fixed K-time between me and him and I'll also place a bounty on him so I'd get some of his KP and ban him from KP generation for 30 minutes allowing me to regain the lead.

It was working fabulously at the start, Hajime was getting KP from the other two and telling them that we're going into K-time. Over the first 30 minutes, I went to the food court a bit and also stayed in other areas a bit.

After 30 minutes, this was the result: I had 75KP, Hajime had 120KP, Satoshi had 60KP and Makoto had 55KP.

Then suddenly, at the 30 minute mark, Satoshi sent Hajime a message to stop following me and to meet up with them.

My heart dropped for a second but I was sure I didn't make any mistakes that led him to catch on. I even tried to run from Hajime a few times to make it seem like I was bothered by being followed.

I told Hajime to have a quick K-time with me before he leaves so that we can make sure not to get penalized at the 40 minute mark if he's not back by then. I told him to put down 1KP and that I'd put down 2KP and beat him.

He agreed since he was ahead of me and he couldn't afford to break our alliance this early on.

After the K-time ended. I had 85KP, Hajime had 120KP and a 10 minute stop on KP generation, Satoshi had 62KP and Makoto had 57KP.

At the time I was anxious when Hajime left because I didn't know what Satoshi was plotting. I told Hajime to go along with whatever Satoshi told him to do. As long as he didn't fall into a trap, keeping his cover was the top priority.

What was actually happening at the time was Satoshi telling them that they'll be switching plans, that instead of having repeated K-times with me, they'd use K-time as a weapon and stop having K-times with me completely so that I'd keep getting fined and not be able to generate a meaningful amount of KP.

Satoshi then had them both take out their sim cards so that even if I saw them and tried to call them, the call would never reach them so they wouldn't have to answer.

They'd only put their sim cards back in when they wanted to have K-time with each other.

Before removing his sim card, Hajime sent me a quick update and I told him to tell them that he's had to spend lots of points to make sure that he beats me in K-time and that he needs them to transfer him points for them to all be equal.

And that idea worked like a charm, Hajime took out his SIM card and gave it to Satoshi as he requested. Makoto did the same.

Then they transferred 15 KP each to Hajime. Hajime told me at the time that they only gave him 5KP, it seems like he was also trying to be sneaky towards me but I would go on to defeat him in the end so it won't matter.

After they gave him KP, I went up to the food court at the perfect time and met up with them.

All four of us stood together then I looked at Hajime and told him "Job's done, right? Let's go." and motioned for him to follow me.

The smile of triumph against me on Satoshi's face dropped when he heard me say that. He looked at Hajime and asked him with a slightly shaken voice "Can I take this as a declaration that you've joined his side?"

Hajime still seemed a bit doubtful because he wanted to keep all of his options open till the last second but he said "Yeah sorry, I've been on Kei's side since the beginning."

Satoshi then angrily returned Hajime's SIM card to him and told him to go ahead and leave.

But I wanted to taunt Satoshi so I told him "You don't get to determine if we leave, we want to stay right here."

Satoshi then grabbed Makoto's arm and angrily walked off.

Me and Hajime were now sitting in the food court. At this time, I had 100KP, Hajime had 155KP, Makoto had 85KP and Satoshi had 85KP.

Me and Hajime sat in the food court talking about plans for the endgame. All I needed to do now was to trick Hajime into giving me his KP and that would be very simple to do, I just had to wait.

And after waiting for a bit, it finally happened. Satoshi announced in the group chat that he had 180KP as per the rules.

Hajime was shocked when he read the message and I acted like I was shocked as well. I then told him "I didn't take this into account, Makoto must've realized he has no hope of winning and decided to help Satoshi win. Satoshi must already be in the Kaiser Ring, he must have 200KP because he probably waited till him and Makoto got to 100KP each then he had Makoto transfer 100KP so he announced that he was at 180KP when he's actually at 200KP"

I then continued while we both started walking out of the food court and down the stairs heading to the first floor where the Kaiser Ring is located "I have a plan Hajime, a plan that involves you winning. If we keep fighting now then my worst case scenario will come to be and Satoshi will win. I can't let that happen. I'll tell you what we can do, Satoshi probably has 3 minutes left in the Kaiser Ring before he gets the win, one of us needs to interrupt him."

"I'll make a binding promise that if you give me all of your KP now, I'll give you 300KP when I hit 300KP and I won't use the 300KP to win. What we'll do is I'll stay

on a higher floor and accumulate KP till I hit 300 then transfer them to you. You go down and keep interrupting Satoshi's Kaiser Ring, stay on the first floor, I obviously won't go down there because there's no KP generation there."

Due to the way the game works, a promise must be kept, this was basically a verbal contract. He had no time to think and transferred his points to me, I suddenly jumped up to 285KP. I sent to the group chat that I hit 180KP.

I stayed up on the higher floor while Hajime went down and found Satoshi in the Kaiser Ring with one minute left before he won but he interrupted him.

My trick was simple though, I stayed up for a few more minutes until I got to 301KP. Even though it was low, I promised to give him 300KP when I hit 300KP. Since I never hit 300KP and went directly to 301KP, I didn't owe him anything.

I then announced to the group that I have won through the economic method and told them all to meet up in the food court.

I arrived there before them and ordered 2 pizzas then I found an empty table and waited for them to arrive. Hajime arrived first with an angry look on his face as I smirked towards him.

He then said "This isn't fair, verbal contracts are absolute so you should've transferred the KP to me. You didn't win, you cheated."

I then responded while smiling at him "I'll explain it all when the others get here."

Shortly after, Makoto and Satoshi arrived. Makoto had a defeated look on his face but for some reason, Satoshi was smiling.

After everyone sat down, I began gloating about my victory. "I bet you're all wondering how I got to 300KP, right? Let me walk you through my plan. First, I anticipated your 3v1 plan and everything you would do and so I prepared a countermeasure, Hajime."

"I convinced Hajime to join my side by alluding to me having a method to disqualify all of you which didn't exist, basically, it was a bluff and he fell for it."

Hajime then cut me off angrily "I didn't fall for your stupid bluff, I just thought that I'd have better odds of winning by joining you. Also as I said earlier, you didn't win, you cheated."

I then looked at Hajime and told him "Remember what we said before the gamble? After the gamble, we'd let the winner gloat and explain his plans. I'll explain to you how I didn't cheat in a bit."

I then continued "After I got Hajime to my side, he kept slowly accumulating the points that you were transferring to him and making you think that he was having K-time with me but he wasn't, me and him were gaining points at the faster rate than you two."

"After Satoshi called him back, I admit that I got a bit nervous that Satoshi had seen through his betrayal but my suspicions were unreasonable, Satoshi suspected nothing."

"I had Hajime get points from you one final time then I showed up to tell you guys that Hajime was officially on my side. I did that because I didn't want Hajime to keep being a double agent to the very end because then he might betray me. I forced him to pick a side and obviously, he picked mine."

"Next, I knew that Makoto would give Satoshi his points. Even though Makoto has a strong personality and wants to win, I knew that Satoshi could convince him that only one of them could win and that it should be him."

"After getting the 180KP announcement from Satoshi, the final stage of my plan was ready. I told Hajime that if he gave me his KP, I'd return 300KP to him as soon as I hit 300KP. I told him I'd sacrifice my own win so that we can make sure to stop Satoshi."

"However, this phrasing has an obvious flaw which even Hajime could've picked up on if he was in a calm state but since we were running to the first floor and he was stressed about Satoshi winning, he didn't think it through and so he didn't notice the small nuance."

"The deal was based on me hitting 300KP, but I never hit 300KP, I only hit 301KP so I had no obligation to give him any KP."

“After that, I announced my victory and gathered you all here.”

Then I looked at Satoshi and told him “As I told you, if I were to try, you wouldn't be able to defeat me. I’m just smarter, accept it.”

Satoshi then clapped at me mockingly but he had nothing to say.

The pizza arrived and Satoshi briefly left to go to the bathroom then he came back. He sat with us and we all ate pizza.

Hajime was unhappy with the result the whole time and kept insisting that my tactics were scummy. Satoshi didn’t comment much and praised me from time to time. As for Makoto, he was silent, he only said one thing “I don’t want to ruin his moment.”

At the time, I thought he meant he didn’t want to interrupt my victory but I couldn’t be farther from the truth.

After we finished eating pizza, my phone vibrated and I took it out of my pocket. Then I saw a strange message, it was a message to the group chat from Satoshi, the man sitting across from me right now and it said

“I have just achieved the economic victory, good game everyone.”

I looked at him and laughed “A bit too late for that. The game’s been over for nearly an hour now.”

He then looked at me and said “Aren’t you the one that said that we should let the winner gloat and explain his plans, so please shut up and let me talk now, it’s my turn.”

I then responded “Why would I do that? I won. There’s no reason for me to let you speak.”

He then looked at me and said “As usual, you place a rule then you don’t follow it yourself. Shut up and listen, I’ll tell you now why I’m the victor of this gamble.”

I wanted to say something but no words came out of my mouth, fear filled up my heart as I thought of the possibility of him having won. I looked back, I reflected but I couldn’t see anything. I didn’t miss anything, it should be my victory. So why is he claiming that he won?

He then continued "Let me give you the real way the story went. First, let's go back to a few days before the gamble. I got on a call with Makoto and Hajime and proposed the idea of a 3v1 alliance, since you appeared to be the biggest threat, it was easy to get them to agree."

"At the time, I had already thought of the idea of taking out our SIM cards and forcing you into a situation where you can't have K-time with anyone which would've been much more effective than constantly having K-times with you but I didn't propose that idea. Instead I proposed the idea of having constant K-times with you and I appointed Hajime to that position."

"I then planted 2 seeds. The first seed I planted was in Kei, I subtly hinted to the fact that we'll be 3v1ing him as I wanted to make sure he'd figure that out. Knowing that he'll decide to turn one of the allies traitor, I planted my second seed in Hajime. Whenever I spoke to him, I often said sentences like 'Even though your individual chances of winning would be higher with Kei, the goal is to stop Kei and make sure he doesn't win'. This subtle manipulation is probably what actually led him to betray me and choose your side. As for why I planted that seed in Hajime, it was obvious that you'd pick Hajime as the traitor as he's the one you knew better between him and Hajime and you had many more opportunities to talk to him."

"Now heading to the day of the gamble, I brought 2 phones with me, this will later be essential to implement my plan. First, I let the normal plan go on and kept sending points to Hajime acting like I'm oblivious about what he's doing. During this time, I was alone with Makoto and I told him that Hajime had betrayed us."

"I told him I'd prove it to him if he followed my lead and so he did. Next, I called back Hajime after letting him accumulate a significant amount of KP. I told them that we'll be switching plans to a better one I just came up with, the SIM card plan that makes sure Kei can't have K-time."

"After I got their SIM cards, me and Makoto implemented the plan to stop Hajime if he turned traitor. I had Makoto secretly put Hajime's SIM card in his phone. If Hajime admitted that he was a traitor, I'd call Hajime's number and Makoto wouldn't pick up. But since I called Hajime and he didn't pick up, that would lead to his disqualification as that was against the rules."

"Then after Hajime asked us for more points, Kei showed up and told us that Hajime was on his side. After Hajime confirmed it, Makoto was now convinced of what I said and agreed to the plan so I secretly called Hajime's number and since he didn't pick up, Hajime was disqualified from then on."

"Next, while I was talking and grabbing attention, Makoto removed Hajime's SIM card from his phone and gave it to me, who gave it to Hajime as if nothing happened."

"But that leaves a question, if Makoto knew about the SIM card plan, why would he trust me with his SIM card? Well, that was because to implement this plan, you'd need 2 phones and since I only had one, he knew it was safe. How did he know I had one? Because if I didn't, I would've never asked for his help with the plan, I would've just gotten them both disqualified."

"But that was all a false misconception I had planted. I could've definitely gotten them both disqualified but that would still leave Kei alive and then I might lose. So instead, I only got Hajime disqualified."

"After me and Makoto left Hajime and Kei, we were talking for a bit and I was waiting for the perfect opportunity then I showed Makoto my second phone. The reason he trusted me is because he believed that I didn't have a way to eliminate him but I had a second phone with me the whole time, I just kept it hidden and asked Makoto to help me with disqualifying Hajime to make him believe I had no means of doing it on my own. I told him to transfer me all his points or I'd get him disqualified so he obliged."

"I didn't disqualify him at the time even though doing so would've won me the game since Kei's also going to get disqualified. The reason for that is simply because I wanted to flex and win without getting everyone disqualified."

"As for how Kei was disqualified, that's simple. I knew that when I announced that I had 180KP, Kei would convince Hajime to give him his points. Once that happened, Kei had to announce that he had 180KP as well, but that was a lie. Since Hajime was disqualified, his points are no longer valid and so Kei didn't have 180KP. So his announcement was false which was against the rules meaning that he was disqualified as well."

“This meant that at this point, only me and Makoto were players. I had about 220KP and he had 0KP. I could’ve had him disqualified but I wanted Kei to think he won just so I could break it all down at the end.”

“So I let Kei have his moment, he announced his victory and explained it all. What he didn’t know is that he was disqualified the whole time and didn’t actually win. During that time, I was gathering KP while we were eating pizza and so was Makoto. Makoto kept transferring his KP to me because I still had his SIM card.”

“I had to briefly go down to another floor to keep getting KP so I said I was going to the bathroom midway, other than that, I waited till I got to 300KP. Then I used the economic victory and won which led me to announcing my victory here.”

I remember exactly how I felt after hearing his explanation. It was a mixture of anger and awe. I wanted to say something, I wanted to refute it, I wanted to make his win invalid but there was nothing I could say. I was silent and so was everyone else.

I tried this time, I tried my hardest to win yet I was completely seen through. Everything I did, he either anticipated or manipulated me into doing. Then fear began to overcome me.

The fear of being ordinary. I thought I was a genius, I thought I was intelligent. But in the end, I was completely outsmarted by someone I previously believed to be an idiot. I had no excuses, nothing to get me out of this situation.

I lost because my intellect couldn’t match his, it was that simple.

After about a minute of complete silence, I broke it. Instead of complaining, I accepted it.

I don’t think I can say I accepted it, I think you could say I was waiting for it, I was waiting for someone to come into my life and show me that I’m not as intelligent as I think I am, that I’m just arrogant. And he just did that for me, I was grateful.

I congratulated Satoshi on his victory and asked him to explain his thought process. I wanted to learn, I wanted to know how to think like him so I could defeat him in the future.

After that day, we got on calls everyday and we even had a few more gambles. I lost every time and I kept asking him for advice, learning and improving each time.

But with everyday that passed, I could feel him becoming more distant but I tried my best to keep him close. I made it clear to him that he is superior to me and I wanted to learn from him, I needed him around to keep improving.

But I noticed something, everyday I'd get better but he remained stagnant.

He was a far away ideal that I wanted to reach, but no matter how much I walked, it seemed like the distance between us kept increasing.

Then suddenly, after ***that day***, the bonds between us were completely severed and he remained an ideal that I couldn't reach to this day.

But I think I realize it now, I realize why we began to drift.

It's definitely my fault. The one factor that changed was my self image. I think he hated the new me, hated my inferiority.

I think he was disgusted by weakness.

I think he previously saw me as someone impressive then after I started latching on to him, trying to catch up to him, he saw me as a pest.

I also realized something else, something more important. I'll never be able to catch up to him.

He has always helped me, he helped me grow to the level I'm at now but if I keep trying to catch up to him, I'll never reach him, he'll always be too far ahead of me.

There's only thing I can do now, I have to work on improving in my own way, building my abilities around my strengths.

I've spent all my time focusing on being like him, that I was just trying to be him. I have to be myself, if I stick to that then I'm sure I'll be able to grow to not just rival him, but even surpass him one day.

I opened my eyes after remembering the Kaiser Games and sat in silence.

I then reached for a pen and paper

“Satoshi,

I used to call you selfish.

I said you only cared about your own goals, your own thrills, your own path. But I was wrong, I was the selfish one.

I never asked you what you wanted. I never cared to know. I only dragged you along the road I wanted to walk, convinced that because we were walking together, it must have been the right one for both of us.

I didn’t let you chase your own definition of victory. I forced mine onto you.

And I only realized that after losing you.

Right now, I still want to win. I still want to unite the three kingdoms. I still want to chase the thrills that make me feel alive.

But I don’t want to drag you along that path anymore.

If walking it with me is what excites you, then let’s walk it together again.

And if it isn’t, then I’ll respect that.

I’ll walk my path, and you can walk yours.

Not as rivals, not as tools for each other’s goals.

But as two people choosing where they want to go.

I hope the next time we meet, we can talk as friends again.

— Kei”

I folded the paper carefully and placed it inside my pocket.

The next time I see Satoshi, I’ll give this to him.