
Kei and Satoshi

Chapter 1 - The Letter (Satoshi)

There was a folded piece of paper on the table when I returned to my room.

I stared at it for a long time before opening it, my mind coming up with countless theories around its contents.

Eventually. I unfolded the piece of paper and instantly knew who it was from.

Kei's handwriting had always been slightly slanted to the right as if his mind moved faster than the pen allowed.

"Satoshi," No greeting. That was unlike him.

"I used to call you selfish." I felt my fingers tighten slightly around the page.

"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 exhaled slowly.

"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." My eyes lingered on that line longer than the rest.

"I didn't let you chase your own definition of victory. I forced mine onto you. And I only realized that after losing you." Losing you. I don't know which of us that line belonged to.

"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." A faint, humorless smile crossed my face. He still didn't understand.

"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." I read that part twice.

“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.”

I lowered the paper.

The room felt quiet.

For a long time, I just stared at the wall.

I don’t know why I didn’t want to walk that path with him, I only knew that I didn’t.

I haven’t felt any discomfort or loneliness since I left.

It was just something inside me, an indescribable feeling.

A voice constantly whispering in my mind, telling me that I have to walk alone, and I can’t help but agree with that voice.

I was born to be alone.

Chapter 2 - Meeting (Narrator)

Abami and Kamashiro met in a quiet room on an unremarkable day.

Kamashiro spoke first "So, what do you think of Kei and Satoshi so far?"

"I can't be sure, they seem somewhat intelligent but they haven't been tested well enough yet." Abami replied

"I agree" Kamashiro said "It's like giving someone a 6th grade math test. Acing that test doesn't tell us whether the person is a talented 6th grader or a PHD level mathematician."

Abami retorted "The results certainly won't tell us but the method can give us a hint."

"Satoshi seems to be more talented so far but he also doesn't appear to be growing. Kei, on the other hand, looks like he's actively trying to improve."

"I noticed that as well." Kamashiro replied. "I also noticed something else."

He smiled slightly and spoke with a taunting tone "So Abami, did you notice it as well? The see-"

"Of course I did, you idiot." Abami interrupted, "Kei used his opportunity on Fukusen Island to do something in the main electricity room, it's very obvious what he did."

"Well Kamashiro, do you actually know what he did or are you trying to get me to tell you?"

"Of course I know, but if I tell you then you can act like you know." Kamashiro retorted

Abami replied "I know, but I don't know if you know what I know. If I tell you what I know, then you can act like you already knew what I know."

Kamashiro grinned slightly "You really are annoying Abami, it was clearly your turn to stop this first. I guess I'll be the bigger man and end this pointless conversation."

"Let's get back on topic, I have an idea for the next game we'll have Kei and Satoshi play. A game which will test their intelligence to its limit and put them in a prime area for growth."

"I have a pretty good idea of what you're planning." Abami said "I'll leave it to you. Make sure to prioritize their growth over testing their intelligence to its limit. After all, even if you take their intelligence to their absolute limit and had them both join together, they still wouldn't be able to get either one of us to try."

Kamashiro laughed, "Arrogant as usual, Abami."

Abami then responded "You can call me arrogant, but I know that you agree."

Kamashiro said "Well, I knew that you knew that I agree."

Abami laughed as he walked towards the door "And I'm the childish one?"

Kamashiro ignored him. "I'll send you the rules soon, you can tell Kei about them, I'll tell his opponent."

Chapter 3 - Realizations (Kei)

I'd spent the last few days in my room waiting for instructions about the next game.

I didn't let the time go to waste though. Normally, I would've drowned it out with video games or old memories. This time, I cut everything off. I didn't leave the room. I turned off every device. I let the silence stay.

That's when I realized something I hadn't understood before.

Intelligence doesn't grow slowly. It jumps.

Back when I was with Satoshi, I thought I was getting smarter by learning from him. In reality, I was just becoming a false imitation of him. This was because real growth in intelligence wasn't a slow and linear process, it consists of leaps that can only be realized when you arrive at them on your own.

Small quantitative changes over long periods of time transforming into large qualitative changes.

Growing intelligence in real life is similar to growing stronger in a shounen anime. You suddenly unlock new stages when you make new realizations or when you're pushed into a corner, you can't make those big jumps while being taught.

Satoshi's way of outsmarting people was natural to him. He led opponents toward disqualifying themselves, or into helping him win without realizing it. I'd always tried to copy that approach, but it was never truly mine. And because of that, he would always be better at it than me.

What I hadn't considered was that there were other ways to outsmart someone. Ways that fit how I thought, not how he did. And by growing in the many other methods, I will undoubtedly also grow in his methods.

I also came to many other minor realizations by reflecting on the past games I've played and what I could've done better. By the end of it, I could feel it. Something had shifted. I wasn't who I had been a few days ago. Now I just needed a real situation to test it.

As I was thinking that, a loud knock on the door vibrated through my mind. It was the first actual noise I've heard in the past few days.

I opened the door to see Abami and I greeted him, but no words came out. Or rather, the words came out very faint because I hadn't spoken in days.

I'm certain he was shocked when the door opened to my rough and unshaven look but a man like him would never let a hint of that shock show on his expression. He then asked if he could come in and I let him in.

The room was messy but we both had a seat around the table near the entrance.

Abami began to speak "The next game you'll be playing is called Prison Break, a car will come pick you up in an hour to take you to Ashabiru Prison." They really haven't given me any time to prepare.

"You and your opponent will be playing the role of murderers who were sentenced to prison, due to your influence as rich men, your lawyers were able to negotiate your sentence down to 5 days so you and him will only be serving a 5 day sentence." Getting 5 days for a murder charge, I must be really influential.

"The prison's structure consists of 2 buildings connected by a wing, the North and South buildings. You will be playing this game in the North building with other prisoners locked in with you, they will all be actors who have been instructed to act as real prisoners." Well that makes things easier, dealing with real prisoners would've been rough.

"Your opponent will also be in the prison as a prisoner, but this time, he won't have any advantages over you, you won't be told who he is and he won't be told who you are." Great, this game will at least have fairness but that also means that my opponent will be very intelligent, I can't underestimate him.

"There is a hidden win condition, this game will be a race to see who can achieve the win condition first. If neither of you achieve it before your sentence of 5 days ends,

the closer one will be considered the victor." Interesting, a hidden win condition, the name of the game, Prison Break, implies that the goal is to break out of the prison but it can't be that simple.

"There are also hidden restrictions that lead to an immediate disqualification and would automatically make your opponent the victor." I'd guess that getting caught trying to escape would be one of the things warranting a disqualification.

"There will be guards wearing blue and guards wearing black. The guards wearing blue will be writing notes about you which you can access anytime, the guards wearing black will be writing notes about your opponent which you won't be allowed to access. A final warning, please try to avoid getting seriously injured because the infirmary in the North building is only capable of handling minor injuries. That is all, I'll be going now, your car will be here in 56 minutes." After saying that, Abami walked out without saying anything else.

Guards writing notes about us, that's interesting. I've always wondered how an outsider would psychoanalyze me, I guess I can find out in this game. I might also benefit from getting my hands on my opponent's notes.

For now, I should take a shower, shave and pack a bag with essentials like a minimal supply of canned food, water and lockpicks for the unlikely scenario that I'll be allowed to bring it with me into the prison.

Chapter 4 - Prison Break (Kei)

A few hours later, I found myself in a prison cell on my own. I looked around the room and saw many normal things, a single bed, a sink, toilet, clock and essentials like toothpaste and a brush.

However, one thing caught my eye, an abnormality. There was a box in the corner of the room with 4 keyholes. I tried looking through the keyholes subtly but I couldn't see anything so I retreated back to my bed. Everyone else also had a box so I couldn't be identified through its presence.

I then walked towards the bars of the cell posing as a normal prisoner while I was attempting to observe the other prisoners in my line of sight. There was a number 43 stitched on my jumpsuit, and after looking around, the highest number I could see was a 48. I'd guess there are about 50 prisoners and a few hundred cells.

There were also many guards wearing grey outfits with numbers stitched on them. The highest I could see was 27 so I'd assume there are 30 grey outfit guards. There are also a few guards wearing blue and a few wearing black but they weren't numbered and their total count shouldn't exceed 10.

A guard walked between the cells calling out a name as he arrived in front of each occupied cell. After roll call was complete, the lights of the prison simultaneously shut off leaving us in complete darkness, then a loud voice echoed through the prison "Lights out convicts! Time to sleep!"

I laid in my bed staring at the ceiling for an unknown amount of time before I eventually fell into a deep sleep.

The next time I was conscious, blinding lights shined all over the prison at 8am. 10 hours of sleep was a luxury I hadn't experienced in a long time. I woke up refreshed and waited till the cells were unlocked at 8:30.

When the bars moved to the side and opened a path, I slowly walked out of my cell and walked with the other prisoners in an organized manner to the yard. We were

instructed to gather there for a morning roll call at 9:00. A great opportunity to observe everyone in a group.

After roll call, we were free to go wherever we liked within the confines of the prison. Before we went off, the guard explained our obligations. Roll call at 9am in the yard, breakfast in the cafeteria at 10am, work between 4pm-6pm, lunch in the cafeteria at 6pm and a roll call at 9pm in our cells. Wake up time is at 8am, lights out is at 10pm. I thought it was a simple and effective system that left me ample time to search for the keys of the mysterious box in the prison cells.

I walked through the prison and discovered that there were eight key areas. The laundry room, the yard, the guard break room, the cafeteria, the housing units, the infirmary, the library and the visitation rooms.

After passing the day by and making a few friends, 4pm arrived without warning, it was now the work period. I had to choose a job, I could be a cook, a laundry organizer, an enforcer or a doctor's assistant.

I carefully considered each option, a cook would give me access to the food that the prisoners eat, I could theoretically poison it but that isn't practical. The cook's most prominent advantage would probably be my ability to build a network of prisoners.

Next was the laundry organizer, the advantage here was obvious, in prison escape movies, the laundry room often has an escape route so it was likely that accessing the laundry room would give me easier access to escape.

As for the enforcer, it would allow me more authority as well as access to the guard's break room for a potential key.

Finally, the doctor's assistant role would probably also allow me to unlock an escape method as well as increased access.

After a short period of thought, I decided on being a laundry organizer. I didn't question my decision too much as there was likely a way to clear this game regardless of the role I chose.

I confirmed my job selection with the guard and walked with a few other prisoners to the laundry room. My opponent could be among them, walking past me as a prisoner without my knowledge.

When we arrived, I pretended to work as I searched the area thoroughly and attempted to profile the prisoners around me. I flipped through clothes and looked between washing machines without alerting the guards and near the end of the work period, I found what I was looking for under a washing machine, a key.

Finding a key confirms that the keys for the box are scattered throughout the prison, it was likely essential to our escape to find the key. Of course, I thought of simply breaking the box to get what's inside but it'll probably lead to my disqualification so I determined that it wasn't worth the risk.

My guess is that there are 8 keys scattered around the prison, one key in each of the main rooms. This means that me and my opponent can each get our hands on 4 keys and open our own boxes. But this also means that if one of us manages to find 5 keys, he can greatly restrict his opponent.

I quickly pocketed the key to avoid detection in case my opponent also chose to be a laundry organizer. My profiling led me to believe that my opponent wasn't a laundry organizer but I can't be too careful.

Once the clock struck 6pm, I walked to the cafeteria for lunch with a few other inmates, but on the way, I slipped away into my cell to place the key I found in my pillowcase to be cautious.

After putting the key into my pillowcase, I rejoined the inmates and made my way to the cafeteria.

I tried doing a quick search for a key in the cafeteria earlier during breakfast but I couldn't find one so I had to be more thorough this time.

I dropped some food and drink numerous times throughout the cafeteria pretending that it was an accident so that I could look under the tens of tables in the cafeteria to see if a key is taped under one of them as that seemed like the most likely area for a hidden key.

On my 5th drop, my guess proved to be accurate. I found a key taped under a table, but before I could pick it up, I was called by a guard for a shakedown. The guard likely suspected me of transporting drugs by my frequent drops.

Since the guard's an actor, it stands to reason that he knows that I'm not transporting drugs but he's playing his role well.

I brought too much unwarranted attention by my actions but finding a second key makes up for it.

The guard performed the shakedown and didn't find anything so he sent me back and told me to stop being clumsy.

I went and sat at the table with the key taped under it and subtly pocketed the key while pretending to eat. I then started to actually eat but I didn't have high hopes.

The food looked like vomit and after having a bite, I confirmed that it tasted like vomit too. We were in prison after all.

After that, I returned to my room and hid the second key within my bedding. I had to be careful of my opponent stealing it so I cut a small line into the mattress and hid the keys inside it to avoid my opponent finding them.

The night's roll call came about and then lights out. The first day has concluded with me finding 2 of the 8 keys.

Chapter 5 - Prison Break (Opponent)

The night before day 1

I'm in a prison with an unknown opponent and we're both racing to achieve a hidden goal.

Basic deduction would dictate that the hidden goal is simply escaping from the prison but there should be something more to it, maybe the contents of the box in my room will tell me. I need to find 4 keys to open it, I'll begin looking for them tomorrow, the only thing I can do now is roll call then go to bed.

I woke up on the first day of the Prison Break game. After the morning roll call and making a few friends, I headed to job selection at 4pm along with the 50 prisoners so I could select my job.

I chose to be an enforcer, I've determined that this role will give me the most access to areas so I could find keys.

After choosing my job, I patrolled the halls and when no one was looking, I snuck into the visitation rooms and quickly scanned under the tables. Incidentally, I found a key under the first table I searched under and didn't have to look further.

I quickly pocketed it before leaving the room and returning to my job in the halls.

Enforcers also had access to the guard break room, so at 5:30, I entered the room to search for a key there but it was filled with guards. As I was about to turn around and leave, I noticed one of the guards with a key clipped to their belt buckle so I stayed.

I then introduced myself to the guards, knowing they were actors. I hoped I could at least shake their hands because the proximity would allow me to pocket the key but they shouted at me to go back out and patrol the halls.

There was only one thing left that I could do, I tripped on a table edge and landed on the guard with a key, I quickly unbuckled it and placed it in my back pocket.

I stood up to see 10 guards firing their tasers at me, my body instantly dropped to the ground making a loud thud.

I was writhing from the pain but I didn't scream, screaming has always been a sign of weakness. I endured the pain, electricity buzzing through my body. I kept trying to get up but my body wouldn't respond and I'd keep falling back down.

When I reached for the guard, I knew that this would happen, I knew I would be tased. After all, the guards would naturally assume that I was reaching for his gun. I was willing to be tased for the key, I had willingly experienced much worse pain in the past.

I looked at the guards as they were warning me to not try anything again but their words were inaudible, all I heard was loud colluding noises. All I could notice was their expressions that betrayed their angry words, many of them looked guilty, after all, they were only actors.

I finally managed to gather the strength to get up and I promptly left the room. I went to the showers and washed my body which was slightly burned from the tasers.

I then headed to the cafeteria and tried to subtly search for a third key but I couldn't find it. I forced the horrible food down my throat then headed back to my cell.

I made a small opening in the roof of my cell and placed my two keys there to avoid them being found if my opponent tried to search for them.

I then waited till lights out after roll call and fell asleep. Overall, a productive but painful day.

Chapter 6 - Prison Break Part 2 (Kei)

Morning of day 2

At 8am, the prison lights snapped on and a guard's voice echoed through the block. "Wake up! On your feet convicts!"

I rolled out of bed and immediately pressed my hand against the seam of the mattress. The two keys were still there. Only then did I let my eyes drift to the box in the corner of the cell. If my opponent hadn't taken any yet, there should still be six keys left somewhere in the prison. The yard, the library, and the visitation rooms seemed like the most promising places to start.

At 8:30, the bars unlocked and we were funneled out towards the yard for roll call. We stood in straight lines, shoulder to shoulder, the perfect setup for observation. Each prisoner had a number stitched onto their jumpsuit for easy identification. I was 43.

I began going through them one by one in my head, reading posture, eye movement, nervous habits. Prisoner number 7 stood out immediately. He looked tense, fidgety, eyes darting too often. Most likely an actor uncomfortable with the role so probably not my opponent.

Most of the guards wore grey, but a handful wore blue and a handful wore black. Blue uniforms were watching me. Black uniforms were watching my opponent. I paid close attention to the ones in black, trying to see if any of them lingered on a specific prisoner for longer than usual, but nothing stood out. If I wanted useful information, I'd probably have to get my hands on one of their clipboards.

My name was shouted for roll call. I answered and followed the line toward breakfast.

After eating, I returned to the yard and searched more carefully this time. I looked between the fences, in the grass of the football pitch and between the plates in the weights area until I finally caught a glimpse of a metallic gleam buried under a wall, it was a key.

The infirmary was my next stop, but even after a thorough search, I couldn't find anything. Either my opponent had already taken the key there, or I simply didn't have access to the right areas without choosing the doctor's assistant role.

I spent the rest of the morning in the library, pulling books off shelves and checking their spines and pages. Hours passed with nothing to show for it.

At 4pm, work duty began. Back in the laundry room, I paid more attention to the daily routines than before. Every afternoon, a cart filled with heavily soiled laundry was sent outside the prison. A guard inspected it carefully before it left. It wasn't a viable escape route, but it was worth noting.

After work, I went to the cafeteria. They handed me a tray with something brown and steaming on it. I couldn't tell what it was, and I didn't particularly care. I ate quickly and headed back to the library. I went through the library row by row, opening each book and searching between the pages and a few minutes before I had to return to my cell, I found a book with a cut out portion inside containing a key.

I walked back to my cell and checked the mattress again to make sure the keys were still hidden, then waited for lights out.

When the block finally went dark, I took the four keys and slid them into the box. It opened with a soft click. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

I couldn't read it in the dark, so I folded the paper and placed it in my pocket, it would have to wait until morning.

Chapter 7 - Prison Break Part 2 (Opponent)

Morning of day 2

The lights and wake-up call of the guard quickly alerted me and woke me up. I got out of bed and instinctively glanced at the ceiling tile that I hid my keys in. I resisted the urge to get up and check it to avoid being detected by my opponent.

I stayed lying in bed waiting till the cell opened at 8:30. I thought of my progress so far, I've found 2 keys, one in the visitation room and one in the guard break room. Out of the 6 remaining areas, the yard, housing units and infirmary seem to be the easiest spots to acquire keys.

I made up my mind, I'll attempt to find the keys in these 3 areas and obtain 5. This should heavily restrict my opponent.

When the gate unlocked at 8:30, I quickly burst out of bed and made my way to the yard. I briefly searched the yard before roll call and then performed a more comprehensive search after but I couldn't find anything even after hours of searching.

I came to the conclusion that my opponent likely found the yard key already so I moved on to the next location, the housing units. During break times, most people were out in the yard so the housing units were mostly empty.

I searched through the housing units, corridor through corridor and floor by floor in silence. After only a short while of searching, the key's metallic shine finally made itself apparent to me and it was in a very obvious position, attached to the top of the central pole of the housing units hidden within a crack.

Climbing the pole would attract too much attention, there was only one option. I went to the top floor of the housing units and took off my shirt then slowly wrapped it around my hands. I then jumped straight into the middle, grabbed the key at the height of my jump then held on to the pole as I was falling.

I got a slight burn mark on my inner wrist but I didn't sustain any serious damage, the whole scene lasted only a few seconds and made no noise so I didn't attract any attention.

Soon after, it was 4pm. I patrolled the corridors of the rooms diligently while subtly making my way to the infirmary. I walked through the infirmary door and saw a doctor with a few prisoners acting as his helpers.

I started panting and acting exasperated, I then called out to the doctor "A prisoner's seizing in the housing units!"

He quickly ran out with two of his helpers, leaving three of them behind. I quickly began rummaging through the cabinets and drawers, as I was searching, I called out to the three prisoners "If any of you tells the doctor that I did this, things won't look good for you."

This led to the three prisoners standing back watching me rummage through the infirmary. I quickly found the key taped to the bottom of a medicine bottle so I grabbed it and exited the infirmary quickly and went back to patrolling the halls.

During lunch, I searched through the cafeteria for a fifth key but I didn't find anything. I quickly snuck out of the cafeteria after having my food and went back to my room. I didn't wait till lights out to open the box because this was a race, I grabbed the other two keys from the roof then placed them all and opened the box to see a single sheet of paper.

I quickly stuffed it in my pocket and made my way to the bathroom. Once I got there, I locked myself in a stall then unfolded the paper.

I read the title slowly "Available escape methods", my mind dissociated from the paper and began to think, this felt too easy.

This game can't be as simple as finding keys then escaping using one of the methods. There has to be something more. Let's review the data, I'm a murderer who's been sent to 5 days in prison, that's an inconsistency I've been struggling with for some

time. If I'm truly roleplaying then why would I escape with a 5 day sentence, it just isn't worth it.

But it doesn't make sense, everything in the game is telling me that the goal is escape, the game's name is Prison Break, the box which we've been searching for keys for talks about escape methods, is that all a misdirection.

Are they trying to convince us that the goal is escape when it's actually just doing nothing and serving my sentence?

But that wouldn't work either, after all, they specified that this game is a race where the one that achieves the win condition first, wins. If the win condition was simply playing out our sentence then neither of us could achieve it first.

There don't appear to be any methods to reduce my sentence so I can eliminate the possibility that the win condition is to play out my sentence.

But then there's nothing left, everything tells us that the goal is either escaping or not escaping but both options have been eliminated. How can I escape but not escape at the same time?

The hidden victory involves the concept of escape, but it's neither to escape or to not escape.

So maybe it's both?

A state of superposition where the victor is the one who manages to escape without escaping.

But how can I escape without escaping? Maybe I have to break out of the prison then break back in?

But that also doesn't make sense, if I break out then it will break the concept of not escaping, it would contradict being a murderer with a 5 day sentence.

So then there's only one possibility left, I have to complete all the steps of escape but stop right before the actual escape then return to the prison without anyone suspecting anything.

This way, I never actually escaped so I didn't break the rule of the 5 day sentence because I never risked having it increased but I also met the game's condition of 'Prison Break'. This has to be the solution.

Deduction complete, let me read the different methods of escape now.

Method 1: "The cafeteria has a food disposal mechanism where all excess food is dumped. Once the food passes through the pipes, it lands onto a shredder which shreds the food and transports it through sewer lines to the outside.

For a player to escape through the food disposal mechanism, they need to deactivate the prison's electrical circuits located in a small room down the stairs of the guard break room.

Successfully deactivating the electricity deactivates the shredder, the prisoner can then jump down the food disposal mechanism to safely land in a water reservoir in the sewers."

This method was clearly a trap, deactivating the electricity alone probably won't meet the requirements of the escape superposition, I'd have to jump down. But if I jumped down, there would be no way to stop myself and get back up before leaving the prison parameters.

Method 2: "The laundry room takes out a cart full of ruined clothes from the prison every day. The clothes are placed into the cart by prisoners who have chosen the laundry job.

Before leaving, the cart is thoroughly searched by guard 12. To escape through this method, you must find a way to convince guard 12 to let you escape."

This method seems to be complex as there's no way to be certain that my method will lead to the guard's cooperation. Will he be more convinced with money, blackmail or something else entirely?

Also, since I didn't choose the laundry job, it will be difficult to sneak myself into the clothes pile. But as long as I manage to convince the guard and find some way into the clothes pile, this method looks to be a valid escape method to achieve the win condition.

Method 3: "The visitation rooms have a door that directly leads to the outside but there are two barriers to get through before leaving the prison through this method.

The first barrier is the glass that separates the visitors from the prisoners. This glass can be lowered by a button device that guard 4 has in his right pocket. Guard 4 is usually at the library and frequently gets engrossed in books and distracted.

The second barrier is the security guards at the exit of the visitor's area. They don't check the visitor's ID upon exit but they will notice if a visitor that has never entered leaves."

This method also looks to have complexities. The first barrier is easy, I'll simply have to pickpocket the guard in the library, press the button and then return back to his right pocket. The timing will have to be perfect though, it will probably have to be during a cafeteria period because no one would be in the visiting rooms or library during that time.

The second barrier is more difficult because it contains an unknown. I'd assume if I request a visitor, I'd get my lawyer since he's the only one mentioned in the storyline but how would I convince him to wear a cap and sunglasses and switch clothes with me to help me escape, that would be difficult.

I quickly refolded the paper realizing I had spent too much time in the stall, I placed it back in my pocket and snuck back into the cafeteria at the last minute.

I then headed to my cell and contemplated the different possibilities while walking. When I arrived in my cell, I decided to shut down my brain, lay on the bed and take a short nap before roll call to avoid an accidental prolonged slumber which I was prone to.

Chapter 8 - Prison Break Part 2 (Kei)

Morning of day 3

By now, I've become used to waking up to the guard's screams and the blinding lights. I quickly rolled out of bed, washed my face and brushed my teeth waiting for the cell to open.

At 8:30am, the cell doors opened and I left for the bathrooms so I could read the paper I left in my pocket last night.

Once I entered a stall, I locked the door and pulled the paper out of my pocket. I thought about the contents yesterday and I'm fairly certain that it will contain different escape methods.

I also deduced that the goal is likely not simply escaping the prison, I theorized a form of entanglement between both escaping and not escaping by fully executing an escape plan but not escaping at the last moment.

I unfolded the paper and it contained what I expected, three methods of escape. The first method is through the cafeteria which I quickly eliminated as a trap.

The remaining two methods are escaping through the laundry room or the visitation rooms.

They both have two barriers to entry. For the laundry escape, you need to first be able to get yourself into the clothes pile and then you need to find some way to convince guard 12 to help you with escape.

As for the visitation room escape, you first need to pickpocket a guard and then return the device to him which is doable but definitely easier said than done. The second is you need to convince your lawyer to help you escape.

My job as a laundry organizer naturally allows me to clear one of the barriers so I'm left with having to convince guard 12 to help me or find some way to incapacitate him without alarming anyone to facilitate my escape but that's a bit more extreme.

For now, there are other options I'd like to consider. It's likely that my opponent hasn't yet gathered the remaining four keys so if I manage to get one more then I'll be able to ensure he never sees this paper making it significantly harder for him to find the win condition and use it.

Another thing which might come in handy is getting my hands on the notes written by the guards wearing black, they might help me identify my opponent which could allow me to interrupt their escape and get them caught leading to their disqualification.

The possibilities of my next move surfed through my mind so I organized them. I'll spend the next few hours looking for a fifth key till work time. During work time, I'll try to get closer to guard 12 to see what he wants and then for my final act, I need to get the clipboard of a black outfit guard but I haven't yet determined how I'll do that.

I left the stall and walked towards the yard for roll call.

I thought about the four remaining areas that I haven't found a key in. There was the guard break room, the housing units, the infirmary and the visitation rooms. If I want to find a 5th key, I'll have to stop looking for a key and start thinking about where I would hide the key myself.

I decided to start with the housing units, I couldn't imagine the key being hidden in one of the occupied cells, it'd probably in an empty cell or near the pole in the middle so there weren't many places it could be hidden.

After roll call, I slowly walked to the housing units to avoid attracting attention then when I arrived, I increased my space. I went from floor to floor searching every empty cell yet my hands came out empty. I also searched the walls for any crevices as well as the pole in the middle from every angle and floor but nothing turned up.

My opponent must've gotten his hands on this key already so I decided not to waste time and move on to another location. I then went to search the infirmary again as well as the visitation rooms but I couldn't find anything.

It's 4pm now so I don't have time to search the guard break room but I'm almost certain that my opponent has found that key as well meaning he also found 4 keys in the first 2 days. That's an unlikely occurrence but not impossible.

I moved the matter of the keys to the back of my mind and actively decided to not try to get anymore keys. My next focus is on guard 12.

I headed down to the laundry room and folded laundry while my eyes searched for guard 12. I then spotted him where I expected him to be, near the laundry room's exit out to the yard.

After all, this is where the old clothes cart goes through to make its way to the yard then to the prison's exit.

As I was organizing clothes near guard 12, I struck up a conversation with him a few times which led me to realizing a few key things.

Once the old clothes are fully gathered in the cart, guard 12 looks through the cart then takes the cart and rolls it out of the prison with no further checks. This means that I can't just knock guard 12 out, I have to bring him on my side and I have a few ways to do that.

After work time, it was now lunch time in the cafeteria. I walked to the cafeteria and saw two guards wearing black on the way. The notepads with notes on the opponent were always in their hands and so they couldn't be stolen.

After lunch, we walked out of the cafeteria and as we walked near the guard wearing black, I pushed a prisoner strongly then hid behind the crowd. The push created an effect with the large number of prisoners which pushed into the guard and led his clipboard to fall to the ground.

I quickly scanned the contents of it before the guard wearing black picked it up again and broke apart the prisoners.

My mind retained everything on the sheet thankfully and I returned to my room to review the information in my mind.

I visualized the sheet of paper which I had seen for only a few seconds in my mind, the first line said "Subject avoids unnecessary interaction. Speaks only when required. Displays high awareness of surrounding movement without appearing to observe directly."

After reading this, my mind automatically reviewed the faces of the 50 prisoners which I had committed to memory and narrowed the list down to 10 prisoners for who could potentially be my opponent.

"The subject shows no visible reaction to discomfort or intimidation from other prisoners. Pain tolerance appears unusually high." This didn't help too much but it narrowed down my list slightly more.

"The subject declined the opportunity to take an easier work assignment. Chose a role that grants wider access instead." Out of the four role opportunities, being an enforcer seems to be the most work so that allowed me to narrow down my list to 2 suspects.

"The subject frequently changes routine walking paths for no apparent reason. Likely testing environmental consistency rather than acting randomly." This line was weird, it didn't match any of the two suspects so I dismissed it as something I didn't observe.

No, I can't dismiss things. I should trust my instincts. But then it doesn't make sense, why does my opponent not match the profile of any of the prisoners.

Another inconsistency I had thought of previously popped up in my mind as well. Is it really a coincidence that me and my opponent both found 4 keys?

Another thing is that things are fitting too perfectly, the game feels a bit easy. It's definitely not easy to figure out the entanglement of escape but it isn't particularly hard either.

Abami and Kamashiro must've known that I'd figure it out, and assuming my opponent is intelligent, they should've expected him to figure it out.

But if they know that both of us would figure it out, then what's the purpose of the game? Is it really a race of who can achieve it first?

Oh wow, brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

This game has been designed masterfully, this is art.

Chapter 9 - Prison Break Part 3 (Opponent)

Morning of day 3

I woke up to the usual lights of the prison and the sound of the guard feeling refreshed. I had a visitation booked for this morning after roll call with my lawyer.

I left my cell and headed out to the yard for a roll call.

After the roll call, I went to the visitation rooms and saw a man in a suit waiting there for me. I sat down and picked up the phone to speak to him through the glass.

I didn't give him a chance to speak "I'll book a visitation with you tomorrow at 8pm, I want you to show up wearing a suit with sunglasses and a hat. No other requests. You have given me a chance to only serve 5 days and I've paid you handsomely for that. I'll pay you the same amount to complete this simple request with no questions."

I saw him moving his mouth through the glass replying to me but I had already put the phone down. I then turned around and walked out of the visitation rooms.

After breakfast in the cafeteria, I headed to the library to analyze guard 4.

I walked slowly to the library through the yard and the housing units observing my surroundings as I did. When I arrived at the library, I saw the red button creeping out of the guard's right pocket.

Pickpocketing it wouldn't be easy but I had a plan. I walked up to guard 4 and started a conversation with him. "Hey, I'd like to read a manga called Usogui but it isn't available in the library."

"If you can get the first volume for me from the outside tomorrow, I'll give you 10,000 yen plain and simple."

"I'll give you an additional 10,000 for every volume you bring me."

The guard considered my offer and agreed then said "Step away convict."

I knew I had achieved my goal, now my escape was inevitable. Tomorrow at 7:50pm, I'll head up to the library and get my book. When I do, I'll place the money in his right pocket and subtly press the button when I do.

Then I'll make my way to the visitation rooms and the glass will come down at precisely 8PM. I'll then attack my lawyer and choke him unconscious. After that, I'll take his clothes and open the door to the exit of the prison but I won't step out.

Finally, I'll walk back to the visitation room, switch the clothes again and get back into the prison. This should be enough for me to have achieved the victory.

There is one more thing I'd like to do though. After lunch, I had a friend bump into the prison guard wearing blue which allowed me to take a look at the notepad for a few seconds.

I committed my opponent's notes to memory and went back to my room. The reason I want these notes is to achieve a more guaranteed win method.

If I can identify my opponent, I'll be able to sabotage his escape and have him caught which will undoubtedly get him caught leading to his disqualification making my victory easier.

After analyzing my opponent's notes, I couldn't determine any prisoners which matched all of them so I decided to ignore the notes and get to bed. I'll just attempt the entangled escape tomorrow and win.

I woke up on the morning of the fourth day and left my room. I walked through the day normally waiting to start my plan at 7:50pm.

Then, as I was walking the halls during my work time, I saw the face I least expected to see in this prison.

The hair on my body all stood up in shock of the face I saw, electricity vibrated through my body at the sight of him, Kei.

A second bigger shock spread through my body when I focused on his face seeing bandages wrapped around his left eye.

He was walking with a guard behind him then I saw him look back to the guard and say mockingly "Guard San, this is Satoshi, he's the one you're looking for."

The guard then said in a monotonous tone "Kei has achieved the hidden win condition, Prison Break has ended in Kei's victory and Satoshi's defeat."

Chapter 10 - Prison Break Part 3 (Kei)

Morning of day 4

Yesterday, I figured it all out. The true hidden win condition.

A few inconsistencies pointed me to the path. The first stems from the fact that I found exactly four keys. It seemed unlikely that me and my opponent would each find 4 keys out of 8 keys, which led to the more simple deduction.

There were only ever four keys in the building.

But then the same problem remains, it's very unlikely that I found all four keys. This then leads us to the next point, no one else was searching for keys.

The next inconsistency was the data on my opponent from his notepad, it didn't match my profile of any of the prisoners in the building, and I'm quite confident in my psychoanalysis.

This confirms the belief that my opponent isn't in the building. But if that's the case, where would he be? He has to exist, the rules say he exists.

It becomes obvious then, my opponent has always been in the prison but he wasn't in the same building, he was in the other prison building.

This is also hidden in the rules, the rules say that the opponent is in the prison and they mention the other building but they purposefully omit the fact that the opponent is in the other building.

The next question is why? Why didn't they have me and my opponent in the same building? Wouldn't it make things more intense?

Well, I determined that there are two reasons for that. The first is that my opponent being in the other wing is relevant to the win condition. This means that the entirety of the escape entanglement was a distraction from the true win condition.

The win condition has to be making it to the other building and identifying your opponent to the guard.

As for how to make it to the other building. The rules outline that quite well, in the warning at the end, Abami told me not to get seriously injured because I'd then have to go to the other building's infirmary.

The second reason behind my opponent being in the other wing is because I know him. This also fits with the win condition of identifying him because I wouldn't be able to do that if I didn't know him.

And the person that fits the profile and also makes sense to be my opponent, well it could only be one person, Satoshi.

After leaving my cell on the morning of the fourth day, I walked to the yard for roll call then had breakfast.

After breakfast, I acted like I fell, and used my right hand to dislocate my own left pinky finger. It was painful but I didn't let it show, I simply showed the guard my finger and requested to go to the infirmary.

Once I got there, I had hoped that the doctor would say that he isn't capable of fixing my injury and that he'll send me to the other building, but he wrapped it up instead and told me not to move it too much for 2 weeks.

I then realized that I needed to have a truly serious injury to be transported to the other building so I sprung out of the bed which the doctor placed me in and quickly grabbed a syringe.

The doctor raised his hands to his face in fear and screamed for the guard. The guard that was nearby ran into the infirmary but I was never intending to attack the doctor.

I turned the needle around and stuck it into my own eye and I then couldn't help but let out a scream of pain before quickly composing myself.

The doctor was shocked but knew I needed serious treatment. He quickly called for a transport and I was sedated and transported to the other building.

I woke up a few hours later with a bandage over my eye, restrained in a hospital bed. There was a guard standing next to my bed, I then told him "I'd like to identify my opponent, please remove my restraints."

The guard removed my restraints promptly as if he was waiting for me to give him that instruction, and followed me as I searched through the halls for Satoshi who I knew was on hall enforcer duty at the moment.

I finally saw him and my heart skipped a beat at his sight. The usual self depreciation and fear that I felt when I saw him had dissipated, all I could feel was excited.

I knew that it was my victory, that I had won.

I then looked at the guard behind me and mockingly said "Guard San, this is Satoshi, he's the one you're looking for."

The guard then said in a monotonous tone "Kei has achieved the hidden win condition, Prison Break has ended in Kei's victory and Satoshi's defeat."

I then looked at Satoshi and laughed at him with all of my heart. "I didn't want to go easy on you this time Satoshi, I used my infinite IQ to outclass you."

Satoshi revealed a slightly angry expression before it turned into a laugh.

This was a strange sensation, I hadn't been able to laugh with Satoshi in so long. I had been looking up to him for so long that I forgot that he was my friend.

He stayed silent so I then told him "You're too weak Satoshi, but so am I. However, you have been stagnant, refusing to improve, at this rate, I will completely outclass you very soon."

Satoshi finally replied “Well Kei, it looks like the old arrogant you is back, but I have no intention of being your friend again. I will grudgingly take your advice though, just make sure not to lose too early before I have a chance of defeating you in a direct battle.”

I turned my back and walked away while laughing “Right back at you!”

Chapter 11 - The Meeting (Narrator)

The day after the Prison Break, Abami met up with Kamashiro.

"That game you designed, I can't help but think it's awful." Abami said.

Kamashiro didn't even look offended "Rich, coming from you. For as long as we've known each other, I've always been the one to design the gambles while you sit there judging them."

"I don't have to be an artist to know that a painting is ugly." Abami replied "I'm also certain I could design a better game than whatever that was."

"Then go ahead and do that" Kamashiro replied "Besides, what didn't you like about the game? I probably already know but I'd like to hear it from you."

"Predictable." Abami said immediately "The moment you explained the rules to me, I predicted the exact way things unfolded. I'm sure you did too."

Kamashiro replied "I can't deny that. Prison Break definitely wasn't the best of my creations but it wasn't bad either. I don't mean to be biased, I can admit it was predictable but it achieved the objective. It fueled their rivalry again and motivated Satoshi to improve rather than remaining stagnant."

"Haha." Abami laughed "You've always been weak at arguments. A game designed by a 5 year old would probably achieve that goal as well. Anyone could've built a game to achieve that objective. The issue with yours is that it's a closed system reliant on wordplay, a gamble where anything could happen, that's when they'll truly be pushed to their limits."

"You say I'm bad at arguments but have you ever considered the fact that the reason you always 'win' arguments is because I can never be bothered to deal with your stubbornness." Kamashiro said then continued.

“But putting that aside, you make a good point. The game could’ve definitely been made to help them improve more than this one did but Prison Break taught them something they’ve never experienced before. Playing a gamble with hidden wordplay and a hidden win condition. In the real world, that’s often the situation. Now, they’ll never fall for such tricks again.”

“You make a good point, but now it’s time to get more serious and put them in truly unpredictable situations.” Abami replied.

Kamashiro replied “You’ve always been more drawn to situations that aren’t fixed, it allows you the opportunity to show your skills. Well, how about it Abami? How about you finally design your own gamble, one revolving around the skills you want to teach them.”

“I’ll take you up on your offer Kamashiro, I’ll definitely design a game far surpassing anything you’ve ever made.” Abami replied.

“Your competitive nature is showing again, we’re on the same team now Abami, no need to be so hostile.” Kamashiro said with a slight grin.

“You’ve become complacent after reaching the top, Kamashiro. I still want to enjoy the thrill. We should have another gamble soon, I’ve missed beating you.” Abami said while grinning.

Kamashiro laughed “You, beating me? It seems like you’ve been dreaming a bit too much. Just focus on creating your game for now, we’ll discuss having a game between us later.”

Abami didn’t say anything more, he simply waved at Kamashiro with a grin then walked out of the room.

Chapter 12 - The Village of Influence

In the heart of the Third Kingdom, two identical compounds had been constructed.

Each of the compounds had twenty luxury villas arranged around a large central building.

Each villa had two floors, a swimming pool, gym, sauna, billiard's table and many other luxurious amenities that felt excessive.

Abami had named them simply: Village A and Village B.

Satoshi had been invited to Village A for his next gamble. Kei had been sent to Village B. They would be playing the same game, just not against each other.

In Village A, 20 people were gathered in the central building, the town hall. Satoshi was one of them.

He looked around, his eyes moving quietly from face to face. Suddenly, he froze for half a second.

Akuma and Kuromine. They stood apart from the others, occasionally glancing toward him before deliberately looking away, as if acknowledging his presence without wanting to admit it.

Satoshi quickly suppressed the surprise and continued observing.

He noticed that there was a gender imbalance, 12 men and 8 women. He quickly determined a likely reason. Akuma and Kuromine were special, they were his previous opponents. This meant, excluding himself and those two, there were 9 men and 8 women. So his opponent was likely a male, this left an even distribution of 8 men and 8 women that are background characters.

Finally, he shifted his gaze to a man sitting leisurely on a chair on his own with his eyes closed. He looked foreign. While everyone else was making small talk, he sat there unbothered and asleep. Satoshi concluded that this man was likely his opponent.

As Satoshi carefully observed that man, a young man in a suit walked in with 20 people in suits organized behind him. He then introduced himself as Enforcer Kanzaki.

After the enforcer's introduction, the man in the chair slowly opened his eyes and leisurely walked over towards the enforcer.

The whole room's gaze was directed onto him, he kept walking before stopping a few meters away from the enforcer near where Satoshi was standing.

He then asked the enforcer "Has the game begun yet?"

The enforcer began to reply "The game hasn't yet begun. I will explain the rules now then I'll announce the start o-"

Before the enforcer could finish his reply, the foreigner lunged at Satoshi and threw a jab towards his face. Satoshi instinctively evaded the jab, a look of shock spreading across his face.

The foreigner didn't leave any room for Satoshi to react, he followed up the jab with an uppercut to the stomach that landed, leaving Satoshi out of breath.

But the foreigner didn't stop there. He quickly shot out a roundhouse kick towards Satoshi's head attempting to knock him down quickly but Satoshi overcame his shock and pain and ducked under the kick.

He then counterattacked and attempted to sweep the foreigner's leg but the foreigner quickly moved away, shuffled his feet then moved back into range to land a right hand punch onto Satoshi's face.

Satoshi evaded it once more but before he could prepare his counterattack, the enforcer and his assistants had already stepped between them and stopped the fight.

The enforcer then looked towards the foreigner and said to him "Fang Yuan, you will not be punished for the violence you committed since the game hasn't begun yet but from this moment forward, physical violence is strictly prohibited. Now, I'll explain the rules."

That whole scene only lasted a few seconds but it felt like hours in Satoshi's mind. He was completely shocked by this man's sudden attack.

Thoughts surrounding the mysterious foreigner, Fang Yuan, surfaced through his mind. Questions like "Why on earth would he do that? Did he really have the resolve to attack me simply to psychologically damage me before the game?" popped up.

Fang Yuan exhibited clear machiavellianist traits during the confrontation. Satoshi also possesses these traits strongly yet he frequently concealed them to curry favor.

In Satoshi's mind, Fang Yuan was a fool. Satoshi strongly believed that the psychological advantage gained from Fang Yuan's attack isn't comparable to the disadvantages.

It would now be easy for Satoshi to create Fang Yuan as a common enemy by taking advantage of the fear Fang Yuan instilled into the villagers that will steer them away from him.

With his attack, Fang Yuan has lost the favor of the masses which Satoshi determined to be the most likely core of this game.

Satoshi quickly escaped his own mind and returned to reality to listen to the rules of the village of influence.

Game Title: The Village of Influence

Players: 20

- 2 Generals: Fang Yuan and Satoshi — 5 Influence Value (IV) each
- 2 Lieutenants: Akuma and Kuromine — 3 IV each
- 16 Villagers — 1 IV each

All IV values are public and fixed. They never change.

Each player receives a glass syringe attached to a personal measuring tube.

Daily Structure

Each day consists of two phases.

Phase 1 — The Vote

Every evening, all active players cast a vote for who they believe should lead the village. The two players who receive the most votes become the heads of two opposing factions. A lieutenant has the voting power of 3 villagers while a general has the voting power of 5 villagers. Any player who votes for someone outside the top two is immediately eliminated.

Once factions are established, the total IV of each faction is calculated. The faction with the higher combined IV wins, and their chosen leader becomes the Leader for the following day.

Phase 2 — The Leader's Authority

The Leader must perform exactly one of the following actions when they are voted. They must choose between:

Option A — Internal Elimination. Remove 2 villagers from your own faction. 1mL is added to your opponent's tube after this action.

Option B — Lieutenant Elimination. Remove your opponent's Lieutenant from the game entirely. However, you must immediately inject yourself with whatever amount is currently in your tube then 2ml is added to it.

Option C — External Elimination, Remove 2 villagers from your opponent's faction. However, you must immediately inject yourself with whatever amount is currently in your tube then 1ml is added to it.

Option D — Lieutenant Loss. Remove your own Lieutenant from the game entirely. 2.5mL is added to your opponent's tube after this action.

The Syringe

For every 1 mL of the sedating agent injected, you fall asleep for 24 hours. This differs slightly depending on height, weight and gender but the variation isn't significant. At 5 mL, you fall asleep for 5 full days.

While asleep, you can't vote and can't be voted for.

If your tube reaches it's maximum capacity of 5 mL on its own, injection becomes forced.

In the case of a draw in votes, both top two voted players must inject whatever amount is currently in their tube and no one becomes the leader.

End Condition — Day 7

On the final evening, all remaining active players cast one last vote. Whoever wins this vote wins the game.

A player who is asleep at that time can't vote.

Additional Rules

- Physical violence results in immediate disqualification
- Players may speak freely, form alliances, and negotiate at any time
- Influence Value never changes, only the number of voters does.

After Enforcer Kanzaki finished explaining the rules, the generals and lieutenants quickly realized something that led to a subtle shift in the room.

Satoshi and Akuma slowly moved to the left side of the room while Fang Yuan and Kuromine simultaneously moved to the right side.

After a bit of time passing in silence, a clear division was created in the room. Satoshi and Akuma stood on the left, Fang Yuan and Kuromine stood on the right while the 16 villagers remained stationary in the middle between them.

Satoshi quickly turned towards Akuma and asked him "Why did you join me?"

Akuma sarcastically replied "Well, hello to you too Satoshi, Shouldn't you be asking me why I'm alive?"

Satoshi rolled his eyes which prompted Akuma to move on "I was told that there were two ways for me to win, the first is for me to achieve the win condition and the second is if you achieve the win condition.

I'd guess the other lieutenant, Kuromine, was given the same win conditions but replacing you with Fang Yuan.

Initially, I wanted to win by achieving the win condition myself to compensate for my earlier defeat but after hearing the game's rules, it became abundantly clear that the game heavily favors either you or Fang Yuan winning and my role is to simply help you win.

As for the villagers, I don't have any idea what motivates them."

Satoshi took in all the information and replied "I'd guess that the villager's objective is to simply make it to the end of the game. This means that they will always vote for one of the two biggest factions and it's up to us to try to sway them to vote for our faction."

Suddenly, the whispers of the room were interrupted by an overbearing voice, it was Fang Yuan, he announced to the room in a domineering voice "Everyone, it is a pleasure to take part in this game with you all. I'm hosting a banquet in my villa in 30 minutes. I urge all the villagers to join me so we can become familiar with one another and establish strategies to ensure everyone gets through the game."

Satoshi couldn't let this go on, he quickly interjected "Everyone, please listen to me. The man you see before you is filled with ill intentions, he does not intend to help you win, he only cares for himself. You all saw his actions earlier, he has no regards for anyone but himself. I would like to establish a strategy to allow all of us to leave this village with a victory. I'll be hosting a banquet myself. I humbly ask you all to join me."

Satoshi bent his head down after saying this to show respect to the villagers. He was obviously smirking underneath, he was just like Fang Yuan, he also had no care for the villagers victory, but he disguised his intentions to gain the upper hand.

The villagers began subtly swaying towards Satoshi but Fang Yuan quickly made his move.

Fang Yuan calmly walked towards the center of the room then spoke in a calm tone "You are indeed right Satoshi. I only care about achieving my victory and have no care for anyone but myself, but that is precisely why the villagers should join me. How could anyone trust their victory in the hands of someone weak and unwilling to take action like yourself."

He then turned his gaze to the villagers and continued "I understand you all. I have deduced your win condition, I know that you simply need to survive till the end to achieve a victory. Anyone who joins me will be protected by me because I need you. I need you to achieve my victory. However, I show no mercy, anyone who decides to go against me will be mercilessly eliminated."

Fang Yuan then walked back to the right wall and shouted out "Anyone who wants to join me, walk with me. Those that go to the other side will be cut off immediately."

Satoshi had to retaliate so he shouted out "Don't listen to this devil. He is fooling you. Join me, I will save you!"

However, it was already too late. The villagers didn't care about who was good and who was bad, who was an angel and who was a devil. They simply wanted to increase their chances of victory and Fang Yuan offered that.

12 of the villagers walked to the right side with Fang Yuan while 4 remained in the middle contemplating, no one moved to Satoshi's side.

Fang Yuan then shouted out "I do not need indecisive people on my side, to the four of you who have stayed in the middle, you are no longer welcome to join me."

The four suddenly felt fear and ran over to the right side, fervently asking Fang Yuan to take them in.

Fang Yuan didn't react, instead he watched them with an indifferent expression, his dark black eyes gazing directly into their souls. The four were suddenly struck with more fear, they got down on their knees and begged him to allow them into his faction.

Fang Yuan waited for them to naturally stop begging after a few seconds then said out loud "The twelve of you who joined me, follow me. I do not have any need for indecisive subordinates." He then walked out of the room and the twelve villagers followed behind him while the remaining four were still on the ground staring at the backs of the leaving villagers while in a pathetic state.

Satoshi's hopes of victory had already been greatly diminished. He felt constant regret about how he played the game. He previously criticized Fang Yuan's ruthlessness but now he was beginning to understand the power that comes from truly being alone and solely caring about one's own victory.

He had one final idea though, he quickly shouted out to the leaving villagers "My villa's doors will always be welcoming to all villagers, I will host a banquet at 7pm tonight, feel free to join me just to have a good time."

This invitation was Satoshi's last ditch effort. The hidden meaning behind it is a direct request to the villagers that joined Fang Yuan, he's telling them that they can also join his banquet after Fang Yuan's banquet is finished if they aren't satisfied with the way he does things, it was a slim hope but it was all he could do.

Satoshi then walked over towards the four men who had been pathetically begging just moments ago. All Satoshi wanted deep in his heart at this moment was to show his true self, his ruthlessness, to do exactly what Fang Yuan did. But he knew it was too late for that.

He smiled warmly towards the remaining four, instructed them to join him and guaranteed them that he'll do all he can to help them make it to the end.

Then, Satoshi, Akuma and the remaining four villagers walked together towards Satoshi's villa to discuss strategies and what to do in preparation for the vote at 9PM.

Chapter 13 - The Village of Influence

In Fang Yuan's banquet, Kuromine was ordered to prepare the food while Fang Yuan sat waiting with the villagers with some wine and conversation.

Kuromine felt deep shame. He who was once a revolutionist and a key opponent that nearly defeated Satoshi, but now he was reduced to a mere slave for another man, a foreigner no less. Kuromine wasn't idle, in his mind, he attempted to find ways to escape this humiliation and win himself but he ultimately accepted how the game favored Fang Yuan and Satoshi.

Satoshi's banquet showed a stark contrast. Satoshi treated Akuma as more of a partner rather than a subordinate, that was obviously against Satoshi's machiavellianist nature but he couldn't afford to be his ruthless self in this game anymore. Satoshi, Akuma and the four villagers worked together to prepare the food then sat down and ate while discussing strategy.

A few hours later, it was 6:30PM. Fang Yuan's guests had long since retreated to their own villas including Kuromine. As for Satoshi's guests, they were still gathered in his villa preparing to host the second banquet.

Satoshi held slim hope for arrivals, he had expected that Fang Yuan instructed the villagers under him to not join his banquet, if they did, he might have threatened them with removal from the faction. To counter this, Satoshi kept his back entrance unlocked and his blinds shut.

He also made preparations by messaging each of the villagers in Fang Yuan's faction privately tempting them to join his faction. He sent these messages through the phones provided by the third kingdom specifically for this game that allowed the players to message anyone privately as well as create group chats with whoever they wish.

Once 7PM approached, 3 villagers entered through the back of the villa together and walked into the banquet.

Satoshi welcomed them with a warm smile and instructed them to sit around the table. After sitting, one of the villagers began to speak

“We three have decided to create a small villager group and joined together to keep our options open. We are not pledging allegiance to your faction nor are we rejecting it.

We would actually prefer to join your faction as we collectively hated Fang Yuan’s way of doing things. At his banquet, he hurled orders and threatened anyone who entered your banquet with being cut off from the faction.”

The situation was clear to Satoshi. These three have defected yet they still wanted to keep their options open so they came in secretly, Satoshi obviously couldn’t allow that so he made his move.
He waved his hand which gave the signal to his loyal supporters. Kuromine and the four villagers got up and simultaneously opened the blinds revealing the three villagers sitting at the table to the rest of the compound.

Satoshi’s banquet was a well publicized manner and there was certainly at least one member of Fang Yuan’s faction who had to be watching Satoshi’s villa. To curry favor with Fang Yuan, Satoshi predicted that he would share the three villagers' actions to him leading to them being ostracized from Fang Yuan’s faction.

The three villagers realized what happened but it was too late. Ugly expressions showed on their faces and they sneered at Satoshi. One of them shouted out “You are just as cunning and insidious as Fang Yuan, you are both devils.”

Satoshi didn’t address the villagers' anger, he simply laughed and said “Now you are all officially part of the Satoshi faction.”

The situation now was closer than before, Satoshi had a lieutenant and 7 villagers while Fang Yuan had a lieutenant and 9 villagers.

9PM quickly followed and all the players met in the town hall to conduct the anonymous vote. Each player was taken separately by an assistant referee to give their vote for the leader of the village for tomorrow.

By 9:30PM, the players had gathered again in the town hall and the results were tallied. The enforcer Kanzaki then announced the results "In the first day of the village of influence, there have been no eliminations.

There were two players that gathered all the votes, the Satoshi faction and the Fang Yuan faction. The Satoshi faction has received 15 votes while the Fang Yuan faction has received 17 votes. Thus, Fang Yuan is the leader for tomorrow and now has 30 minutes to make a decision regarding the action he would like to take."

Fang Yuan didn't hesitate for a second, he looked towards the enforcer and spoke with an unwavering voice "I would like to confirm the Lieutenant loss and eliminate my own lieutenant from the game."
Everyone's face was filled with shock while Kuromine's was filled with anger. He launched himself aggressively towards Fang Yuan, his anger overcoming his common sense. He had previously lost embarrassingly to Satoshi and now the same thing was happening again.

Referee Kanzaki quickly ran towards Fang Yuan to subdue Kuromine but Fang Yuan didn't need it. He actually walked towards Kuromine who was charging at him and pinned him to the ground with a swift motion.

Referee Kanzaki quickly took over, and handed Kuromine over to an assistant referee.

He then approached Satoshi's personal tube and added 2.5ml of the sedating agent before leaving.

Satoshi was shocked at the events that transpired. Not at the fight, but at Fang Yuan's decision to eliminate his own lieutenant.

Satoshi thought that Fang Yuan would certainly either eliminate 2 of his villagers or his lieutenant to widen the vote gap but instead he focused on increasing his

accumulation which now means that Satoshi has more voting power for the next round.

All the villagers quickly dispersed and returned to their villas to get some sleep.

Chapter 14 - The Village of Influence

The next morning began and Satoshi invited the villagers of his faction to his villa in the morning.

Even though Satoshi has more votes, the current situation still heavily favors Fang Yuan. Satoshi has 15 votes under his control while Fang Yuan has 14 but Satoshi already has 2.5ml in his tube.

This means that if he decided to remove villagers from Fang Yuan's side, he'll have to inject whatever's in his tube meaning he'll be asleep for a few days which will allow Fang Yuan to turn the tables and easily achieve victory.

On the other hand, if he decides to eliminate his own villagers, he will quickly lose the support of the remaining villagers as they'll fear elimination which will lead to Fang Yuan gaining the majority of votes and winning the rest of the rounds.

After deducing this, Satoshi realized the true intent behind Fang Yuan's move, to force him to eliminate his own Lieutenant as well. Satoshi conjectured that the purpose behind Fang Yuan wanting to eliminate both Lieutenants is yet again due to his lone wolf nature that even surpassed Satoshi's.

It was because he didn't trust his own lieutenant and because he realized that Satoshi had ties with his lieutenant. This achieved two results, firstly, by eliminating both lieutenants, no one else held significant power except the generals and Fang Yuan was confident in his ability to pull villagers to his side.

The second result is a potential upside, if Satoshi had a friendship with Akuma, he might be reluctant to eliminate him, choosing one of the two other options which would undoubtedly lead to Fang Yuan's victory. Of course, this result would never happen due to Satoshi's nature, he would certainly be willing to sacrifice his lieutenant for victory.

So, during Fang Yuan's breakfast banquet, he instructed his supporters of the strategy. After implementing this strategy, Fang Yuan would have 14 votes while Satoshi would

have 12 which would create another issue, but this time, the issue wouldn't be Satoshi's but rather Fang Yuan's.

The reason for that relies on the core identity of the leader, at that point, both sides would have 2.5ml in their own tubes. This means that they absolutely can't choose to eliminate anyone from the opponent's side as they would then have to inject themselves with the sedative but if they eliminated their own faction members, they'd have to have a good explanation for it or the remaining faction members would leave.

Satoshi obviously reassured Akuma that he would win even after Akuma's removal which would lead to Akuma winning as well, even if he's out of the village.

Night quickly approached and the people gathered in the town hall once more. Satoshi quickly noticed something different about Fang Yuan's villagers and was able to quickly attribute the reason behind it.

Fang Yuan had created a priority mechanism. Depending on how helpful his villagers were to him, he would rank them and the ones at the bottom would be eliminated once necessary. He also obviously threatened anyone that defected with being eliminated from the village. Finally, he prohibited them from contacting each other to avoid them creating factions.

Anyone who detected a faction forming would tell Fang Yuan to rise up on the list, as for those who tried to form a faction, they'd be moved to the bottom.

This allowed Fang Yuan to create a system which justifies him removing his own villagers which once again put the situation in Fang Yuan's favor because once he gains the majority votes again after this round, he won't have to struggle with his villagers defecting once he eliminates some of them.

The enforcer walked into the room and announced the start of the vote, each player placed their vote secretly one by one and the outcome should've been obvious, 15 votes for Satoshi and 14 for Fang Yuan, however reality often has its own plans.

After the vote concluded, enforcer Kanzaki opened the results paper handed to him by the assistant enforcers and his eyes involuntarily widened.

He quickly recomposed himself "For today's vote, there were 17 votes for Fang Yuan." When Fang Yuan heard that, he sneered knowing that his plan worked.

Referee Kanzaki then continued "6 votes for Akuma and 6 votes for Villager Sato." Fang Yuan's smug face was quickly wiped and replaced with shock for a brief moment before recomposing himself. He quickly deduced the reason behind this result and then looked towards Satoshi.

On Satoshi's face was a wide grin but he was shaking internally. At that moment, he truly looked up to Fang Yuan. He realized that his machiavellianist nature that he thought was unparalleled still frailed in comparison to Fang Yuan's which is what put Satoshi in this precarious position.

Even though the facial expressions indicate that Satoshi outsmarted Fang Yuan in this round, he actually took a huge risk which might instantly guarantee his loss.

To understand this, let's look at the true events that transpired behind the scenes. The true intent behind Fang Yuan's move wasn't to force Satoshi to eliminate his lieutenant.

This all goes back to the first day when three villagers defected from Fang Yuan's camp to Satoshi's. That was actually a planned move by Fang Yuan to make the game appear closer to Satoshi at 17 vs 15 votes.

Once he won the first round, he decided to eliminate his own lieutenant to give Satoshi the illusion that he now had more votes which would lead him to the belief that Fang Yuan's scheme was to force him to eliminate his own lieutenant.

While in reality, Fang Yuan still held the advantage, as he held 17 votes even after Kuromine's departure from the 3 villagers that had been instructed to defect by Fang Yuan.

Satoshi saw through that plan quickly but even after he saw through it, he couldn't do anything about it. Figuring out Fang Yuan's true plan didn't help him, there was no way to escape the carefully woven net once he was trapped in it.

But Satoshi found a way, he had to cut off the rope holding up the net and fall to the ground along with the net. If he survived the fall, he would have a hope of making a comeback but if he fell to his death, the game was over.

Satoshi's strategy involved the clause of draws. In the rules explained by Enforcer Kanzaki, he said that "In the case of a draw in votes, both top two voted players must inject whatever amount is currently in their tube and no one becomes the leader."

This rule was clearly intended for when the top two players had a tie in votes but it never specifies that.

Satoshi decided to take advantage of this rule in an ingenious way. He knew that he couldn't stop Fang Yuan taking first place as he only had 12 votes in his control so he decided to split his team's votes.

In this way, there was technically a draw in votes which would mean that there would be no leader and the top voted of the top two factions must inject themselves. In this case, there are three factions so the leaders would all have to inject themselves with their syringes.

The three factions were Fang Yuan's faction with 17 votes, Fang Yuan had nothing in his syringe so nothing would happen.

The second faction is Akuma's faction, Satoshi instructed Akuma and 3 villagers to vote for Akuma and since Akuma has nothing in his syringe, he also wouldn't inject anything.

As for the third faction, Satoshi and a villager named Sato voted for villager Sato as the faction leader because if Satoshi was voted as the leader, he'd have to inject 2.5ml.

This was the ideal scenario of this plan, or rather, this gamble. This would all depend on the enforcer's personality, if he determines that the rules clearly insinuated a draw between the top two then there are two potential outcomes.

The first outcome is that Fang Yuan is appointed as the leader and the game goes on. The second outcome is that Satoshi and his followers will be determined to have voted for factions not in the top two and would all be wiped out but that was unlikely.

Chapter 15 - The Village of Influence

As the enforcer deliberated, he had to look back on the script he read when calling out the rules as he had forgotten exactly what he had said.

As he was reading the script, he realized that this loophole truly existed but he determined that it obviously implied that a vote between the two leaders would result in a draw rather than a draw between two minor factions.

He was about to announce his decision of making Fang Yuan the leader and having the game play on when his phone started ringing.

He took it out from his pocket and saw a call from Abami who had been watching the game from the security cameras.

Enforcer Kanzaki quickly picked up the phone and Abami quickly began to speak "Yo, Kanzaki-San. I intentionally designed this game with this loophole so please rule it as a draw and have the faction leaders inject themselves. Also impose a rule that now revises the draw rule making it only applicable for the top two factions. If any other factions have a draw, the major faction will be considered the leader and the two drawn factions will be considered one."

Kanzaki quickly replied "Yes sir, thank you for your guidance."

Abami replied while laughing "Don't mention it." Then hung up.

Kanzaki then stepped back into the town hall after the phone call and announced the result.

Fang Yuan was internally furious but he was powerless to do anything about it so he bit his tongue and began to quickly formulate new counter strategies.

On the other hand, Satoshi was expressionless with a deep emotion hidden behind his dead eyes. Anger.

The enforcer left and shortly after, the villagers dispersed to their villas. Satoshi also returned to his villa walking gracefully and ignoring the gaze of the villagers.

He entered the villa and walked up the stairs to the bedroom, walked in then closed the door. Then suddenly, he exploded with anger.
He sent a vase flying across the room and destroyed everything around him before quickly recomposing himself. He then sat on his bed and closed his eyes.

"This is bullshit, it's all rigged. I can't believe I had to be saved. It's obvious, I know that Kanzaki was about to rule in Fang Yuan's favor, I should've lost. I was completely defeated by Fang Yuan, I only managed to climb out the hole because of a rope from heaven."

"I can't keep on being weak. I've been arrogant, thinking I had reached the limit of human potential. Even when thinking of Abami and Kamashiro, knowing that they could easily defeat me, I still believed deep down that I could beat them."

"Now I realize how vast the sky is, even a mere pawn sent in by Abami was able to humiliate me. I must truly embrace my nature, if I wish to be alone then I must win through my own power. I never want to rely on anyone else ever again, I will defeat Fang Yuan and grow beyond him."

Satoshi's thoughts drifted through his mind turning his anger into a drive for more, a drive for victory.

But Satoshi knew that he was still in a precarious position, even after taking a gamble, failing and being saved by Abami, his situation hadn't changed greatly.

Fang Yuan currently has 17 votes under his control, 5 of his own and 12 from villagers. Meanwhile, Satoshi has 12 votes, 5 of his own, 3 from Akuma and 4 from villagers.

The only difference is that now the battlefield has been cleared up, there are no longer any traitors within the factions and loyalties have been established.

Fang Yuan had already tried recruiting Satoshi's villagers to his faction that night promising them guaranteed safety but the villagers refused under Satoshi's guidance.

The reason behind their refusal is simple. It's because as long as they remain in Satoshi's faction, they're safe. Satoshi would never eliminate them if he becomes the leader because he needs voting power and Fang Yuan wouldn't eliminate them because Fang Yuan will likely eliminate his own villagers since he already has voting power, all he needs is assurance that he won't be injected with sedating agent so he would avoid eliminating anyone from Satoshi's faction.

Of course this wasn't completely accurate and many changes could happen but Satoshi had successfully brainwashed them with this viewpoint and they were unlikely to betray him.

As for Akuma, it's needless to say that he is even more unlikely for him to betray Satoshi.

Fang Yuan's villagers are also unlikely to betray him due to the contribution system he created, Satoshi had tried poaching some of Fang Yuan's villagers on multiple occasions with no success.

All of them without exception had even reported Satoshi's attempt to poach them to Fang Yuan for contribution points.

Satoshi had tried setting a trap by not attempting to poach a small portion of Fang Yuan's villagers. This trap's purpose was to sow discord in Fang Yuan's faction because Fang Yuan wouldn't have received any information from those villagers about getting approached by Satoshi which would've led him to the belief that those villagers had already betrayed him but Fang Yuan was too intelligent to fall for that trap and saw through it.

At this time, Satoshi was still sitting on his bed formulating hundreds of strategies that each had a flaw and weren't usable.

As the sun began to rise, Satoshi suddenly opened his eyes with an air of determination as he had finally found a strategy to potentially turn the situation around.

He quickly checked the time and realized that he was in a precarious position, he quickly laid down, set a 6 hour alarm and fell asleep to prevent his body's limitations from activating. This also meant that he didn't fully consider the details of his strategy but he couldn't afford to stay up any longer.

Chapter 16 - The Village of Influence

Satoshi woke up at noon on the third day. He had slept in the suit he was wearing so he quickly took it off, showered then put on a new one.

While in the shower, he went over his plan a few more times attempting to hastily cover up any holes.

After that, he walked out of his villa and into the open air of the compound. There, he saw many groups gathered, talking and enjoying their time together but there was a clear distinction between those of his faction and those of the opposite faction.

Satoshi walked up to a group of four villagers and Akuma sitting around a table. They all greeted him and he returned the greeting.

"Sorry to dampen the mood but I have to discuss some strategy with you all" Said Satoshi as he sat down at the table with a smile on his face.

One of the villagers responded "It's fine, tell us, what's on your mind?"

"I intend to make my move now to get us out of this situation, I know you all must be worried under your cheerful smiles right now but I'm quite certain I'll be able to flip the tables as long as you all help me." Said Satoshi

Akuma quickly responded intelligently boosting morale "We'll all follow you till the last moment Satoshi, we're certain you can get us out of this."

The other villagers roared in unison after hearing this.

The night of the fourth day approached and everyone gathered in the town hall for yet another vote.

As for the vote's outcome, well it should be quite clear, Fang Yuan should win the vote at 17 vs 12 votes but things haven't gone according to expectations in this game so Fang Yuan was on high alert.

Everyone left the town hall one by one to give their votes then enforcer Kanzaki returned to announce the results.

Kanzaki announced in a clear voice "Today's vote has ended with 29 votes for Fang Yuan's faction, since there is only one faction with votes, there will be no leader for this round.

This might sound confusing at first but the rules clearly outline that the leader is picked between the two factions with the most votes, since there is only one faction with votes, there will be no leader.

As per the rules, when there is no leader, the two generals must inject whatever is currently in their syringe and then 0.9ml will be added to the syringe.

Fang Yuan, Satoshi, please come towards me, I will now inject you with your syringes."

Fang Yuan laughed inwardly "Haha, so this is Satoshi's final scheme. He realized that he had no hope in winning so he built this scheme as a last ditch effort to turn the tables.

It's quite simple really, when we get injected, I'll be unconscious for nearly a day while Satoshi will be unconscious for nearly 3 and a half days.

Even though he'll be unconscious for longer, the truth is that the time doesn't matter. He'll be awake on the seventh day before the final vote so he won't miss out on that.

As for me, I'll be awake tomorrow before the next vote so I won't even miss a vote. But he intends to use this day while I'm asleep to have Akuma attempt to convince my villagers to switch sides. If Akuma succeeds in that then he'll control the votes and he'll give Satoshi the victory which gives Akuma the victory as well.

But this plan has lots of issues. The first involves Akuma, if he converts my villagers then he can simply win the final vote himself but that's unlikely, he seems to have a

close relationship with Satoshi even though Satoshi likely doesn't see him as more than a pawn.

Regardless, since he doesn't gain anything by winning without Satoshi, he'll likely win with him.

The second issue is that Satoshi will be unconscious till the last vote so even if Akuma converts my villagers, I'll have two days to convert them back and I'm quite confident that I can beat Akuma in a mind game and get my villagers back even if he was instructed by Satoshi.

The final issue and the biggest issue involves my villagers themselves. I've already arranged more than enough food in one of the villager's villas. I've already instructed them to remain in the villa if I'm ever unconscious, to close the windows and doors and to not leave until the daily vote.

Obviously, they'll keep track of each other so if any of them decide to leave, the others will inform me when I wake up and I'll have that villager eliminated. There might be some risk of conversion when they leave for the town hall but since I'll only be asleep for 0.9ml worth of sedative, I'll wake up before the vote and will be able to ensure they don't convert.

Put simply, it would be a miracle if Satoshi even managed to convert one of them.

I'm trying to think of anything else that Satoshi could do but nothing's coming to mind and I've already been injected, I'll probably be asleep shor…"

Satoshi and Fang Yuan were injected and entered into an unconscious state.

Fang Yuan's villagers didn't waste time, they quickly gathered together and left towards one of their villas.

Akuma and his villagers quickly followed. Satoshi had instructed him to attempt to convert Fang Yuan's villagers which is why he followed them. Satoshi also instructed

him to be wary of Fang Yuan villagers that convert as they could be traitors sent in by Fang Yuan.

But in the end, no one converted. Akuma tried calling out to them multiple times but they kept ignoring him and walked towards a villa before shutting the door and locking themselves in.

Akuma and his villagers each returned to their own villas in defeat but that was only the first part of Satoshi's plan, it wasn't over yet.

The morning of the fifth day began, Satoshi and Fang Yuan were still unconscious in pod-like beds in the town hall, meanwhile, Fang Yuan's villagers were locking themselves in the villa.

Akuma made more attempts to convert the villagers but none of them opened the doors or responded to him.

Chapter 17 - The Village of Influence

The day passed and the sun set. The town hall gathering was about to begin in an hour, Akuma and his villagers were sitting around a table in the compound whereas Fang Yuan's villagers were in a villa.

At that moment, with the sun setting behind him, Fang Yuan walked out of the town hall reciting a poem

"The sun sets without loyalty, and the night does not promise its return.

All closeness is merely distance not yet revealed.

Trust is a temporary shape taken by self-interest before it dissolves.

When time turns, even those beside you become part of the landscape behind you."

Akuma's heart started beating irregularly upon hearing this, even though he knew that Fang Yuan would be returning about now and he knew that Satoshi had a plan to turn the situation around when he woke up, he couldn't help but feel fear. That also applied to the villagers around him.

Fang Yuan knocked on the villa's door in a certain pattern then the door unlocked for him. He went in, gathered the villagers and then walked out together towards the town hall for the day 5 vote.

After everyone gathered in the town hall for the votes, enforcer Kanzaki walked in to begin leading people out for their votes but his entry was interrupted by the sound of a metal being struck.

Everyone looked towards the source of this noise, Akuma. And they all watched as the coin he flicked high into the air landed in his hand. Even though there was nothing special about this action, it was abnormal to the silence they had been accustomed to when the enforcer walked in.

Fang Yuan's head quietly spun a few times before arriving at a conclusion, he had just unveiled another layer of Satoshi's plan.

Before the coin flip, Fang Yuan had clearly understood something, he had to split off one of his villagers to vote for Akuma every round. That way, if Akuma decides to rally the votes for Fang Yuan, the situation of no leader doesn't repeat itself as there will be at least one vote for another party.

But this also meant that if Akuma decided to rally his votes around a random one of his villagers, the villager that I sent to vote for Akuma will have voted for the minority and will be kicked out.

And as expected, Akuma publicized it.

"Many of you might see this coin flip as a random action but in reality, it has a significant effect on dictating your lives in this game. This coin flip has just made the decision for me regarding whether I'll rally my votes around Fang Yuan or around a random villager of mine." Akuma paused for a few seconds before continuing

"What this means for you is if any of you vote for one of my random villagers, you have a 37.5% chance of being eliminated."

Most of Fang Yuan's villagers were confused, they didn't understand why they would ever vote for one of my villagers but Fang Yuan understood clearly.

He could no longer command any of his villagers to vote for Akuma as they will have a 50% chance of being eliminated, he also can't ask anyone to vote for a villager as they will have a 37.5% chance of being eliminated.

Satoshi just forced Fang Yuan's hand, by taking this action, Fang Yuan now has to have all of his villagers vote for him. If Akuma then votes for Fang Yuan as well, Fang Yuan will be forced to be injected again as there won't be a leader.

Fang Yuan thought to himself "Akuma's coin flip probably doesn't mean anything, he'll vote for me regardless, but now the villagers won't dare to vote for him.

This means I'll be unconscious for tomorrow until just before the vote but then the same thing will happen the day after tomorrow. This move would be deadly if the amount injected was 1ml but since it's 0.9ml, I'll be awake for the final vote.

Even though this move seems grand at first, it only means that I'll be unconscious all the time except for the votes, as long as my villagers stay inside, they won't be converted.

Rather than helping Satoshi, this move is securing my victory."

Kanzaki then began guiding villagers out one by one for the vote, after that was done, he announced the result.

"All votes have gone to Fang Yuan, since there is no leader, Fang Yuan must be injected with the 0.9ml in his syringe then 0.9ml will be added to it."

The result was as Fang Yuan expected, he was injected and the events of the last day repeated. His villagers bundled together in the villa, never leaving.

Time passed, and the sunset of the next day, day 6, came about.

Fang Yuan once again walked out of the town hall reciting the same poem again.

"The sun sets without loyalty, and the night does not promise its return.

All closeness is merely distance not yet revealed.

Trust is a temporary shape taken by self-interest before it dissolves.

When time turns, even those beside you become part of the landscape behind you."

The villagers then gathered again in the town hall, Akuma flipped the coin and the votes were announced to all be upon Fang Yuan again.

He was injected again with 0.9ml and 0.9ml was added to his syringe.

Fang Yuan's villagers returned to the villa they've been gathering in while Akuma and his villagers returned to their own villas.

The sun rose the next morning and Satoshi woke up from his deep sleep. He disconnected the IV drip that provided him with nutrition then walked out of the town hall to his villa.

Let's go over the current situation on the surface.

Fang Yuan is unconscious and is expected to wake up at sunset, the vote will take place this night about two hours after he wakes up. He has 0.9ml in his syringe and he has a total of 17 votes including his own.

Satoshi is awake, he has 0.9ml in his syringe and has a total of 12 votes including his own.

On the surface, Satoshi appears to be clearly in a losing position since the final vote simply relies on who gets more votes, so how does Satoshi intend to turn the situation around?

Satoshi thought to himself as he was cooking "Even though victory is within my grasp, there is still one final obstacle I must overcome. And even if I win, I must not forget that I was saved by Abami's decision mid-way through, I must not ever allow myself to be in a position like that ever again."

After cooking for himself, Satoshi ate his creation, a spectacular french omelet with grapefruit juice.

After that, he slept a few hours before meeting up with his villagers to ensure that they still understood his plan.

Chapter 18 - The Village of Influence

Time passed and the sun was about to set once again. At this moment, Akuma was in the townhall building while his four villagers were outside the building standing in front of the entrance.

The purpose of this move wasn't to simply block the villagers from coming in, the enforcer would never allow something like that to happen. When the enforcer arrives, he'll simply move the villagers from the entrance to allow everyone to enter. The plan was different, it all relied on Akuma.

Akuma held Fang Yuan's syringe in his hand and waited for Fang Yuan to begin to show signs of waking up.

After a few minutes of waiting, Fang Yuan finally began showing signs of consciousness, and upon waking, he saw Akuma's facing staring directly at him.

Fang Yuan then spoke in a soft voice "I see, so this is your intention, it's exactly as I expected, it seems I've lost today."

At this moment, Akuma injected Fang Yuan with the 0.9ml of sedative in his syringe then remained inside and awaited his fate. Fang Yuan didn't attempt to retaliate as if he was fine with defeat but even if he had tried, he definitely wouldn't have found the strength to.

A few minutes later, Satoshi ran towards the town hall screaming "You guys can't do this, let me in. This isn't fair."

But his villagers didn't listen, they simply stood in front of the door motionless. Satoshi didn't dare to attack them so he quickly called the enforcer.

The enforcer was already on his way though, he began moving as soon as he saw Akuma inject Fang Yuan through the security cameras.

About 15 minutes later, the enforcer and his assistants arrived and forced their way in.

It is now 7:30pm and the voting begins to take place at 8.

The villagers began to arrive and gather, usually they're all gathered by 7:40PM.

After the enforcer entered the town hall, he instructed the assistants to inject Fang Yuan with a syringe before turning towards the players.

He then spoke in a loud clear voice "Due to rule breaking, the following players are hereby eliminated, Akuma Ryo, Villager 6, Villager 8, Villager 13, Villager 17."

After saying that, the room erupted in uproar. Most of the noise came from the eliminated villagers, one of them said "You promised us Satoshi, you told us that as long as we stood in front of the door and didn't do anything, we wouldn't be eliminated."

Satoshi then looked at them with a confused look "What are you saying? You, Akuma and the rest of the villagers suddenly decided to rush towards the town hall, I didn't know why, so I stayed in my villa but it turned out you were planning to do something against the rules.

Why did you think you wouldn't be eliminated? even though you didn't directly inject Fang Yuan, you broke the rules as accomplices. Who knows what would've happened if I didn't come in and call the referees.

I wouldn't have cared if I had lost but I wouldn't have wanted to win like this!"

Everyone in the room could tell that this was a performance. Even though it was a flawless act from Satoshi, even the idiotic villagers of the other side could easily tell that Satoshi had ordered them to do this.

Of course, Satoshi could've not assigned the villagers to the door, in the end, they served little purpose. They were merely a preventative measure in the unlikely scenario that an enemy villager walks in before Fang Yuan was injected but Satoshi was willing

to sacrifice them all even if it only reduced his chance of failure by a fraction of a percent.

As for Akuma, Satoshi would've sacrificed him but in the end, he will win along with Satoshi as that's what his win condition stipulates.

The room was enveloped in silence, Satoshi's villagers and Akuma had been escorted out and Fang Yuan's villagers had no words to say, it was completely shocking.

The silence was then cut by enforcer Kanzaki as he spoke sarcastically "Well don't worry Satoshi, you won't have to bear with such an unjust victory, we've already injected Fang Yuan with a counter-sedative, he'll be awake by 7:50PM, just barely within the time before the voting begins."

Satoshi's face filled with a defeated look upon hearing these words as he fell onto his knees in despair, his face covered in his hands.

All the villagers couldn't help but look at him in pity, it was over.

Time passed, the clock struck 7:45 then 7:46 then 7:47 then 7:48 then 7:49 before finally striking 7:50PM but Fang Yuan still showed no sign of movement.

The enforcer looked over at Satoshi with suspicion but couldn't determine anything wrong.

Two more minutes passed but Fang Yuan still showed no signs of waking up and Satoshi was still on the floor in apparent despair.

The enforcer quickly made a call to someone that appeared to be a medical professional but he was assured that Fang Yuan should wake up.

Three more minutes passed with no change. The enforcer was furious internally. Even though he was impartial externally, he wanted Fang Yuan to win deep down after all the shit that Satoshi had pulled.

He quickly made a decision to inject Satoshi with more counter-sedative up to the safe limit but nothing changed.

Four more minutes passed but Fang Yuan was still asleep.

Satoshi then suddenly lifted himself from the floor with a loud laugh echoing throughout the room then he looked towards the enforcer and said sarcastically

"I just remembered something! Akuma had said something about grapefruit juice before heading out to the townhall. I didn't realize it then but now I do, he must've added grapefruit juice to the sedative, this breaks down the digestive enzymes that digest the sedative leading to it having a much longer half life!"

He then laughed out loud again after saying that. Everyone knew that Satoshi must've been the one to instruct Akuma to add grapefruit juice to the sedative but no one could do anything about it.

Before the enforcer had the chance to call the medical professional for advice on counteracting this, the clock struck 8PM.

No matter what the enforcer wanted, he couldn't stop the unrelenting current of time. Since the time had reached 8PM, it couldn't be reversed.

The enforcer then announced with a clear reluctance in his tone "The voting process will begin now." He then led the players to the voting room one by one.

A few minutes later, the result came out "Satoshi has obtained the votes of all the player, so Satoshi, the villagers currently in the town hall as well as Akuma Ryo have all successfully passed the Village of Influence. The game is hereby officially concluded."

In the end Fang Yuan was defeated and Satoshi obtained victory from the grasp of defeat. His victory involved multiple factors including his own scheming, luck and Abami's intervention but the most important factor that brought him victory was Akuma, or rather, his identity as a lieutenant.

Fang Yuan had eliminated his lieutenant early, if he had kept him around, he would've surely noticed the hidden value of a lieutenant while scheming. The lieutenant is the only player who would be truly loyal to you.

All villagers could switch allegiance and they could not be brought to sacrifice themselves. This is why Satoshi's coin flip tactic was effective, it relied on the villager's interest for self preservation. It is also why Satoshi's final move worked perfectly, no one else would've been willing to inject Fang Yuan and eliminate themselves except the lieutenant, the only entity that could win even after elimination.

At the same time, Kei's game had also concluded. He went up against a skilled opponent but Kei quickly gained the upper hand and kept it throughout the game to secure an easy victory by the end.

Even though Kei's opponent had been picked specifically by Abami to specifically counteract his strengths similar to how Fang Yuan counteracted Satoshi's strengths, Kei had grown far beyond Abami's predictions and managed to win without much difficulty.

But no victory can last forever, Kei's victory was quickly followed by calamity. When Kei returned to his assigned room in the third kingdom after the village of influence, he was visited by Abami who had a solemn expression on his face.

"Your father has died of old age and your kingdom calls for your return and coronation as the next king. There is a car waiting for you outside, please make your way back to the first kingdom. It'll be more difficult to organize time for your next games now but we'll be in touch to sort things out. Good luck."

Kei had long since tempered his mind so his expression didn't betray his inner thoughts.

But deep down, he felt something.

It wasn't the sadness of losing his father or the fear of responsibility but rather a different, much more powerful feeling.

Excitement.

Chapter 19 - Revolution

Kei returned to the first kingdom without a hitch and was quickly bombarded with media upon leaving the car to enter the castle.

Questions were thrown at him one after another while he was still exiting the car.

“Prince Kei, how did you feel when you heard that the previous glorious king had passed away?” Asked one of the reporters

Another reporter asked “Prince Kei, what do you intend to do about the war with the second kingdom when you officially become king?”

Among the many noises and questions, one clearly stood out “Now that the mad king is dead, do you intend to continue his shitty legacy and lead more of my family to their deaths?” This question wasn’t asked by a reporter, but rather by a normal citizen, one that had clearly been affected by the actions of Kei’s father.

After the question was asked many officers quickly jumped onto the villagers and apprehended him. Then one of them did something truly audacious by normal moral standards but was quite common in the current first kingdom, he took out his gun and shot the villager straight in the forehead with many video cameras recording the scene.

Kei didn’t even flinch at the sight as he walked out of his car into the castle indifferently. Behind him, the sharp screams of the reporters filled the air.

However, they quickly died down out of fear and were replaced by the shouts of the officers. “Long live the new king! Long live King Kei the second! Long live the new king! Long live King Kei the second!”

Kei finally entered the castle after the chaotic scenes that only lasted a dozen seconds followed by the officers then walked into the throne room.

There, a video camera had been readily prepared aimed directly at the throne, Kei entered the room with a slightly oversized black suit purposely prepared for this coronation, the same suit that his father wore during his coronation.
Upon entry, the ceremony officially began, the king's council officially welcomed the new king during this time and the celebrations lasted for hours before Kei finally got to sit on the throne and officially become the next king of the first kingdom.

For security purposes, countless forces stood outside the gate of the throne room however no one inside the room was allowed a gun except the king as a sign of respect.

This setup allowed Kei to perfectly execute the plan he's had for many years. As soon as he sat in the chair, he tapped a button on his phone while it was in his pocket and a few gunshots were heard outside the gates.

The esteemed guests of the King's coronation quickly cowered in fear behind tables and scattered around the room while Kei sat firmly in his chair unwavering.

People all across the kingdom were watching this broadcast with fear on the outside, but deep in their hearts, a sense of hope arose. They hoped that the shots they heard were a force of resistance, that they would make their way into the throne room at any moment and shoot the descendent of the mad king to end the cycle and bring a new prosperity to the kingdom and their hopes had been met.

Nearly a hundred armed men walked into the throne room with one officer captive held at the front of their formation by someone that appeared to be the leader of this force.

The leader then shouted out "All of you, line up in front of the king and get on your knees." During this, he never addressed the king once.

Shortly after, all the guests were on their knees in a line in front of the king when Kei finally got up and looked directly at the video camera recording him.

“My father was a despicable human being who ruined the lives of the people of the kingdom and their families, I will not allow this cycle to repeat.” After Kei said that, the leader of the armed forces walked towards Kei and handed the captive officer to Kei.
“The man you see before you is the same man you saw earlier today. He ruthlessly killed a man when I walked out of the car simply for voicing a negative opinion of my father.

At the time, I was nearly unable to restrain my anger but if I had shot him then, the council would’ve retreated deep into the castle and I wouldn’t have been able to reach them. I would’ve likely been executed under false pretenses.

Now that I am the king, things are going to be different, I will not repeat the mistakes of my father. And this new era will begin with the death of this unjust officer.”

As he said that, he took off his suit jacket in an act that clearly denounced his father’s influence, took the gun hidden within and then shot the officer with a bullet into his forehead.

After that, Kei raised his hand in a swift motion and each of the armed forces stood behind one of the guests of the coronation, then with another motion, all of the armed forces fired their guns at the same time.

Ear splitting bullet sounds echoed throughout the throne room, before finally dissipating, leaving countless bodies on the floor, with a bullet having just passed through the back of their skulls.

Kei then went up to the stage, faced the camera once again, and looked towards people of his kingdom.

“All of these men you see dead beneath my feet were my father's greatest supporters. The men that have killed them were also men of my father's armies that I have been gathering since I was young.

Whenever I found someone that clearly did not align with my father's values, I recruited them into my force, and waited.

I waited painstakingly everyday, my heart being torn apart everytime I saw an injustice committed by my father but I was powerless.
If I had taken action then, I would've undoubtedly been executed for treason.

But now things are different, I am now the king and I promise to use the forces I have gathered for the prosperity of this kingdom and its people.

Unfortunately, some members and officers of my father's faction are still alive and free, dispersed throughout the land. I have tried my best to imprison as many of them but there are still quite a few out there.

I will issue wanted posters for all of them, and my armed forces will imprison them upon sight. The ones that committed evil with their own hands, the ones that mercilessly followed my father's commands, they will be mercilessly executed in the same way.

As for the ones that didn't take any evil actions, they will be imprisoned for an appropriate period of time, before being released into the public once again.

I ask for your support over the coming months as I return the first kingdom to its former glory. If anyone has any suggestions for future projects, feel free to bring them in through our newly created suggestions website. Let's all work hard together for a better tomorrow!"

After saying that, the cameras shut down, and the broadcast ended. Kei was officially now king, and the secret plan which he had been brewing had finally come to fruition.

Chapter 20 - Revolution

Kei could have organized these forces to come together and retaliate against his father while he was still alive but that would've brought about way too many risks and it was likely to fail as his father constantly had eyes on him.

Kei made his way to the king's office after the speech and began working for the kingdom and issuing new decrees.

A few days later, he was still in his office. He had been awake for many days on end, making decisions for the kingdom's prosperity. He also managed to end the war with the second kingdom, publicly conceding many resources to Satoshi's father, the king of the second kingdom, a cost he was willing to pay to end the war.

In fact, Satoshi's father had also wanted to end the war after Kei's father died. Even though he held a deep grudge against the previous king, he actually supported this one secretly because he had plotted against his father.

But Satoshi's father couldn't simply stop the war, he would have no face left if he did that so Kei created a way out for him. He publicly announced a massive resource compensation to the second kingdom as the price for an alliance but in reality, he had already secretly negotiated with Satoshi's father and didn't have to pay a price for the alliance.

The resources he had conceded were simply a media stunt to allow Satoshi's father to save some face.

Even though Satoshi's father conceded on this end and finally ended the war, his cruel nature still remained at heart. He was just like Kei's father, if not worse. He still left his citizens in poverty and hunger while he basked in constant feasts. The war was simply a headache for him that he was hoping to end for a long time but couldn't due to his rivalry with Kei's father.

As for Kei, he accomplished many great things in these few days other than the alliance. But the tasks never ended. They were relentless.

It was too much for him to do. Even though he had achieved the first step to his goal, to unite the three kingdoms, he still did not feel satisfied.

He even felt a sense of annoyance. He was annoyed with the way things were moving. He came to the realization that his pursuit of these impossible goals was much more fun than actually achieving them.

As his mind was drifting away from his current task, thinking about these pointless thoughts, he suddenly made a huge realization and got up from his seat in shock. It happened in a flash, but he was sure he had found the true reason behind Abami and Kamashiro's games, and why they had brought him and Satoshi to compete against them for the rule of the three kingdoms.

And now he was going to use that information to his advantage to move things forward. Everything suddenly became clear to Kei.

This simple realization led to another great surge in Kei's strength. He had surpassed Satoshi after his previous realization, but now he was well beyond him, and Satoshi will have to get even stronger to be worthy of competing against Kei.

After he made this realization, Kei quickly assembled some forces and created his own council of decision makers.

He then assigned each member of his council a few tasks before promptly leaving the first kingdom and heading out to the third kingdom to meet with Abami and Kamashiro.

Going to the third kingdom was no longer simple for him since he was king now. This move would have great implications, and everybody would be watching him so he decided to leave secretly leaving behind a trusted advisor to play the role of king secretly.

Two days later, he was in the third kingdom, and was in a room with Abami and Kamashiro, the same room where he had met them for the first time.

However things were very different this time. Kei had grown remarkably since that time and he even had some leverage against Abami and Kamashiro this time.

The leverage that Kei held was precisely the purpose behind the games he and Satoshi had been partaking in.

Kei discovered it when he was in thought in his office "I'm so bored of this, it really is annoying being needed by others.

My mother died when I was born and my father was never around so I never had the classic sense of familial obligations, I was always able to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted.

But now, things are different, I'm king. A king has responsibilities, I can no longer do whatever I want.

Alas, these are the limitations of being part of a system, when you're at the bottom, you have to constantly act in line with the system and try to advance in it, in an attempt to reach the top and have power over those at the bottom.

But when you reach the top, whether you're a politician, councilman, prime minister or even king, you're still limited. You must always act with the interest of the system in mind, you cannot act out of line and you must constantly sacrifice for the system.

That's the beauty and curse of systems. Every system operates in the same way, no matter how big or small it is. Whether it be a family or a country, it's the same.

Even in small families, one must sometimes sacrifice what they want to do simply to satisfy the others around them. Also, one must always act within what is considered normal in that family's culture. One must also support what the family supports, if everyone in that family follows a certain belief or religion, you cannot defect or you are ostracized. To be a part of a family and benefit from their support, whether it be financial or emotional, one must also sacrifice a lot.

Similarly, with a country, everyone must act in line with the country's rules and policies. If one dislikes the country's way of doing things, they must stay silent.. If one publicly criticizes the country, they are ostracized or imprisoned. In extreme cases like my father's rule, they'd be killed.

And if you try to ignore all those things and focus on advancing yourself, you're only advancing the country you're in through your taxes and spending.

So then you might decide to try to become a politician to change the system from within and become part of the people that benefit from the system but as you advance, you realize you become even more limited.

To be free and not limited is to be left ostracized, alone and without resources.

Only a certain few can be free yet advanced. Those who take advantage of the system to climb into money or power then leave the system and grasp control over it from the outside.

Oh how I would like to be in that position right now!

Oh, wait, wait. I just realized something. Yeah this has to be it.

That's why those two are doing all of this.

They were initially alone and free, they built a great empire outside the system with very little resources then used that to exert control over those in the system and so the third kingdom came to be.

But now they're trapped, as the rulers of the third kingdom, they're certainly experiencing what I'm experiencing now. They want to go back to being free, so they can pursue their next goal, their next thrill.

After all, uniting the three kingdoms after decades of Japan being ununited is definitely not easy but it's also not the end of the road. In the end, it's just Japan.

We've been isolated from world trade and have basically created our own world since the beginning of the internal strife many decades ago. By uniting the three kingdoms and ending the internal strife, it is merely the beginning of returning back to the world.

The next step in a man chasing the most impossible goals would be to conquer the rest of the world next.

But that was much easier said than done. Once the ruler of the three kingdoms enters the competition over power against other countries, it becomes much more difficult to outmaneuver your opponent as they constantly have eyes on you.

Abami and Kamashiro didn't attack the first and second kingdom, initially I thought it was because they wanted to avoid bloodshed, but I was wrong.

If they attacked us and took over, it would be impossible for them to relinquish their power without the country going back to an internal strife over power.

So they created these games, brilliant, truly brilliant!

With these games, they intend to help me and Satoshi grow to be capable leaders then have us compete against each other to determine who would be better.

Once the winner between me and Satoshi was established, they most certainly intended to lose the last game on purpose and give the winner between me and Satoshi rule over the three kingdoms.

They'd probably do it in a way where they still exert some form of influence over the winner between me and Satoshi so they can go back to covertly making moves.

They'll then begin moving towards taking over the rest of the world by taking action from the shadows and leveraging the influence they have over Japan to assist them when necessary.

But they must've known that either one of me or Satoshi would likely discover their true purpose which will create the standard for the final game.

If I win against Satoshi and advance to battle against Abami and Kamashiro, the final game would most certainly be a game where both parties are attempting to make the other party achieve the victory conditions, a game which would most certainly be countless times more difficult than a standard game where both parties strive for victory.

And now, since I've discovered this purpose, I can use it to make some demands. Since Satoshi has likely not yet discovered the purpose, I could share it with him.

Abami and Kamashiro would obviously not want to see that, the first reason is that they would hope that he never finds out and defeats me so their final game would be easier. The second is that being given the purpose compared to discovering it himself would significantly hinder this growth.

I can use this information to blackmail those two to an extent. I'll make some demands threatening that I'll release this information to Satoshi if they don't comply. I must obviously be careful with how far I take this for many reasons but this is the layout of what I'm intending.

As for what I'll request, I still have to think deeply about it."

Chapter 21 - Negotiations

Kei was now prepared as he sat across from Abami and Kamashiro, he began to speak in a calm tone “I’ve come here to request a favor from the two of you if I may.”

Kamashiro responded in a respectful tone “Your journey here must’ve been difficult due to its covertness and we appreciate you making the time to see us, please tell us what you’d like and we’ll do our best to help.”

A smile grew on Kei’s face before replying “It’s quite simple really, I’d like to skip all the games and directly advance towards defeating the two of you for control over the three kingdoms. Or it might be more appropriate to say, "I'd like to advance to being defeated by the two of you.”

After Kei said that, a smile developed on Kamashiro’s face while Abami laughed heartily.

Abami then quickly ceased his laughter and replied “Splendid Kei, truly splendid! So you’ve finally realized it. I guess I was wrong, you win this time Kamashiro.”

Kamashiro smiled at Abami with a clearly gloating gaze after Abami finished talking. Kei was initially perplexed but he then realized that the meaning behind Kamashiro’s victory is very insignificant.

Kamashiro and Abami had probably competed against each other by betting on who would discover their intentions first. It seems that Kamashiro bet on me while Abami bet on Satoshi and since I discovered it first, Kamashiro won.

Kei suddenly felt a sense of longing, even after Abami and Kamashiro achieved so much and became rulers, they still had a fun friendship. Kei longed for the day when he’d be able to experience that same friendship with Satoshi again.

As for the meaning behind Kei’s request, it was just an act, his request was clearly never to actually directly advance to facing Abami and Kamashiro, that would be too big of a request that would definitely be rejected.

It was all just a roundabout way of informing Abami and Kamashiro that he had discovered the purpose behind their actions.

Kei conveyed the information in this way to adhere to the normal way of doing things during negotiations at the high level, things are never said outright, instead they are concealed.

It was also a negotiation tactic, by starting off with an impossible request, it would make his subsequent request easier to swallow.

But Abami and Kamashiro had obviously seen through all of that, in the end, it was all just formalities.

Kei then continued to speak "Indeed I have realized it. This has led me to admire the two of you even more.

However it seems that Satoshi hasn't yet realized this truth, it would truly be unfortunate if the news spread to him, wouldn't that make your plan more difficult to achieve? Of course, even if he does come to know, it's only natural you'd like him to figure it out himself. At the very least, that ensures more growth for him."

Kamashiro then replied "Yes, it would truly be unfortunate if Satoshi somehow caught wind of this information. However, there's no need to be so formal Kei, Pray tell, what is that you want."

Kei then replied "Indeed, there's no need for us to be so formal. To be honest, I feel as though we have grown to become friends so I'll be direct.

I've received information regarding Satoshi's previous game. He participated in the village of influence, same as me, but against an opponent named Fang Yuan. In that game, Satoshi managed to outmaneuver Fang Yuan in the end but he required a lifeline from Abami to do so."

As for how Kei received this information, everyone around the table knew. Satoshi and Kei had long since created temporary relationships with assistant referees for information.

These assistant referees were still fully loyal to Abami and Kamashiro but they gave information to Kei and Satoshi when they asked.

Of course, these assistant referees had already reported to Abami and Kamashiro when Satoshi or Kei tried to bring them over to their side but Abami and Kamashiro had told those assistant referees to give information to Kei and Satoshi when they asked.

Kei knew that Abami and Kamashiro had deliberately left these assistant referees to keep him constantly informed.

Put simply, this system was a roundabout way for Abami and Kamashiro to give information to Kei and Satoshi.

"What I would like is for my next game to battle against Fang Yuan. To put it bluntly, my request is this, I would like for Fang Yuan to be my opponent in the next game you propose, I also want you to give him a significant advantage to make the game for difficult for me, and finally, I'd like you to set up cameras around the arena and ensure that Satoshi is watching the game between me and Fang Yuan.

This request directly benefits you as well. It will allow me to grow by facing a difficult opponent while in a disadvantageous position. At the same time, it will allow Satoshi, who has lagged behind, to be inspired and grow substantially to once again be able to rival me."

At this moment, all three people in the room knew the truth but no one revealed it. In reality, Kei had no leverage.

Even though Kei could tell Satoshi the true intention behind these games, Abami and Kamashiro hold much larger leverage, they can send soldiers in and slaughter the other two kingdoms, they could rig the games and do so much more.

But in every way that Abami and Kamashiro could use to negatively affect Kei, they'd also harm themselves. Although the harm to Kei would be much greater, they wouldn't take any such actions unless necessary.

Put simply, Kei's leverage holds no meaning since Abami and Kamashiro hold much larger leverage but if Abami and Kamashiro were to use their leverage, then they would harm themselves as well which then gives a small meaning to Kei's leverage.

If Kei were to request anything outlandish, it would instantly be rejected, this is partially why Kei made the request he did, he made a request that allowed Abami and Kamashiro to benefit as well allowing him to use his invisible leverage to achieve something that barely meets the bottom line of Abami and Kamashiro.

If Kei tried to request something else in the future with his leverage, it would instantly be shut down as well for the same reasons. Kei realized he had one opportunity to use his leverage for a request and he used it perfectly.

Kamashiro quickly responded "We'll start working on your request right away, do you need anything else?"

Kei replied "No thank you, just let me know when the game's ready, I'll stay in the third kingdom in the meantime, is my old room free?"

Abami replied "Yes it is, but I have one question for you Kei.

If you defeat all the opponents we set for you then defeat Satoshi then defeat us as well, will you be able to handle it? In that situation, Kamashiro and I would be stuck ruling the three kingdoms while you can go out there and take steps towards the next goal.

By doing that, you'll be exposed to a lot of risks and hardships, you might think it's been hard for you to reach the place you're in, but objectively, you just inherited a kingdom, you didn't go through the dangers of having to build one yourself. Are you

certain you won't tire and quit mid way? Are you certain you can handle that difficulty?"

Kei then responded calmly "The winds travel violently

The mountain remains unshaken

The wind does not tire of blowing

The mountain does not tire of standing."

Abami let out a soft chuckle then replied "Good answer, you can go to your room now, we'll notify you once the game is ready."

Kei walked towards his room in the third kingdom which he had stayed in multiple times.

When he opened the door, he uncontrollably felt a sense of nostalgia. He had been away from this room for a month, and during this month, he was so busy he wasn't able to focus on anything besides his work as king.

Now that he has returned, all of it seems to be a reminder of his old self. When he sees it, he remembers the person he was when he first entered this room.

He sees the room and remembers the inferior man who couldn't help but look up to Satoshi, even though it was only a few months ago, it felt like it had been years to him.

That lingering smell of his cologne, and the mirror he had woken up to look at his face every day and see disappointment, he can now stare directly at with a fierce gaze.

He quickly dispelled those thoughts from his mind, and for some reason, he started talking to himself out loud.

"I really didn't want those two to realize my true intentions, but I wanted to make this request, and I knew no matter how much I tried to hide it with tactics, the moment I

made this request, they would know the true purpose behind it, and they would now have something they could use against me in the future.

My goal has always been excitement, experiences, to be able to enjoy as many things as I can, and I was willing to sacrifice nearly anything, simply to feel more excitement in this life.

In the end, my main goal now is to unite the three kingdoms, leave it all under Abami and Kamashiro's rule, while still maintaining control over them, then explore the rest of the world and begin working on the next impossible goal.
This pursuit is what truly brings me excitement. Everything else, friends, family, lovers, they are all decorations of life. They make life more fun but ultimately, that's all they are, decorations.

They add-on joy to life, but do not compare to the pursuit of this excitement. Cultivating both the pursuit and decorations at the same time would definitely be ideal but having people in your life always add on obligations that ruin the pursuit which makes cultivating both nearly impossible.

However, Satoshi is different. I'd like to achieve something similar to what Abami and Kamashiro have achieved.

They were once rivals too, who fought against each other, but then in the end, they joined together to achieve control and create the third kingdom.

They even once went up against Fang Yuan. Fang Yuan was a foreigner. I know all about Fang Yuan. I have already gathered information about him when I became king of the first kingdom. He was a foreigner who migrated to the then-ruined areas of the third kingdom.

He was poor and he had nothing, but with his own intelligence, he made a name for himself and gathered and created the biggest information agency throughout all the three kingdoms. He was the one who controlled the lives of many through purely information.

However, after a long series of events, he was defeated by Abami, and all his, everything he had was seized by Abami.

Going back to the main point, Kamashiro and Abami joined together and created the three kingdoms after defeating many opponents, they were also initially friends then became opponents then became friends once again and that is what I hope for me and Satoshi as well.

Having a friendship like Abami and Kamashiros doesn't restrict the pursuit because they are both fully aligned in what they want, and even if they were to not be aligned, then they would be able to constantly separate and return when they deem fit. Since they have no obligations to one another, they are able to enjoy each other as embellishments of life without restricting their pursuits.

So, in the end, one of my many goals is to bring Satoshi back to my side. I made this request so I could defeat Satoshi's opponent for myself, the one who you could argue surpassed Satoshi and outperformed him for the most part until the last moment.

By going up against Fang Yuan while in a disadvantaged position and winning, Satoshi will see for himself that he has fallen far behind me. This will be the first necessary step to acquiring Satoshi.
In the end, this might have no effect. If the reason for him wanting to be isolated is different to mine then my move will have no effect, in that case, I will accept the reality and move on to my other goals, but I have a goal I want to achieve and so I will do my best to achieve it and bring him back.

So for now, let me conserve my energy, sleep more, and prepare myself for the next game against Fang Yuan. I wonder what those two will cook up. Hopefully, the game's challenging and induces my growth as well."

Chapter 22 - The Asphyxiation Labyrinth

A few days later, Kei was led through the third kingdom by an enforcer towards a water treatment plant.

Once they entered the plant, they went towards a stairway and walked down floor after floor until finally stopping after 5 minutes of walking.

They arrived at an empty floor with two doors.

The enforcer then opened one of the doors and Kei entered behind him to see a wide area with nothing inside. Just a completely empty room with four white walls and one door which he walked through.

The room itself was a large square larger than any wedding hall, even larger than a football field.

"This room is probably the equivalent of 2 full lengths of a football field on each side." Kei thought to himself.

The floor of the room had a peculiarity, it was sectioned into numerous squares of equal size, each square being the size of a normal room. In the middle of each square was a trapdoor.

"There seems to be 8 squares for each wall so that means there's 64 squares in the room and 64 trapdoors, this game looks like it's going to be interesting." Kei thought to himself "There's also a security camera scattered around the ceilings, Satoshi must be watching this, I should put on a good show."

There were two more abnormalities in the room, the first was the fact that there were two more people in the room, both also wearing suits.

With a quick look, Kei discerned who each of them was, the taller one with long hair reaching to the bottom of his chest was most definitely Fang Yuan. Even though Kei

had never seen him, he knew a lot of things about him, one of them was his appearance.

Thoughts quickly flashed through Kei's mind "The slightly shorter man behind him standing with a fully straight posture must be the enforcer that brought him here, similar to the one that brought me here. There seems to be no assistant referees today so this game is likely a 1v1 between myself and Fang Yuan."

The second abnormality in the room lies in the corner of the room to the left of the door they walked through, it was a large stack of cylindrical objects with very short lengths appearing similar to cans of tuna but significantly wider.

Each of them clearly had writing on them, Kei tried focusing on the writing to read it but the cylinders were too far away.

"Even though I have some eye problems, my vision definitely isn't one of them, it seems I can't read this text even with 20/10 vision, I should try moving towards them slowly to read what's written, I might be able to get an early advantage by doing this." Kei thought to himself.

Even though this description seems long, it all took place in a blink of the eye. Before Kei had a chance to walk towards the cylinders, the enforcer behind Fang Yuan spoke aloud "Quickly, gather towards me so I can explain the rules."

Him saying this at this moment clearly had a hidden meaning. He saw Kei trying to move closer to the cylinders and didn't want him to do that, it seems he stopped Fang Yuan from reading as well and wanted to maintain fairness.

Kei wanted to drop his phone so he could get closer and try to read what's written but his enforcer quickly stood to his left and walked him towards the other enforcer, not giving him a chance to do so.

Up till now, Fang Yuan hadn't spoken once yet. When Kei got close enough to the enforcer and Fang Yuan, he lunged at Fang Yuan and attempted to land a jab towards his face which Fang Yuan quickly parried.

Fang Yuan's expression remained unchanged, he simply returned the favor by attempting a counterattack but he didn't have the chance to, the enforcers were already close by so they each grabbed Fang Yuan and Kei.

The enforcer behind Kei then spoke "They warned us this would happen. I'd like to clarify that from this moment forward, violence is forbidden."

Kei laughed before looking at Fang Yuan and saying "I just wanted to test you, the one who outmaneuvered Satoshi, no hard feelings."

Fang Yuan responded while remaining unmoved "The way you speak of Satoshi gives me the sense that you regard him as your equal. If that's the case then my victory this time should be easy."

Kei and Fang Yuan's spar ended abruptly before either of them had a chance to prove their skills so it quickly switched to a verbal spar.

Kei then responded to Fang Yuan "You say that but you lost to Satoshi so you're not qualified to be insulting him."

Fang Yuan promptly came back "You must know how I was defeated, my victory would've been assured if it wasn't for Abami's intervention, it is simply a matter of the game being rigged. As long as this game isn't rigged in your favor as well then I'll definitely emerge victorious."

Fang Yuan's speech didn't affect Kei since he had already expected that response and had already prepared a counter for it "You say that but we both know that even after Abami's intervention, you still held a massive advantage yet you were outmaneuvered by Satoshi, doesn't that just scream incompetence?"

Kei expected Fang Yuan to back down after hearing this but Fang Yuan had already expected that response and also prepared a counter "Do you seriously believe that I wasn't able to outmaneuver Satoshi in that village?

I simply stopped fighting after the intervention, can you guess why?"
Kei remained silent after that question prompting Fang Yuan to keep speaking.

Fang Yuan then continued "There are two main reasons. The first reason is a minor one, if the game was rigged once, what's stopping it from getting rigged again? I didn't want to put in effort into a pointless game.

But more importantly, it was to face you!"

Kei was internally shocked but didn't let that change the smile on his face "Oh yeah, tell me more, how did you manage that?"

Fang Yuan then responded "You must've heard about me from Abami and Kamashiro, right? I was the owner of the biggest information business in the three kingdoms, with a few words, I could bring down businesses and kingdoms.

But I was unfortunately defeated by Abami a few years ago and was sentenced to a life in prison after Abami and Kamashiro developed the three kingdoms.

Even after my imprisonment, I still held information and had many connections so I knew everything about the connection between you and Satoshi as well as the games you were playing.

I also quickly deduced the reason behind Abami and Kamashiro holding these games but I'll keep that quiet, wouldn't want Satoshi watching through the cameras to hear about it."

Kei suddenly felt an even bigger shock as he began to connect the dots, he was also confused "How the hell does this guy know about the talk I had with Abami and Kamashiro and Satoshi watching this game, I only told those two about it and they shouldn't have told anyone else without reason." Kei thought to himself but he once again didn't let his expression change.

Fang Yuan kept saying "Kei, think back to the letter you were reading when you

figured out the true intent behind those two doing this. Didn't that letter give you that surge of inspiration that led you to figuring out their true intent.
It was I who wrote the letter and instructed a subordinate to send it to you. Knowing your own temperament and attachment to Satoshi from my intelligence, I was able to predict your reaction once you figured out their true intent.

It seems my prediction came perfectly to reality and it allowed me to face you today.

As for my reasoning for wanting to fight against you, it should be quite obvious. Initially, when I faced Satoshi, those two promised me my freedom if I defeated Satoshi but even if I managed to win, and even with my current connections, I would've had to spend years rebuilding the network I previously had.

So instead of taking it seriously, after Abami's intervention in my match with Satoshi, I decided to let things take their own course.

If I managed to defeat Satoshi then I would accept my freedom and rebuild my power brick by brick. If he managed to outmaneuver me which I thought to be quite likely, then I would allow myself to lose.

It was essentially a low risk, high reward option. As long as you acted similar to my prediction then those two would call me back to face you. This time, I was able to use their urgency and their previous rigging of my match against those two to negotiate for better terms that involve putting me back into a position of my power along with my freedom if I win.

There was obviously a chance that you wouldn't figure out their true intent from my letter or that you wouldn't request me to battle you but I determined that to be unlikely and decided to take the risk. As long as you acted according to my expectations, I would gain a lot and save myself years of effort."

Upon hearing this, Kei was internally filled with a mix of rage and awe, he didn't expect that his every action from the moment he read that letter up till now was manipulated by Fang Yuan.

But he again didn't let these emotions overcome him, he was long since unaffected by his emotions, able to act without allowing his emotions to cloud his judgement "Well played Fang Yuan, it seems like you will most certainly be a difficult opponent."

In another room, in the third kingdom castle, Satoshi was internally filled with rage but he didn't externalize it.

He was currently sitting besides Abami and Kamashiro watching this interaction happen through security cameras and was filled with anger seeing how Kei and Fang Yuan both disregarded him as an unworthy opponent.

Kamashiro then spoke up to Abami "In the end, you just got lucky. I would've been right about Satoshi figuring out our intent first if it wasn't for Fang Yuan's letter. I would've won the bet if there wasn't outside intervention from Fang Yuan."

Abami responded to Kamashiro with a laugh "Did you ever consider that Fang Yuan doing this was all within my expectations and so by rigging that game between Fang Yuan and Satoshi, I triggered this situation that allowed Kei to figure it out first and win the bet?"

Kamashiro then responded "Of course I considered that, I just wanted you to say it proving you cheated, we agreed that we couldn't interfere with the result of this bet and let them figure out on their own, by admitting this, you admit that you cheated by influencing Kei into figuring out."

Abami then laughed as he responded "We both know I never confessed, I just posed a question, let's stop with this pointless banter, just accept your defeat."

Kamashiro then replied "Even if you never admit it, we both know that you actually influenced Fang Yuan into manipulating Kei into figuring it out so even though I admit defeat on the surface, we both know deep down that the victory is truly mine."

Abami then laughed and replied "Keep believing that if it helps you sleep at night."

At this moment, Satoshi's rage rose even further. Every part of his body was filled with anger, not only did Fang Yuan and Kei look down on him, even Abami and Kamashiro were talking as if he didn't exist.

But he quickly dispelled his rage and cleared his mind because there was something important he had to think about it

"The conversation between Fang Yuan and Kei as well as the conversation between Abami and Kamashiro focused around the same thing, the reason behind these games I've been playing. I'll watch the game for now but I must begin thinking about this when I get back."

All of these events happened within a minute of Kei walking into the room. As the enforcer was about to begin explaining the rules, a voice transmission from the cameras interrupted him

It was Abami's voice coming through the transmission "Kei, after hearing what you've just heard, are you sure that you would still like Fang Yuan to have an advantage, we can still revert this advantage if you wish for us to do so."

Fang Yuan was unmoved after hearing this, he had already predicted that Kei would request that Fang Yuan be given an advantage so that Kei could prove his superiority.

Kei then responded "No, it's fine, Fang Yuan without an advantage doesn't meet the qualifications to be my opponent."

After hearing this, Fang Yuan sneered inwardly at Kei's arrogance but he didn't mind the outcome, he actually preferred it.

This was because Fang Yuan didn't care about the method, he didn't care if it was hard or easy, all he cared about was the results. He wouldn't feel any shame if he beat an infant in a battle to acquire benefits, all he cared about was benefits and results.

After all the commotion concluded, one of the enforcers left the room while the other remained to explain the rules.

“The game you’ll be playing today is called The Asphyxiation Labyrinth.”

After hearing this, Kei quickly made some deductions regarding the content of the game based on the title.

“The 64 room sized squares on the floor are likely the 64 rooms of the labyrinth. I’m assuming the labyrinth is underneath us and that it is fully submerged in water. I’d also assume that the trapdoors are entrances to each room in the labyrinth.”

The enforcer continued “In the asphyxiation labyrinth, you will each be placed into one of the rooms of the labyrinth and must compete to reach the goal room which will be D5. Reaching D5 will require going through precisely 6 rooms including your starting room and the goal room to reach assuming no doors are locked.

Since there will be locked rooms, the actual route to reaching the end will be much longer than six routes.”

Kei quickly thought to himself that depending on how they move him, he’d be able to figure out which room he starts in even while blindfolded which could provide him with an advantage but the next sentence from the referee ended that hope.

“You will be sedated for a short period of time for us to bring you each to the trapdoors you will be entering your rooms through so you won’t have any idea what your starting room is.

Each normal room will have 4 doors, side rooms will have 3 and corner rooms will have 2. In each room, only one door will be unlocked while the remaining doors will be locked.

During the reconfiguration events, the locks of the room will undergo a change and the unlocked door might change or remain the same.

The frequency of the reconfiguration events as well as which door becomes the unlocked door are all based on formulas that can be calculated by the players throughout the game.”

Kei tried to think of different possible formulas but the possibilities were too many and the enforcer never paused during the explanation so Kei gave up on the idea of figuring it out now and refocused with the enforcer.

"These cylinders you see in the corner of the room each contain air. Each player will start with 10 air containers, every time you successfully open a door and walk through it to the next room, you will acquire another air container.

If you walk through a room you've already walked through, you won't obtain an air container.

Finally, on each container, you will see abilities written on it numbered from 1-8.

At the start of the game, there will be a 5 minute period before the game begins for each of you to pick skills.

Fang Yuan will have the option to select three skills while Kei will have the option to select two.

If you do not select your skills during the 5 minute period, they will be randomly assigned to you.

Each skill has a different cost of usage and a different ability. The cost of usage is air containers, once you decide to use a skill, you must leave the corresponding amount of full unopened air containers in the room and announce that you would like to use the skill.

The skill's effects will only be activated the next time someone enters a new room.

Each round, you will have a time limit of 5 minutes to pick a door and walk through into a new room. You will keep going until you pick a locked door.
When you pick a locked door, you must remain in the room you're currently in.

After a player's turn is concluded, there will be a one minute waiting period, if during this period, a player uses a skill, a referee will go through the trapdoor to take the air containers that were used to buy the skill then the next period will begin.

This one minute period will remain even if no skill was used to ensure fairness. There is one more way for a skill to be activated, there are certain rooms that have been decided to be skill rooms.

Once you enter that room, a skill will automatically be activated without the players being notified. It will be activated in the same way that a player skill is activated, when the next new room is entered by either player.

So if a skill is activated, there are three possibilities. Either Fang Yuan activated, or Kei activated it or one of the two of you entered a skill room.

The skill rooms will always be active so even if you walk back into a skill room you were in before, the skill will be activated but it will be randomized skill each time so the skill might benefit you or harm you.

There are two primary ways to win, the first is by reaching the goal first. Once a player reaches the goal room, an announcement will be played and the game will be concluded.

The second is if your opponent runs out of air and is forced to give up.

During this game, managing your air containers is vital. By constantly attempting to decipher the formulas that control the labyrinth, you might needlessly waste oxygen, it might be smarter to allow luck to control your path through the labyrinth.

Using skills also wastes air containers, so the benefit you gain from using a skill might not be worth the cost at many times.

There are also specific circumstances in place for the occasion that you two meet in the same room but those will be explained during the situation if it ever occurs.

These are all the rules of the game you need to know for now, there are still some nuances that haven't been explained that you will only understand after entering the labyrinth.
You will now be asked to wear these suits, they are just like the normal suits you're wearing now, they have been fitted to your specific sizes but they are specifically made to be water resistant in a way similar to wetsuits which will make traversing the labyrinth easier."

After he said that, the enforcer that had left earlier walked back in with two suits, one for Fang Yuan and one for Kei.

It was slightly embarrassing but Kei and Fang Yuan quickly changed into the waterproof suits within the large room but they weren't allowed to go near the air containers which they both attempted to do to get a time advantage early on.

After putting on their suits, they were blindfolded then sedated with a weak sedator that only keeps you unconscious for 10 minutes.

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After waking up, they were instructed to keep their blindfolds on. The enforcers then opened the trapdoors of the square each of them was standing on and guided them into the labyrinth at the same time.

Fang Yuan and Kei were both quickly flushed into the cold water of the labyrinth before the enforcers quickly closed the trapdoors and quickly instructed Fang Yuan and Kei to take off their blindfolds.

Kei quickly opened his eyes and found himself in a room filled to the brim with water without any place to get oxygen. He quickly fell down to the bottom of the room and hit the floor due to the weighted boots he was told to wear.

He was holding his breath and quickly spotted 10 air containers in the corner of his room.

He quickly walked across the floor and headed to the corner of his room, each step feeling laborious as he had to lift the heavy boot off the ground each time. He then waited until he felt like he nearly ran out of breath, then opened an air container, held the opening to his mouth and finally started breathing.

He quickly controlled his breathing and looked around the room. He saw a security camera in the top center of the room and a bag in the other corner of the room.

He then walked towards the bag, put it on his bag and then walked back to the air containers and placed eight of them into his bag. One of the other two remaining was already in his mouth, he held the other one in his hand to read the skills written on it.

Fang Yuan coincidentally also took the same actions and then they both stood in the center of their rooms with their eyes focused on reading the air containers.

An announcement then rang throughout the labyrinth, the audio coming from the security cameras “A 5 minute timer has started and is shown on the watches you were

provided before entering, please make your skills selection before the period ends to avoid a randomized skill choice."

Kei read through each skill slowly coming up with a use for it

"The first ability is called Discard. If used, a random locked door will be voided without ending my turn and it costs one canister. The benefit of this ability is clear, instead of having to choose between 4 doors to find the unlocked door, I'd get to choose between three.

This ability will probably be more useful in side rooms and corner rooms, I'm currently in a room with four doors so it won't have as much utility if I used it in a room like this one.

If this ability were to be triggered from a random room event then I will receive information telling me the location of one of the locked doors in the room through my earpiece.

The second ability is Pathfinder. It costs two canisters when used and I'll get information on my watch telling me how many rooms I would have to go through for the shortest path to the goal, in other words, the Manhattan distance.

So if I were to use this ability now, I would be told that I'll need to pass through 5 rooms.

In this situation, I could disregard oxygen consumption and spend my air containers on abilities like Discard to eliminate doors and lead me to the final destination before a reconfiguration event makes my path longer.

But this rule has something strange about it, its cost. Two canisters would normally be very high for an ability like this one meaning that the information provided by pathfinder is likely an essential part to figuring out the law of the labyrinth.

The next ability is Undertow, this one sits at a cost of one canister. When used, I can flip my opponent's unlocked door into a locked door for two of his turns.

If during those turns, he opens different doors then this ability would go to waste so it comes with a risk but if he tries opening that door when it's locked then he would assume it's a locked door and waste many turns going through other doors before returning to that locked door.

The fourth ability is Mirage, it produces the full sensory experience of a reconfiguration event without one actually taking place and it costs three canisters.

This ability has been specified to be one of the two abilities not in the pool of random skills from a room skill event. The reason behind this is likely because a single mirage would mislead both players too much, throwing the game into chaos.

Even though the ability might appear too expensive at first, when observed more deeply, it should be more expensive.

To understand this, we need to look at the core of this game. If we were to play this game with a silent reconfiguration event then this game would turn into a game mostly reliant on luck. Since we won't know when the door locks have changed, we will never be able to deduce the pattern of this labyrinth and the person that makes it to the goal first would be decided through luck.

Deducing the frequency of the reconfiguration event as well as the way it chooses which door is unlocked is the key to solving this game but a single use of mirage by Fang Yuan can completely mislead me and lead me to never deducing the formula behind the reconfiguration events.

The fifth ability is connection, it costs one canister and it allows the player who used it to contact another player through a text software available on the player's watches allowing the two players to have a conversation for two minutes.

All agreements made on the watch have been specified to be binding so if me and Fang Yuan are ever in contact and agree to exchange something like information, we cannot go back on our words due to the binding nature specified.

If this ability is triggered by a random room event, it will simply put both players in contact without spending anyone's canisters.

Looking at this ability, I don't intend to buy it and I assume Fang Yuan won't either, it will probably only come into the game if it is triggered as a random room event.

The sixth ability is Pulse, using it tells me how many canisters worth of oxygen my opponent currently has, the information is displayed on my wrist watch and it costs one canister.

The way the Pulse ability works is cleverly designed to avoid loopholes revolving around Fang Yuan keeping some open canisters in reserve to confuse this number. It instead counts the total amount of oxygen in your canisters and converts it into a full canister count.

The seventh ability pairs well with Pulse and it's called Hypoxify. It costs 3 canisters and it allows you to get rid of two of your opponent's canisters.

It can be very useful in a conservative strategy. For example, if I pick Pulse and Hypoxify for my abilities, I can spend the whole game not spending any canisters on abilities and never thinking about the rule, relying on quickly accumulating canisters.

Then when I believe I have enough canisters, I can check the amount of canisters Fang Yuan has through Pulse and if he has less than two thirds of mine, I'll just keep using Hypoxify until I've depleted all of his canisters and win the game without ever finding the goal.

This might be a viable strategy for Fang Yuan since he can choose three abilities allowing him to diversify his methods for winning but since I can only choose two abilities, by picking Hypoxify and Pulse, I'll be betting all of my chances of victory on depleting Fang Yuan's oxygen which would be too risky.

I could also only choose Hypoxify and wait for a pulse random room event to confirm whether it's reasonable to use Hypoxify to deplete Fang Yuan's canisters but that would be too reliant on luck and so I don't see myself doing that.

The final ability is called Detection, it costs a whopping 5 canisters but it would also allow a player to develop a massive advantage.

In a labyrinth like this one, there is no way for a player to determine their location. Even after finding a corner room, you won't be able to narrow down whether you're in A1, A8, H1 or H8. This greatly increases the difficulty of figuring out the formulas because you never know where you are.

The Detection ability tells you what room you're currently in as well as the direction of North but it costs an overwhelming 5 canisters.

Now that I've read through the 8 abilities, I need to think carefully and decide which two to choose."

"Since I only have two choices, I'm quite restricted. The reason being there's one skill that's essential for me to acquire.

I have to choose either one of the Pathfinder skill or the Detection skill. There's an obvious mathematical reason behind that and that is the Manhattan distance.

They also told me privately through my watch after entering the labyrinth that my goal room is in D5 and that the Manhattan distance between my current room and the goal is 5. This means that I must be in one of 12 locations, either A3, A7, B2, B8, C1, E1, F2, F8, G3, G7, H4 or H6.

Out of these 12 rooms, only four are rooms with four doors, leaving my current room being one of 4 options, B2, F2, G3 or G7.

Even though I was given my current Manhattan distance to the goal, I'll need to know it on many occassions to calculate the law of the labyrinth as it is likely an essential aspect in the law's formula wich is why choosing one of the Detection or Pathfinder abilities is essential.

Pathfinder costs 2 canisters and displays your manhattan distance on your watch for the room you're currently in as well as the next one. On the other hand, Detection is a long term investment, it costs 5 canisters but it will allow you to know your Manhattan distance and location at all times.

The issue is that I can only have 2 abilities, this poses a significant threat to me and makes it difficult for me to choose Detection.

Since Fang Yuan can choose three abilities, he can choose one of Pathfinder or Detection, as well as two other abilities. If he chooses Pulse and Hypoxify as his two other abilities, I'll be in a constantly vulnerable position.

This stems from the cost of Detection. If I use Detection then I will likely fall behind two thirds of Fang Yuan's oxygen count, if he then uses a combination of pulse and Hypoxify, he can fully drain my oxygen and I'd lose right away.

This is the first true battle in this game, do I pick Detection and take a risk for long term benefit? Or do I play it safe and choose Pathfinder putting me in a passive position?

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"I wonder how this game will go, it looks to be very well put together." Satoshi thought to himself.

His thoughts drifted as he thought of strategies that Fang Yuan and Kei might take while he waited for them to finish thinking and pick their abilities.

He looked to his left to see Abami then looked to his right to see Kamashiro. They occasionally had short conversations between each other putting Satoshi in an awkward central position.

"He definitely did all of this to show me how much he's grown, I'm personally uninterested in him and his growth but it will be interesting to see whether he's actually grown to be more capable than me."

Just as Satoshi thought of this, Fang Yuan and Kei both inputted numbers into their watches nearly simultaneously with 20 seconds left for the timer.

The numbers chosen by each player showed up on each player's screen, these numbers directly corresponded to the skills they chose.

"Interesting choices." Satoshi mused

If we consider picking the abilities the first battle of this game, I'd determine the result to be a draw. Obviously Fang Yuan still holds a significant advantage due to the fact that he has 3 abilities but Kei played the first battle very well." Satoshi thought to himself.

Next, the enforcer's voice played through the labyrinth coming from the cameras

"Through the process of random selection, Kei has been decided as player 1.

A 5 minute timer will appear on your watches shortly, once it appears, the game will start and it cannot be stopped until a player is determined the victor.

During the 5 minutes, you will have complete freedom to do what you wish. To confirm a door selection, you simply need to touch it.

If the door is the unlocked door, the door will automatically unlock and you will be moved to the next room through a suction force then the door will be locked behind you. The 5 minute timer will then restart and it will still be your turn.

Once you encounter a locked door, your turn will end and a one minute timer will start. Skills can be used at any time except during the one minute period, the collection of the air containers for skills used will take place during the one minute period.

Similarly, if abilities like Hypoxify are used, they will only take effect during the one minute. Using an ability then not having enough air containers to pay for it during collection will result in immediate disqualification.

After the one minute timer concludes, a 5 minute timer will automatically start on your watches without pause and the next player's turn will take place. This process will keep repeating until the game concludes."

Upon the conclusion of the enforcer's words, the 5 minute timer automatically started on their watches and a connection between the two players started nearly instantly after that.

The one who initiated that connection was Kei, a chat between Kei and Fang Yuan automatically started and Kei quickly started typing.

"I'd like for us to form an agreement, I'll tell you both of my abilities at the earliest possible time after you agree, in return, I'd like to reserve the right to ask you one question which you must answer honestly if you possess the answer, if you don't have the answer, you must state that you do not know the answer." Kei sent the message to Fang Yuan within the first 30 seconds of the two minute chat window.

Kei then waited in anticipation for a response but Fang Yuan wasn't planning on offering it just yet.

Fang Yuan thought to himself "If I reply with an answer right now then he'll have time to negotiate further. On the other hand, if I don't reply at all then he won't try opening another chat.

So the best way to maximize value is to send my offer in the last few seconds, that way, he'll have just enough time to read it but not nearly enough time to create a counteroffer forcing him to waste another canister to start a new chat."

After thinking that, time kept passing, every second felt like a minute underwater, until finally, Fang Yuan's response came in with 10 seconds left.

"Our current communication already shows me you have the Connection ability, unless the rare situation happened where the room you started in is an ability room but that's highly unlikely.

Your second ability also must be Mirage, you must've deduced the importance of knowing the amount of reconfiguration events, the only way you'd be able to have leverage against me is by choosing the Mirage ability so I'm already quite certain of your abilities and so getting that knowledge would be quite useless for me.

My counteroffer is this, if you agree to start a connection with me everytime you use a Mirage ability at your earliest possible convenience and tell me that you used Mirage then I will agree to your condition. You must also tell me if you've used Mirage so far and how many times and you won't be allowed to start a connection and tell me you used Mirage when you haven't."

Fang Yuan had kept his response quite long purposely but Kei ignored most of the words and used basic speed reading to find out what Fang Yuan's counteroffer was and instantly agreed to it without hesitation.

He then quickly sent the message "Discard and Connection" which he had prepared in the textbox before receiving Fang Yuan's message predicting Fang Yuan's time

wasting technique and getting the negotiation done without having to start another connection."

Upon reading Kei's reply, Fang Yuan was slightly shocked but it also wasn't out of his predictions.

"When I sent my counteroffer, I purposely made my request something very difficult to agree to. I truly believed he had Mirage and Connection and so if he did, by revealing his Mirage count, he would lose all leverage.

He wouldn't be able to do anything to me since his Connection is a passive ability while his Mirage would be completely exposed leaving me an easy victory as I would be able to use my own Mirage ability to confuse him and make solving the law useless. So if he did have Mirage, he would never agree to my offer even if he had predicted my late tactic as it would be too disadvantageous to him.

I did also consider the slim possibility that he might not have Mirage but I didn't believe that would actually be the case, it seems I misread him. In any case, even in the situation where he doesn't have Mirage, I still hold the advantage.

We're still in the same exact situation, now that I know for certain that he doesn't possess Mirage, I can calculate the law of the labyrinth in peace while he can't do anything. Even if he uses his question to ask me how many Mirages I used at a certain point, he wouldn't be able to calculate the law because I would still be able to use Mirage after his question.

The only difference in this situation compared to him having Mirage is that he possesses an extra ability which in this case is Discard. By using his ability to eliminate some doors, he can move through the maze faster but he'll still have to rely on luck to win, his situation is quite dire."

On the other hand, in Kei's mind, he had completely won the interaction and achieved his nearly ideal outcome.

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Overall, Kei currently held 9 air containers in reserve and the one he's currently breathing through, he'll have to lead a full air container in the room he's in for the enforcer to collect it when the next round begins so he'll be left with 8 in reserve.

He also has the opportunity to ask Fang Yuan one question at any time throughout the game which Fang Yuan will have to answer honestly.

In comparison, Fang Yuan didn't use any air canisters and so he has 9 in reserve and one he's currently breathing through. He knows that Kei's abilities are Discard and Connection and so he knows that Kei has no way to confuse or obstruct him. Finally, he still holds three abilities which Kei is unaware of.

In this situation, Fang Yuan clearly held the dominant position but Kei was still happy, the only thing that Kei had that could turn the situation around was the question.

This left Fang Yuan with a deep seated ominous feeling, Kei's quick acceptance of the counteroffer left him wondering regarding the contents of the question. Fang Yuan usually never doubted his moves, he was completely ruthless and unaffected but this unknown factor was what he feared most.

It was like a tiger hiding in the tall grass leaving Fang Yuan constantly wondering when it would pounce. It also violently increased Fang Yuan's oxygen consumption as thoughts bounced around through his mind trying to deduce the contents of the question.

He quickly realized that his thoughts were inefficient so he calmed his mind and decided to remain in a state of thoughtlessness waiting for his turn.

In the meantime, Kei was already making his move, he quickly used Discard twice, consuming two more of his air canisters without hesitation.

Upon entry into the labyrinth, he was told to assume that he walked through a certain door and since the door you walk through has been said to lock behind you then by

eliminating two door options, he was left with one which he was certain was the way forward.

He left three air canisters in the room, and tapped the door left after the elimination process from Discard. The door unlocked and a strong suction force pulled Kei into the next room.

When he entered that room, the time on the watches reset to 5 minutes. This indicated to Fang Yuan that Kei had successfully moved to the next room.

This also gave Fang Yuan information, since he knows that Kei possesses Discard, he strongly suspected that Kei had used Discard at least once to narrow the doors down.

Upon entering the new room, Kei gained one air container which was dropped from the trapdoor at the top. He quickly put it into his bag. He now had 7 air containers in reserve and one in his mouth which was being used up rapidly as his brain was flowing with calculations and things he had to memorize.

Even though the Discard ability might've seemed weak when he first read it, upon review, he realized that it was actually quite powerful which is why he chose it. Even in a four doored room, by using it twice, he could guarantee the right door. This is because the door he walks in through has been specified to always be locked. Then once he goes into the next room, he'll get one air container which will make his overall loss one air container.

Basically, for the price of one air container, he could always guarantee the right door. Overall, this wasn't sustainable. This is because oxygen is a consumable resource and if he goes too low then he could be Hypoxified or even eventually run out.

But then Kei took another extreme action, he quickly used two Discard abilities again and then walked through another door leaving his container count at 6 in reserve and one in his mouth which was nearly depleted.

There were two reasons behind Kei's willingness to take extreme action and spend air containers at a violent rate. The first involves Mirage, he knew with a strong conviction that Fang Yuan held the Mirage ability.
That posed a hidden threat to him, the moment the first reconfiguration event took place, he would enter a state of confusion because of his lack of knowledge regarding whether it was a true reconfiguration event or merely a Mirage by Fang Yuan so he acted early in an attempt to gather information before the first reconfiguration.

As for why Fang Yuan didn't use a Mirage, he hadn't fully expected that Kei would act this decisively early on but that wasn't the main reason. Even if he had used Mirage, he knew that Kei would've strongly suspected that such an early Mirage was a fake, the confusion it would cause to Kei wouldn't be worth its high price tag of 3 containers at this early stage.

The second reason behind Kei's early aggression was air containers, the game was still in its early stages and the quantity of air containers in each player's hands was quite obvious.

This served as a layer of protection for him. He was certain that Fang Yuan had 9 air containers. In comparison, after Kei's spending, he only held six.

With this ratio, if Fang Yuan held Hypoxify he could use it three times leaving both players with no air containers in reserve, in that situation, Fang Yuan would win the oxygen war as he consumed less thoughts.

But Kei was quite certain this situation wouldn't play out. The first reason for that is he doesn't believe that Fang Yuan has Hypoxify. Since Fang Yuan must've chosen a law solving ability like Pathfinder or Detection and he must've chosen Mirage, that only leaves him with one option.

Kei didn't find it likely that Fang Yuan held Hypoxify without Pulse. Even if he did hold both, he would have to spend one point on using Pulse first leaving Kei out of the range of a Hypoxify loss.

In the case where Fang Yuan held Hypoxify alone, Kei bet that he still wouldn't use Hypoxify due to risk. If Kei had used one Discard in a room and took a 50/50 chance instead of using two then by Fang Yuan's use of Hypoxify, he would lead to his own demise.
But this will also be the reason for Kei stopping his movement, if he used Discard again then a Hypoxify loss would be more likely so he chose to avoid it.

Kei considered choosing the door he walked through knowing it would be locked, he feared that by choosing a different door, if he got it right by luck, he would lead Fang Yuan into making the decision of using Hypoxify which would cause Kei to lose but he ultimately decided against wasting his move.

He would eventually have to move and letting Fang Yuan accumulate an advantage early on wasn't to his benefit so he chose one of the other three doors at random and it ended up being a locked door ending his turn.

It's worth mentioning that every room Kei walked in so far was a four doored room.

Upon the ending of his round, Kei's oxygen canister was drained and he was forced to open up a new one leaving him with 5 canisters in reserve and putting him in a risky position, but he had to take such risks if he wanted to have any hope of winning.

In comparison, Fang Yuan's oxygen canister still had a bit left in it due to his reduced oxygen consumption.

After the one minute period passed, a new 5 minute timer started on their watches and it was now Fang Yuan's turn.

To summarize the current situation, Kei passed through two rooms but he didn't know whether he got closer to his D5 goal or farther from it by passing through the two rooms. He holds the two abilities Discard and Connection and he now has 5 air containers in reserve.

In comparison, Fang Yuan was currently in his starter room, he has 9 air containers in reserve and he knows both of Kei's abilities but he still has to remain vigilant of Kei's question.

Fang Yuan's turn started and a few seconds after it started, the watches reset to 5 minutes once again. Fang Yuan successfully cleared a door.
When the clock reset, Kei was panicking. Even with his normally elite sharpness, the severe stress of the situation led him into a panic and rapid oxygen consumption.

The reason behind his stress was obvious, it was Hypoxify. Kei currently held 5 containers in reserve so if Fang Yuan had guessed the right door without using any abilities, he would have 10 containers in reserve.

In this situation, even if Fang Yuan were to assume that Kei had six in reserve, he could still attempt the Hypoxify win and he would hold a great chance of success.

But time passed and nothing happened to Kei which calmed him.

At that moment, Fang Yuan thought to himself "How disappointing, if I had picked Hypoxify then as long as I guessed the right door, I would've likely been able to win.

But I wonder, in that situation, would I have taken the risk. I don't mind taking risks but only when I can control the outcome, well I guess I'll never know.

In the end, I chose the safer route and went with Discard as my ability. But this time, I didn't use it, there's no reason for me to consume my ability early on as I hold Mirage.

Combining those two with my Detection ability makes my path clear, I'll win by deducing the law and dominating the labyrinth.

I guess I should do it now, Fang Yuan confirmed the usage of his ability, Mirage and a shake spread throughout the labyrinth along with a distinct sound of gears moving which both Kei and Fang Yuan heard."

Yes, Fang Yuan held Mirage, Detection and Discard. Even though it might seem like a simple route to achieve victory, Fang Yuan will only be able to utilize it to its fullest extent by constantly outmaneuvering Kei.

Also, what does Fang Yuan care about whether it's a simple route or a difficult route. Fang Yuan started with a heavy advantage and decided to hold on to it as well as he could.
Fang Yuan didn't take risks because he didn't have to. The method never mattered to him at all, as long as he won.

At this moment, Fang Yuan held eight air containers in reserve while Kei held five but Fang Yuan's air container also now ran out of air and so he had to open another one and was left with seven in reserve.

Kei used four Discards and one connection so far, in comparison, Fang Yuan used one Mirage.

Kei heard the sound and felt the shaking but he wasn't able to determine whether or not he truly experienced a reconfiguration event so he resolutely decided to ignore all reconfiguration events and not waste his time trying to find the pattern behind them.

He was currently organizing his thoughts around the law. After careful thought, he narrowed down the possibilities of the law.

He knew that the law must involve factors that were known to him when he entered his first room so it likely involved a combination of some of these 5 factors: air container count, number of doors, number of abilities used, number of reconfiguration events so far and the Manhattan distance to the goal room.

He was able to eliminate the number of abilities used from the selection because it involves information from both players.

He also knew that the combination likely involved three factors as four would be too many but two would be too easy to solve.

Of the four remaining factors, he strongly suspected that the law of the labyrinth involves a combination of the Manhattan distance, the number of reconfiguration events and the number of doors.

He eliminated the air container count as an option because it would involve too many complexities and details making it very difficult for the enforcers to determine what door is unlocked.

Currently, both players will always have access to the number of doors in their own rooms. The other two factors are a much bigger problem for Kei. Since Fang Yuan has Detection, he'll know his Manhattan distance at all times after using the ability whereas Kei will never be able to find out his Manhattan distance, he only knows the Manhattan distance of his starter room.

As for the number of reconfiguration events, Kei won't be able to know this value for certain due to Fang Yuan's Mirage ability but Fang Yuan will always know the number of reconfiguration events.

This left Kei at a significant disadvantage, Fang Yuan guessed a door while in his second room but it was locked this time and after the one minute period, it was now Kei's turn again with both players having played one turn.

In this situation, Kei only holds two advantages, the first is that he is slightly ahead of Fang Yuan in terms of labyrinth progression. The second is that he is still withholding the right to a question to Fang Yuan.

Fang Yuan holds many advantages though, he has more air containers, he knows the true number of reconfiguration events and he is able to know his exact position at all times through one use of Detection.

Kei calculated silently in his mind as the clock to his turn ticked down "I currently have 5 air containers in reserve. If Fang Yuan hasn't used any abilities then he would have 10 air containers in reserve but if he hasn't then he'll probably use Mirage sometime soon in fear of me figuring out the frequency of the reconfiguration events rendering his Mirage ineffective.

This means that he will likely be at 7 air containers.

As for his other abilities, he likely hasn't used Detection yet. The beauty of Detection isn't simply the enormous information it provides allowing one to know their position at all times. Its power also stems from the fact that its usage doesn't have to be early.

This is because once Detection is used, one can backtrack the path they took and figure out the coordinates of each room they went through and which door was unlocked. There is still an issue with this, its limitation is the human brain. After passing through a few rooms, the information becomes too great and to be able to perfectly remember every piece of context and use it to deduce the law becomes too difficult.

This is because the best way to understand the law is to pass through rooms and record what door unlocked and what the context was at that time regarding number of reconfiguration events and door count. If the Detection ability is used too late, lots of that context will be forgotten making lots of the progress you made to deduce the law meaningless.

This is the beauty and curse of the Detection ability, it is directly linked to the human brain's limitations. The other deterrent from this ability is its exorbitant price of 6 canisters.

As for why I believe Fang Yuan holds the Detection ability over the Pathfinder, that is related to my read on his personality. He is clearly the type to prioritize victory over all else and while Pathfinder might be effective, it is too inconsistent and will likely consume more air containers over the long run if your goal is purely to deduce the law.

Since Fang Yuan's position makes deducing the law the best path, Detection is undoubtedly the wiser choice so I have high confidence that Fang Yuan chose Detection.

So after calculating this, Fang Yuan currently likely has 7 air containers and one more ability that might be used or unused. Regardless of what that ability is, it is likely still unused.

Fang Yuan's main issue in this labyrinth will likely be air container usage. He will have to use Mirage at least once more down the line to ensure that I do not figure out the frequency of the reconfiguration events. This will be another 3 air containers of consumption.

He will also use the Detection ability at some point meaning another 5 air containers of consumption.

This means that his last ability will have very little room for use due to his high air container consumption. This doesn't mean that it didn't have any use though, it was actually incredibly useful.

If he didn't have three abilities at the start, I would've never taken this route towards victory. With my negotiations, I gave him everything he needed to be confident with his deduction of the law.

Him knowing I don't have Mirage is a great help to him. As long as he deduces the law, he will be able to fully clear the labyrinth with ease.

He was also able to confidently pick a high consumption ability like Detection due to his dominant position with three abilities.

Even though I'm in a very tough position, I can work on deducing his third ability." Kei's eyes moved to the air container in his mouth as he read the abilities on it once more.

"The first ability is Pathfinder, this is most certainly not his third ability as it holds zero utility in combination with his Detection ability.

The second ability is Discard, this a very good candidate for his third ability as it can help directly progress his goal of deducing the law in the fastest time possible. It also

comes at a low cost making it feasible for use in combination with his high air container usage.

The third ability is Undertow, it would allow him to flip my unlocked door into a locked door. It can most certainly restrict me greatly and it is definitely possible for this to be his third ability yet I think it's highly unlikely. His game plan revolves greatly around deducing the law as quickly as possible, spending his precious air containers to hinder me, someone who is already highly unlikely to deduce the law would be unwise.

The fourth ability is Mirage which he likely already possesses.

The fifth is Connection, it would be very needless for anyone to pick this ability, I only decided to pick it after lots of deliberation to execute my negotiation smoothly early on. Fang Yuan certainly didn't pick it, and even if he did, I don't have to worry about it.

The sixth and seventh abilities are Pulse and Hypoxify. He most certainly didn't pick Pulse either as it is very impractical without Hypoxify. As for Hypoxify, I can't be certain whether or not he picked it. If he had then I believe he would've taken the risk and used it after passing the first room.

If he had done that, he would've won and I would've been eliminated. There's also a chance he possesses the ability but decided to not use it at the time due to its riskiness and decided to play a safer strategy of just trying to deduce the law.

But I don't think that's the case. There wouldn't have been any better opportunity for him to use Hypoxify throughout the game and if he wasn't willing to bite the bullet at that time and take the risk then he wouldn't have picked Hypoxify to begin with.

The final ability is Detection which I'm already quite sure he has.

After this long process of elimination, he likely has Detection, Mirage and Discard. I'll work under the assumption that that's the case.

Since I'm assuming he has 7 air containers without considering Discard then if I consider he used Discard, that number would change.

I'm quite certain he didn't use Discard once, if he did, that would only change the chance of a correct selection from 33% to 50%. He would have either used it twice or never.

If he never used it then he would have 7 air containers in reserve and he must've gotten lucky with the door pick. If he did use it, he would have 5 air containers and passing the first room would make sense.

I have no data to go off and both options seem plausible, even though he needs to save air containers for the Detection usage, he still might use Discard because he doesn't have to worry about me ever using Hypoxify.

It could be generated as a random event, but as long as he never drops below 3 air containers in reserve, he'll be fine.

Conversely, the chance of him passing through the door without using Discard is 33%, I'd rather bet on the 67% odds so I'll assume he has 5 air containers for now but I'll keep the possibility of him having 7 in the back of my mind."

Kei couldn't be certain so he didn't know just how close his deductions were to the truth but in reality, Kei deduced nearly everything with a perfect accuracy besides the Discard usage.

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After taking advantage of his turn's time to thoroughly think everything through, he didn't hesitate to use two more Discard abilities and headed into the next room leaving him with four air containers in reserve.

Kei had now passed through three rooms while Fang Yuan only passed through one. He used two Discard abilities again and made it into the next room leaving him with three air containers in reserve after obtaining one from the new room, upon being sucked into the room, his watch beeped with a distinct sound he hadn't heard before.

Upon hearing that beep, Kei sighed and said to himself "Finally." He looked down at his watch and saw one word flash across the screen, Undertow.

"Damn it, I really didn't want to get Undertow or Hypoxify but fate works in a cruel way." Kei shouted internally. He had just walked into a random ability room and the random ability that was generated was Undertow, this meant that for the next two rounds, Fang Yuan's unlocked door would remain locked.

Fang Yuan obviously didn't get a notification informing him of the ability so this would noticeably hinder Fang Yuan's progression, but for some reason, Kei wanted to avoid getting it or Hypoxify, he didn't want to hinder Fang Yuan at all.

Instead he seems to be searching for a specific ability but alas, he didn't get it. Now Fang Yuan will be stuck in his current room for at least two rounds.

It was still Kei's turn and he now held 3 air containers in reserve with the air container in his mouth close to running out, he was taking incredible risk betting on the fact that Fang Yuan doesn't hold Hypoxify and it paid off.

But, he couldn't progress further with Discard, if he used two Discards again then he would be left with 2 air containers. Entering that territory is too dangerous, if Fang Yuan lands on a Hypoxify random room before Kei manages to reobtain an air container, Kei will run out of oxygen and be dragged out when he's on the verge of drowning.

Kei didn't want to keep his mind running so he picked a door at random and it ended up being locked bringing his turn to an end after advancing through two rooms, four in total including the first round.

The one minute time period started yet again and upon its starting, the entire labyrinth shaked and the distinct sound of gears moving was heard, a reconfiguration event had happened once again, but this time, it was a real one, Fang Yuan hadn't used Mirage.

Fang Yuan's turn started and he mentally noted down the reconfiguration event. He then quickly picked a door which turned out to be locked, this started the one minute period yet again.

What Fang Yuan didn't know is that the door he just picked was actually the unlocked door before the Undertow event took place.

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A few turns passed by without either side making any considerable moves.

Kei had now passed through 7 rooms which puts him at 3 more rooms from earlier. He completely guessed doors for two of the rooms and guessed them both on the second attempt. He used a double Discard again for one of the rooms leaving his current total air container count at 3 once again as he had to open another new one for breathing.

In comparison, Fang Yuan currently held 9 air containers but he has only passed through 3 rooms. This is because he never once used an ability besides the Mirage and the Undertow ability that was used against him earlier had slowed him down significantly.

A reconfiguration event also happened during this time period and Fang Yuan hadn't used other abilities.

At this moment, it was Fang Yuan's turn. He was in a room that he had been in since his previous turn, he had two doors left to guess between. But, his mind was filled with thought, he was quite certain he had deduced the frequency of the reconfiguration events.

Well, deduced isn't the right word to use as it was incredibly simple. So far, there have been three sensory experiences of a reconfiguration event, the first was after both players passed through a combined three rooms. The second was when they passed four rooms and the third was when they passed nine rooms.

In reality, the first one was merely a Mirage by Fang Yuan. Putting the mirage aside, Fang Yuan noticed that the first Mirage happened after four rooms had been passed but during the one minute period. The second took place after nine rooms had been passed but also during the one minute period.

This led him to one of two conclusions. Either the reconfiguration event takes place every four total rooms passed but it only happened during the one minute period, so

even if an extra room had been passed, it would still happen. The second possibility is that it's incremental, so the first time happens after four rooms, the second after five rooms and so on.

Fang Yuan thought to himself "I'm quite fortunate that Kei just passed through two rooms because if he had only passed through one then the second reconfiguration event will have taken place on the 8th combined room which might've led Kei to already start suspecting the frequency of the reconfiguration events."

He was still slightly disappointed, the reconfiguration event frequency determinant was too simple but he understood that it was likely made that way to focus more of the complexity on the law of the labyrinth.

But still, he couldn't let Kei find out the frequency determinant because if he did then the only advantage Fang Yuan would have left is the Detection ability. It's still a huge advantage but he didn't want to give up one of his advantages for no reason so he resolutely decided to use Mirage knowing it would take place in the next one minute period.

Next, he needed to ensure that he'd pass through the right door so he used one Discard ability leaving him with only one door option since he had eliminated one beforehand and one was the door he came through.

He then walked through that door and entered his fifth room. He now held six air containers while Kei held three but he was in his eighth room.

In all this time, Fang Yuan had always been in a four door room and he had just entered his first three door room. He guessed one of the two doors that he hadn't walked through and got it right, entering a four door room and putting him back up to seven air containers.

Upon entering the four doored room, a beep triggered on his watch with a single word on it, Discard. One of the doors lit up with the distinct red colour when the Discard ability activated which told Fang Yuan that this door was a locked door.

He was now left to choose between two doors and he once again guessed correctly. His luck was truly too good, even though he hadn't used any Discard abilities yet, he was now in his seventh room, only one room behind Kei in progression.

His air consumption was very rapid, as he had to constantly keep track of all of the rooms he had been in, he realized that he had become unable to keep track anymore.

He was now in his seventh room with 8 air containers in reserve and a half depleted air container in his mouth, it was now the right time to use it, Detection.

He spent 5 air containers and activated the Detection ability, he then received a notification on his watch informing him of his current coordinates, the doors also each glimmered with either an N, E, W or S indicating the four cardinal directions.

From this moment on, Fang Yuan knew his exact location and he'll know it at all times from now on as he had the four cardinal directions so he always knows which square he's going to.

He quickly calculated and realized that he was still four Manhattan distances away from his goal room. He started at five similar to Kei so all of this swimming moving from room to room only ultimately got him one Manhattan distance closer to the finish line. This further proved why finding out the law was essential.

Fang Yuan then closed his eyes and the amount of air bubbles emitted from his mouth increased greatly, his mind was working at an incredibly fast pace going step by step back from his current room to the starting room as he recalled the exact conditions of each room trying multiple different combinations to figure out the law.

He utilized all of his remaining round's time thinking before tapping a door at the last second which turned out to be locked.

The one minute period timer started and an enforcer swam into his room to collect the air containers spent on the Detection ability. During this one minute period, another reconfiguration event took place.

This was the Mirage ability that Fang Yuan had used, Fang Yuan knew that the reconfiguration event wasn't real but Kei didn't.

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It was now Kei's turn once again, he was in his ninth room, he had 3 air containers so he couldn't use his Discard ability without dropping to two, fortunately, he had already guessed two of the doors in his current room leaving him with one choice.

He quickly tapped that door and it unlocked allowing him entry into the next room. The 5 minute timer resetted again and a distinct beep sound came from Kei's watch signaling that he has once again entered a random ability room.

He looked at his watch and the word Discard flashed over it, he then looked around the room and saw one door flashing red.

"Damn it, this isn't the one I wanted either, it's one of the better ones to have gotten but it isn't the one." Kei thought to himself.

He then used another Discard ability, left one air container in the room and tapped on the remaining unmarked door that unlocked.

Upon being sucked into the room, he saw a man standing in front of him with shut eyes, it was Fang Yuan.

Fang Yuan heard the suction voice and quickly turned around to see Kei. After seeing Kei, he was incredibly shocked. Not by Kei, but by the amount of air bubbles being emitted from his air container.

Fang Yuan had been keeping track of the eight rooms he's been in and he hadn't been able to keep track of anymore. Even when his mind was juggling all of this and he was standing still constantly expending energy to deduce the law, his air bubble emission was still less than Kei's.

The meaning behind this was clear, Kei had been keeping track of all the rooms he's walked into so far. Fang Yuan quickly calmed his mind realizing that Kei must've lost track of a few of them but that wasn't the case. Kei had been keeping track of all ten rooms he's been in without fail, this has always been his strength.

Even when he was weak and constantly losing to Satoshi, his mind was always special. Now, even after being in 10 rooms, Kei was still able to keep track.

Satoshi watched from the cameras as the clash between both players was about to start, they had finally entered the same room. Abami and Kamashiro were sitting on either side of Satoshi with interest as well. Satoshi had found it unsettling at first, he wondered why they didn't just sit next to each other instead of having him in the middle but he quickly dispelled such useless thoughts.

He focused his mind back on Fang Yuan and Kei, only a few seconds had passed since Kei entered the room but looking at Fang Yuan and Kei's unwavering gazes at each other, it felt like an eternity.

A voice coming from the camera interrupted that silence. An air container was dropped from the trapdoor towards Kei and the voice specified that Fang Yuan wasn't allowed to seize it, this was Kei's air container for entering a new room.

Kei took the air container and quickly replaced it with the one in his mouth that had run out at the same time.

In his bag, Kei currently held 3 air containers with a freshly opened one in his mouth. At the same time, Fang Yuan also held 3 air containers in his bag with a nearly depleted one in his mouth.

This was the first time during the game when Kei held the lead in air container count but that lead was quickly lost as a ding sounded from both of the players' watches showing that a communication chat was created.

Kei had just spent one air container which he took out from his bag and dropped on the floor to initiate a connection, since they couldn't speak, he had to use a connection to ask his one question.

Yes, he was about to ask his question. This right which he had been withholding the whole round was finally about to be used and a question then appeared in the chat after Kei typed for a bit.

"If you were to use the detection ability now, what would be the result?" Upon reading this message, Satoshi who was watching through the camera instantly connected all of the dots and realized what Kei had been trying to do the whole time.

The reason Kei was unhappy with Undertow as a random ability is partially because he was trying to find another ability but mainly because he didn't want to restrict Fang Yuan.

He wanted Fang Yuan to advance as much as possible until he reached his brain's limit. He wanted Fang Yuan to use Detection as soon as possible so that when he runs into Fang Yuan in a room, he'll be able to ask that question.

Little did Kei know that Fang Yuan had just used the Detection ability in that very room and had barely hit his limit, if Kei had run into Fang Yuan just a bit earlier then Fang Yuan wouldn't have used Detection.

But also, if that had happened, Kei wouldn't have asked a question and would've waited till the next time they met. The way he managed to determine that Fang Yuan had most likely already used Detection was by looking at his bag.

It was clearly too light to have many air containers so he was able to determine that Fang Yuan had most likely used Detection. Of course, there was a chance that Fang Yuan never had the Detection ability but Kei decided to bet on the fact that he did, and it was successful.

There would've been a significant disadvantage if Fang Yuan hadn't used the Detection ability yet, and that is that by the time he meets Fang Yuan again, Kei would've already lost track of most of his progress. He was now barely holding on while keeping track of the ten rooms, it could be said that the meetup happened at the perfect time.

He also phrased the question in a way that counters Fang Yuan's brain. He knew that even if Fang Yuan used the Detection ability earlier, he would be keeping track of every room he enters so by asking "If you were to use the detection ability now, what would be the result?" he ensures that he will get the right answer as long as Fang Yuan has already used Detection.

Fang Yuan gritted his teeth and was forced to reply giving Kei the coordinates and cardinal direction, it was humiliating for Fang Yuan but it also quickly eased his mind.

The possibilities that could come from a question were endless, now that it was asked, it no longer weighed on his mind as a burden.

Right now, Fang Yuan and Kei were both in very similar positions, they both had a similar amount of air containers and they both knew their location. Kei had passed through more rooms though making him more likely to figure out the law.

But that was only surface level, in reality, Kei was still at a massive disadvantage and even though he passed through more rooms, he was still hopeless when it came to figuring out the law.

This all goes back to the reconfiguration events, Fang Yuan knows how many configuration events have passed but Kei doesn't, this means that it is still infinitely harder for Kei to figure out the law. He'll have to test with many different possible values for the reconfiguration event count making him have to do multiple more layers of calculation.

Fang Yuan still firmly held the initiative.

Many rounds passed without anything eventful happening. There were a few reconfiguration events with one of them being a Mirage from Fang Yuan. Fang Yuan had landed on two more random event rooms while Kei had landed on three.

Fang Yuan's random abilities were Pulse and Hypoxify. In comparison, Kei's random abilities were another Undertow, a Pathfinder that was completely useless since it

came after acquiring Detection information from Fang Yuan, and a Connection that went to waste.

Kei was now in a very precarious position with little hope of victory, Fang Yuan had been delaying his rounds to the limit each turn while Kei had been getting them done as quickly as possible.

Even though at this point, Kei had passed through more rooms having passed through 20 with only 2 repeats while Fang Yuan had passed through 17 with 3 repeats yet he still wasn't able to figure out the law.

The number of reconfiguration events posed too many variables and even with his exceptional mind, he wasn't able to deduce the law. He also most certainly wasn't able to negotiate with Fang Yuan for that information. This stems from two primary reasons, the first is that Kei didn't have anything valuable to Fang Yuan, he had absolutely no leverage. The second is that the information of the number of reconfiguration events was simply too valuable and Fang Yuan would never give it up, him doing so would be akin to signing his own death warrant.

But Kei had a plan, the reason he sped through the game early on disregarding his air container consumption wasn't simply to accelerate his progress, it mainly served one purpose, he wanted to enter as many random ability rooms as possible.

This is because he was trying to acquire one ability, Pulse. The reason that ability was so important to him was simple, by knowing Fang Yuan's air container count, he'd be able to reverse engineer his spending to deduce the amount of Mirages he had used.

This would've worked very well if he acquired Pulse in the early game, but even if he had acquired it late, he'd be able to narrow down the real number of reconfiguration events to two values making it significantly easier to deduce the real law, even though it would still be harder for him than Fang Yuan, Kei was confident in his own ability to handle that challenge.

Unfortunately, he never landed on Pulse. His luck was truly too pathetic, he had gone through 5 random room abilities that each picked at random between 6 possible abilities but he had never once landed on the one he wanted.

Now, the situation was clear, the enforcer had predicted that an average mind would be able to deduce the law after 20-25 rooms as long as they had access to all the variables, Fang Yuan had now passed through 17 rooms and his mind was most certainly beyond the average, he was definitely close to deducing it.

On the other hand, even though Kei had passed through more rooms, he wasn't able to deduce the law as he was missing a variable.

At this moment, Kei held two air containers in reserve and a nearly empty one in his mouth. He couldn't afford to be cautious any longer, he used both his air containers on Discard abilities and waited the whole 5 minutes for his turn trying to figure out the law.

Once he didn't figure anything out, he went through the unlocked door and dropped another air container from the trapdoor. The announcement forbidding Fang Yuan from taking this token was played again, the reason was because the room that Kei had entered was the room Fang Yuan was in.

Kei gazed at Fang Yuan with deep eyes, but all he saw was a mocking grin on Fang Yuan's face, the air bubbles coming from his air container were too low for someone deducing, Kei could instantly tell, Fang Yuan had figured out the law.

They stared into each other's eyes as the 5 minute timer slowly ticked down, once Kei's turn ended, Fang Yuan would clear the labyrinth in one fell swoop.

Kei thought to himself "I really didn't want to have to use this method, I guess I have to rely on you once again."

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Kei then laughed maniacally, one minute had passed since he entered the room. He had been in complete silence but he suddenly laughed. It obviously couldn't be heard, but his expression and his emission of air bubbles clearly indicated his laughter.

Fang Yuan's heart fluttered but he quickly calmed himself "Kei has to be bluffing. There's nothing he can do, if he has truly somehow figured out the law, then I will applaud him and admit the gap between our minds but that isn't possible, there are too many variables." Fang Yuan thought to himself.

But he could've never predicted what would have happened next.

A distinct beep sounded from both of their watches interrupting the deathly silence. Kei then threw one air container out into the corner of the room and then revealed his bag to Fang Yuan.

He showed him that it was completely empty, he had just used his last air container to start this chat.

He then typed "I am a deity beyond your understanding, did you seriously believe you could defeat me?"

After typing that, the air container in his mouth faltered, it no longer emitted air bubbles, he had run out.

Everyone couldn't help getting shocked, Fang Yuan tried not to show it but traces of fear leaked out into his expression, the enforcers watching the match as well as Abami and Kamashiro were in complete suspense waiting to see what Kei would do next.

Only Satoshi was different, he understood the truth behind Kei's move the moment he read the message. Kei was truly desperate, he had to rely on Satoshi for help.

Kei was now holding his breath pinning his hopes on Satoshi coming through to assist him, he knew Satoshi would understand his message but he couldn't know

whether he would decide to help him and he wasn't sure that he was even capable of helping him, but this was his last choice.

Kei's message to Satoshi was simply the word "deity". The name of the mall that they had their final competition in before parting quickly appeared in Satoshi's mind as soon as he read that message, Deity Mall, The Kaiser Games, he remembered it all. This word was a signal to Satoshi, a signal requesting his help.

And Satoshi didn't hesitate to help, he jumped forward onto the transmission device in his monitoring room, clicking the button that unmutes the voice transmission and said one word, eight.

After saying that, he was quickly restrained by Abami and Kamashiro. That was the true reason for their presence, they sat on either side of Satoshi to stop him if he decides to interfere in the game. Usually, they would've been on guard but Kei's move also had another purpose, he framed himself in a way that made it appear that he had a final plan that he even fooled Abami and Kamashiro, their eyes were glued onto the screen waiting to see what Kei would do but he never acted, by the time they returned their attention to Satoshi, he had already sent out the word into the silent labyrinth, eight.

Upon hearing that, Kei who was nearly out of breath quickly walked towards the air container he had thrown away and placed into his mouth with his last bit of strength, he had oxygen again.

He now knew the number of reconfiguration events, it was eight. Three minutes were left on the clock, Fang Yuan was furious but violence was forbidden and Kei didn't pay him any mind, he simply closed his eyes and began to deduce.

Even though he had passed through twenty rooms, the law wasn't meant to be deduced in three minutes. Even though he had past incomplete deductions from before he knew the count, they were still not enough.

He deduced with all his might, two minutes remained then one minute then finally it clicked, he combined all of the information he had and deduced the law.

The law combined the three key factors in a brilliant way, it could all be summarized into one equation (Distance-to-Goal + Number of Reconfiguration Events) mod (Door count in current room). After having deduced the law, it turned out to be simple, he simply has to add his current Manhattan distance to the number of reconfiguration events then divide it by the door count in the room.

After that, a number would be yielded. If the number's 0, then the door to the right of the one you walked in through would be the right door. If it's 1 then it would be the door to the right of that which is the door opposite to the starting door. It would then keep going on and on, with each increasing number, it would shift to the next door to the right excluding the door you walked in through.

Kei quickly calculated the right door as he walked towards, there were 5 seconds left but Fang Yuan wasn't going to lose that easily. He was already standing slightly closer to the right door, the moment he saw that Kei had deduced the formula, he walked towards the right door and stood in front of it.

Now, if Kei wants to tap the right door, he'll have to move Fang Yuan forcefully which would be considered an act of violence. If he had more time, he would most certainly be able to get around him but he only had 5 seconds left.

If Kei didn't manage to walk through the door, he would instantly lose. Not even because Fang Yuan would complete the labyrinth, it's because he would be disqualified. The rules explicitly stated that the enforcer will come and collect the air containers spent during the one minute period.

Since Kei had picked up the air container he used for his Connection ability, when the enforcer sees that Kei can't pay the price for the ability he had already used, it would be an instant disqualification, there had to be a full air container left behind in the room he used the ability for him to not be disqualified.

The reason he was able to pick up the air container is also due to this feature. As long as he completes the labyrinth in one go, the one minute period would never come and he'd never have to pay the price.

But now, there were 5 seconds left and Kei was so close yet so far. But Kei wouldn't be defeated in any situation, he would always find a way out.

He resolutely took off the air container from his mouth, four seconds were left. He then threw it directly onto the door. If he threw it too high, Fang Yuan would move his hand to intercept it so he threw it between Fang Yuan's legs at the bottom of the door.

Since Fang Yuan had weighted boots on, he wasn't able to close his legs in time, so the air container passed through and hit the door. The moment the air container made contact, the door opened and a suction force pulled Kei and Fang Yuan into the next room with one second left on the timer.

Kei's victory was now assured, knowing the formula, he could walk through all the doors with ease and make it to his goal room but he wasn't given a chance to do that, Fang Yuan was disqualified.

He had broken the rules by entering another room when it wasn't his turn leading to an instant defeat.

The game was over, The Asphyxiation Labyrinth ended in Fang Yuan's defeat and Kei's victory.

The trapdoor on top of their room had opened and Fang Yuan and Kei were instructed to leave.

Fang Yuan loses, he will get sent back to prison. But before that, he had to let out his anger, the normally composed and machiavellianist Fang Yuan spat off horrible words towards Kei.

He then said "You and your dumbass buddy Satoshi, always winning through luck and shitty game construction. Satoshi was previously saved by Abami and now you only won because those stupid pieces of shit, Abami and Kamashiro, weren't able to control their game. Satoshi should've never been able to help you."

Kei calmly laughed at his face before replying, he knew Satoshi was watching so now he decided to explain his true scheming capabilities to impress Satoshi.

Satoshi was already impressed with how close Kei got, even without hearing what Kei was about to say, he had already mentally accepted that Kei had surpassed him for now.

But what Kei was about to say would raise Satoshi's evaluation even further "You idiot. The reason I was able to do this wasn't as simple as Abami and Kamashiro not controlling their game, I had planned for this situation from the start.

At the start, when you were gloating about how you manipulated me into finding out Abami and Kamashiro's true intentions, I had already deduced all of that. I already knew that you were the one that had the letter sent and that you planned for me to bring you back.

I led you into explaining that, I not only fooled you, but I also secretly manipulated Abami and Kamashiro."

Abami, Kamashiro and Satoshi all instantly understood what Kei meant and what he was going to say next and so they didn't restrict their praise. Abami and Kamashiro discussed fervently with each other feeling a sense of pride towards Kei's improvements, they admitted that he had successfully influenced what they did.

Kei continued "I led you into explaining your manipulation then purposely showed an expression of despair on my face. I knew that Abami and Kamashiro were watching and that they would offer to reverse the advantage I gave you after seeing how defeated I looked after hearing you.

By doing this, I was able to confirm that they had microphone access. Also by hearing Abami's voice coming from the left and Kamashiro's voice coming from the right, I was able to deduce that someone was sitting in between them, that person would obviously be Satoshi.

The only reason I decided to go for my final plan was because I knew Satoshi was watching and was able to communicate with me if he wished. If I didn't have this information, I never would've gone for the Discard and Connection strategy, I didn't want to use this strategy if I didn't have to but since I was unlucky and never landed on Pulse, I was forced to use it.

I then sent you the message leaving a hidden message that only Satoshi would understand. He knew that I was calling for help but I made it seem that I was confident in my victory and I had a final plan.

This further led Abami and Kamashiro into focusing on me and ignoring Satoshi allowing Satoshi the opportunity to send me the transmission.

Even the air container throw, it wasn't something random. I had predicted a possible situation where I would be blocked from entering a door so I had already tested and seen that throwing an air container at a door still triggers the mechanism since it's my air container.

If I hadn't figured out the law in time, I would've used your position to find the right door by acting like I had figured out the law and seeing which door you blocked. However, this method is obviously much more risky so it's great that I figured out the law in time.

Your loss wasn't simply a game fault, I had engineered my strategy around using this game fault as my final strategy from the start, if it didn't exist then I would've found another way to defeat you.

But don't blame yourself for losing, you weren't weak, I was simply too strong for you to handle."

Fang Yuan was dumbfounded, he wasn't able to mutter any words, he was convinced that as long as there was no intervention, he would definitely be able to beat Kei. But now it was revealed to him that he was thoroughly defeated through a pure difference in skill even when he held the advantage.

He had nothing to say, images of Abami flashed in his mind, images of his loss to him all those years ago, they surfaced now as he related them to the current Kei that had defeated him, he saw in Kei today what he had seen in Abami all those years ago.

He held his head down in defeat and didn't resist as the enforcers cuffed him and walked him out of the building.

Abami and Kamashiro had long since removed their restraints on Satoshi, there was no reason to hold him back after Kei had already won. Satoshi then clicked the unmute button and spoke directly to Kei

"Well done, I underestimated you, I must admit that at this very moment, I am inferior to you but this truth will soon be changed.

The day we fight against each other is approaching, please understand that I still do not intend to befriend you again, your growth is merely a catalyst for my growth, it has not enticed me to become your friend even slightly.

We will battle against each other soon, and on that day, I will certainly defeat you. Also please be aware that I have also figured out Abami and Kamashiro's true intentions as I contemplated it while you were in the labyrinth.

Don't lose just yet, hold on a bit longer so I can be the one to defeat you."

Author's Afterwords

For all the people who have read Kei and Satoshi volumes 1 and 2, you might've been confused at the start of the first volume regarding the identity of the protagonist, is it Kei? Is it Satoshi? Or is it both?

But as you keep reading it, you realize that much of the story is narrated through Kei's perspective and there is a simple reason for that, Kei's character is a manifestation of myself in this novel.

Much of this novel is based on a true story, mine.

Obviously, lots of it is fictional, the three kingdoms and the games they partake in are mostly fictional.

However, there are two key things that are very real and anchor this story to reality. The first is the characters of Kei and Satoshi and the way they are represented.

Kei is a representation of me, as I live life and learn new things, I write the character of Kei learning those same things through a fictional setting.

This is also why the release of this novel was delayed quite significantly, I only wrote when I felt the inspiration to write. When I make new realizations regarding myself or my friend who I've been separated from (Satoshi), I write them down in the form of Kei and Satoshi.

The second thing that is real in this novel is The Kaiser Games.

The Kaiser Games is a game that took place in volume 1 of this novel and it directly describes the actual events that took place during this game in real life without deviation or dramatization.

That of course means that I am admitting that I embarrassingly lost to my rival that day even after all the advantages I had. I was successfully schemed against and my every action was predicted.

Of course, that was the reality for all of the games we had before we went our separate ways, I was always defeated in a variety of different ways.

I didn't include these games in the novel simply because they would be too boring, The Kaiser Games was the game that I invested the most time into creating and it was the one that involved the most action which is why I included it in the novel.

I won't go into our dynamic further as it can be clearly understood by reading the novel.

In regards to outsmarting, I hold a rather unconventional belief that real people can reach the level of high tier fictional characters and even go beyond that in outsmarting.

For example, when many people read Kaiser Games, they thought that Satoshi's scheme was a low mid tier scheme, of course I'm putting myself down once again as Kei (me) had absolutely zero feats in The Kaiser Games besides getting completely manipulated but the point still stands.

My rival, one year ago, when he was much less intelligent compared to his current state was able to barely scrape into the mid tier of outsmarting as a real person. I believe we're still quite far off the high tier stage as that stage requires quite a large qualitative jump but I certainly believe it's possible.

This novel serves as a progression manual for myself representing my growth in a fictional setting. Even now, as I reread this to refine it before publishing, I find myself disagreeing with many of the things I believed earlier in the novel.

The letter sent by Kei to Satoshi at the end of the first volume that was shown through Satoshi's perspective in this one was a message I had wanted to send to the real life Satoshi who I hoped would read the novel. Now, reading it again and all of the events happening in the first volume as well as the start of this one, I cannot help but feel how incredibly corny it is.

This is because I wrote the first arc a few months ago right after volume one's completion, then the second arc about two months ago then the final one just now before writing this afterword so many of the things I believed and my way of thinking back then have already significantly changed.

To be honest, even the end of this volume feels pretty corny but it works in a fictional setting so I'll leave it as it is.

But besides serving as this benchmark for growth, this novel also serves as a minor form of outsmarting practice for myself. Since I've lost my rival, I haven't had the chance to create more games and improve in live adversarial scenarios so I resorted to this novel.

When writing the arcs, I pose restrictions on myself, I quickly come up with the rules then I force myself to come up with all the strategies while writing as if I'm living through the moment.

If I come up with a strategy that is blocked by the rules, I found a way around them rather than simply changing the rules, this forces me to continuously think and become more creative.

This is also why I write arcs in quick bursts with long breaks in between. When I get inspiration, I quickly come up with a game in 15 minutes then I write the whole arc in one sitting, coming up with strategies as I write.

The only one that took me longer was The Asphyxiation Labyrinth, since it involved complex rules and a bit of math, I was forced to spend nearly 2 hours just to come up with the game, I think it's my best work so far so I hope you enjoy it.

Of course all of this pales in comparison to the experience I get from actually playing these games against a live opponent and even that pales in comparison to actually getting real world experience where you are forced to outmaneuver your opponent to survive but those kinds of situations are really rare to come across.

There are indeed limitations to the human mind, we aren't capable of formulating strategies at the speed of these characters most of the time since they are fictional. There are also many more factors for us to consider in the real world since we don't know the opponent's move making it even more difficult.

However there are many techniques to supplement these flaws and compensate for them.

There are also lots of practical benefits for most in chasing significant advancements in the path of outsmarting, even if you intend to live a normal life, having good attainment in this path will allow you to gain many benefits in the most mundane of environments.

And even if I'm wrong, even if surpassing a high tier level of intelligence is impossible, so what? That makes it even better, never reaching the goal will allow me to keep continuously striving, maintaining the excitement for as long as possible. Even if I die in the end, so what? It's just death. We all die, at least when I die, I'll die with no regrets knowing that I had always remained true to myself and was doing what I wanted to do.

Next, I'd like to discuss the writing of this volume and the release of the third volume. As I sat here rereading this volume to polish it, I noticed significant writing improvement between the first arc and the last arc so I hope you beared with it.

When I write the third volume, I'll probably consider my writing in the last arc of this volume to be bad, that's just how growth works.

I also found myself developing an interest in poetry recently so I attempted to write a few poems. I know they're quite lackluster but I hope you can extract some meaning from them. I wanted to include one in the last arc as well but I couldn't find an appropriate place to add one in since there wasn't any talking in the arc.

The timing for the release of the third volume will be very variable and I can't predict it. Since this story is heavily related to my real life, it takes time for me to manifest changes within myself before I compile them into the words that make up this novel.

I wanted to include a final arc in this volume where Satoshi shows his ability can still rival Kei's but I didn't feel inspired to write it.

Finally, I truly appreciate all those who have read and supported this novel. I enjoy seeing discussions around Kei and Satoshi and their intelligence and if you enjoy talking about them then I'm happy to see it.

Let me know what you think of the intelligence of the characters, have they finally made their way to the high tier of outsmarting? I will most definitely read your posts even if I do not reply or comment.

Thank you all for reading ~ HourFrame9349